

THEATRE

Celebrating artistic freedom

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‘The Festival of Plays That Almost Weren’t’ will open this weekend at Bengaluru’s premier experimental theatre venue. Unlike those theatre festivals that are glitzy promotional galas replete with marquee names and hot tickets priced outside the reach of the hoi polloi, the Ranga Shankara Theatre Festival is much more sedately and sensibly curated, and has consistently been both accessible and inclusive. In this 14th edition, as indicated by the tagline, works that have flirted with the edges of acceptability, either social or state-mandated, have been brought together in a nine-day itinerary, that’s well worth taking a southern sojourn for. Many are fresh productions taken to execution after draft ideas were green-lit by the festival committee. Most are Indian adaptations of international works that were once banned or heavily censored – a strange anomaly in a country in which the spectre of censorship of the arts has always loomed large.

Political hues

What is brought on board by classics like Eugene Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* and Evgeny Schwartz's *The Dragon* – reimagined as The Third Space Collective's *Mahish* and Tadpole Repertory's *Rakshas* respectively – is astute political commentary in tried-and-tested dramatic structures that lend themselves to be retrofitted into local contexts that share the climate of insecurity and foreboding of the originals. Schwartz's play came in the guise of a fairy tale that appeared, on the surface, to kowtow to that genre's conventions, but underneath lurks a subversive critique of Stalin-era authoritarianism. This deeply embedded political subtext was due to highly restrictive regulations that governed works of art. Bikram Ghosh's version of Schwartz's play, written by Irawati Karnik, is similarly mired in multi-layered fantasy, while Neel Sengupta's *Mahish* places the original's 'absurd' premise – humans slowly transforming into rhinoceroses – against the backdrop of the Mahishasura Mardini, and it is the goddess Durga's buffalo and its many doppelgängers that run amok in this adaptation.

Another *Rhinoceros* adaptation directed by Gagan Dev Riar will open as part of Prithvi Theatre's fringe showcase in November, while Gurleen Judge's *Dohri Zindagi*, which Riar's group, Play On, had co-produced, is included in the Ranga Shankara line-up.

From the margins

One production to anticipate is Deepika Arwind's *I Am Not Here*, devised and performed by Ronita Mookerji and Sharanya Ramprakash. Billed as inspired by Gurdeep Kaur Bhatti's *Behzti*, a play that was pulled by the Birmingham Rep after Sikh protests – ostensibly because of the portrayal of a rape and murder in a gurudwara – Arwind's play is also a meditation on the largely absent female voice in play-writing in general, not just the 'banned' pantheon that Ranga Shankara was looking to tap into. The other work that the play takes off is Joana Russ' *How to Suppress Women's Writing*. The blurb describes it as an eight-step guide in how to censor women's writing. The voices of the dispossessed will also find an airing in *Chandala, impure*, the Pondicherry-based Théâtre Indianostrum's reworking of *Romeo and Juliet* as a caste-crossed love allegory in Tamil. The play has returned from an international run in France – including three shows at Ariane Mnouchkine's Théâtre du Soleil, alma mater to director Koumarane Valavane. The play qualified technically for the festival because Shakespeare's original was once banned in Austria, but looks to be a powerful inclusion.

Protest and freedom

The festival's themes of suppression and obfuscation were underlined with undesirable prescience by events at Bengaluru that took place last week. At Jagriti Theatre, performances of Dayasindhu Sakrepatna's *Shiva* were cancelled due to protests by groups affiliated with the Vishwa Hindu Parishad. The right-wing elements involved hadn't

actually seen the play, but took offense at its title, and insisted the play be shut down. Both the police and the venue capitulated to their demands, although Jagriti's Arundhati Raja has promised future shows. Sakrepatna's play is an affirmative exercise that deals sensitively with queer identities, and follows the 'coming out' story of a young man called Shiva. It had performed multiple shows across Karnataka, before coming up against self-styled custodians of religious sentiments.

The play's title carries metaphoric weight and a queer resonance that is celebratory rather than provocative which might be too much to comprehend for some, but whatever its inducement, its inalienable right to exist as an untrammelled work of art must be protected.

However, that is easier said than done in a climate where we are getting increasingly inured to flagrant abuses of freedom of expression. It is this vacuum in which a theatre festival that highlights such repression might appear to be both a helpless giant or a mirror for introspection.



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