

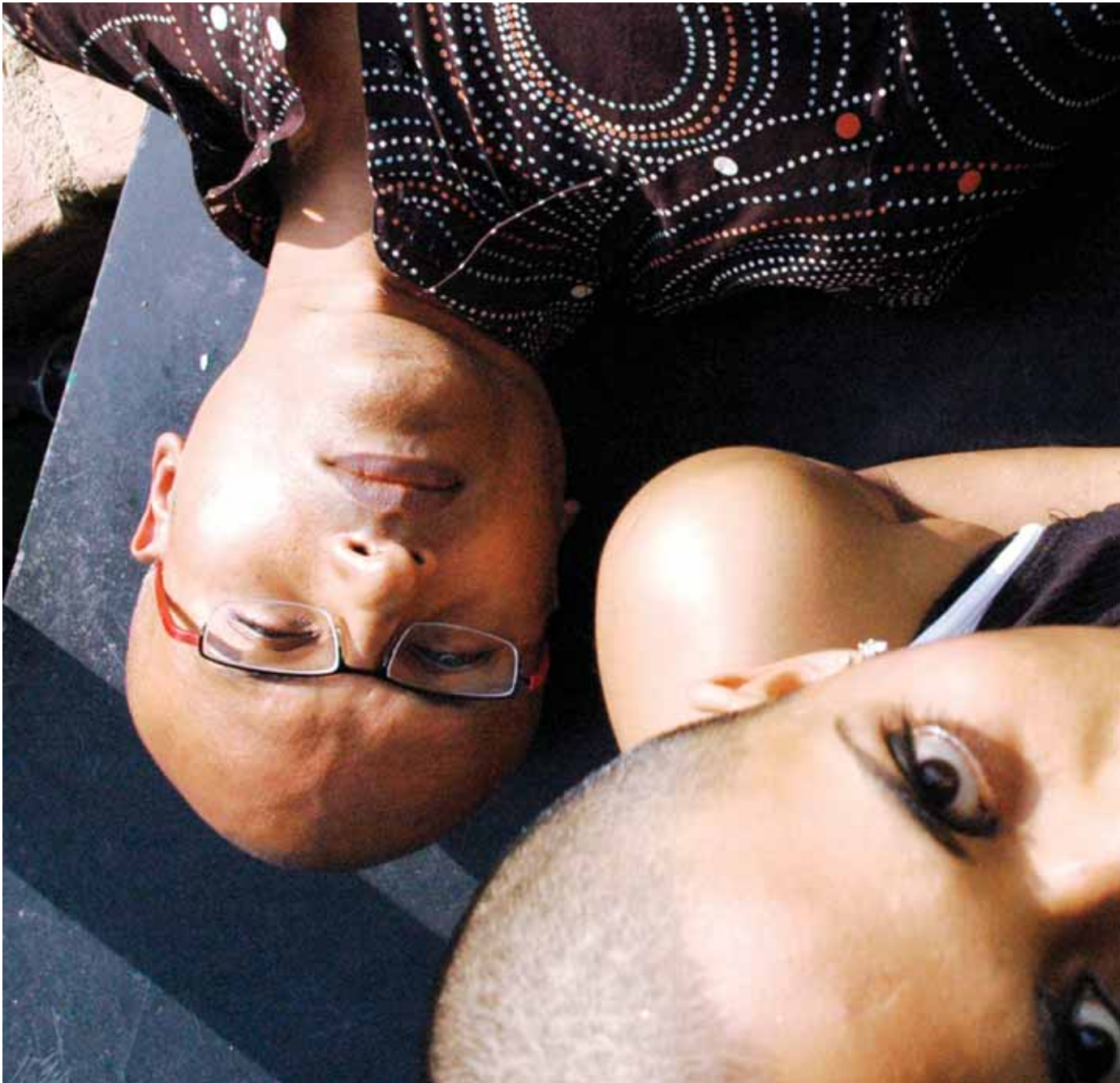
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Theatre

# Variety Fair

*Prithvi festival, 2009, celebrated the universal language of theatre*

Kavitha Rao



Suguna Sridhar

*Sridhar/Thayil's "The Flying Wallas: Opera Noir" was one of many unlikely combinations at this year's Prithvi festival*

A bald woman in a pink tutu singing opera and swinging from an imaginary trapeze. A bald man in a sharp white suit reciting poetry on the meaning of life and death. A murder mystery with a tough broad and a deadpan ghost straight out of a Raymond Chandler novel. Welcome to Sridhar/Thayil's "The Flying Wallas: Opera Noir",



one of many unlikely combinations at this year's Prithvi festival. Opera crossed with poetry and noir isn't regular theatre. But it worked, for the most part. The classically trained Suman Sridhar's surreal, beautiful voice and expressive face made a perfect foil for poet Jeet Thayil's sardonic stage presence. Thayil called it "street corner opera that tells a story and entertains". That it did. Many of the audience said they were dreading two hours of incomprehensible Italian opera, but ended up being pleasantly entertained. In one scene, Sridhar, annoyed at being stalked by the pesky ghost, warbles, "What the fuck??" as the audience erupted into laughter. "We call it noir because the opera uses a voiceover reminiscent of American noir movies of the 40s and 50s," said Thayil, "but it's also noir in the sense of non-white. It's not pretentious, pseudo intellectual stuff; it's for everyone."

Was it really theatre though, asked some viewers? "Call it performance, poetry, poverty, prayer," deadpans Thayil. "I call it work." The performance also felt a bit unresolved for some of the audience, who were left wondering who killed whom, and why? But then it's always a good thing to leave wanting more. "We do plan to make it a longer piece," said Thayil. "The shows at Prithvi were crucial because they showed us the possibilities for Indian opera."

Inventive combinations dominated this year's Prithvi festival, now in its 26th year. The theme was "Theatres of India", with eight groups from across the country performing everything from opera to folk theatre.

"Our aim this year was to show Indian theatre in all its variety and diversity," said festival director Sanjna Kapoor. Kapoor, the daughter of actors Shashi Kapoor and Jennifer Kendall, and the granddaughter of theatre founder Prithviraj Kapoor, has been running

Prithvi since 1993. Some might even say she's been running theatre in Mumbai. "There's some extraordinary theatre happening in extraordinary places. We have veteran groups such as Naya Theatre from Chhattisgarh, Ninasam from Heggodu village in Karnataka, Nirman Kala Manch from Patna, and Adishakti from Pondicherry. We also have newcomers such as Sridhar/Thayil, Ranan and Theatre Roots and Wings". "No theatre group is like another," said Sameera Iyengar, co-director of the festival. "This is meant to give you a taste of what's out there."

This year's fest also featured several languages: "Charandas Chor" in Chhattisgarhi, the classic Bhojpuri play "Bidesia" from the iconic Nirman Kala Manch, three Kannada plays from the rural Ninasam group, and even a Malayalam Japanese production (with English subtitles) from the Malayali group Theatre Roots and Wings. "I don't think language is an issue," says Kapoor, "Theatre is a universal language".

This year, Prithvi also had its first fundraiser, honouring the late Habib Tanvir's Naya Theatre group, with proceeds from the sale of memorabilia going to help veteran actors. "We are honouring them as a mark of gratitude for their years in the theatre, not as a charity drive," said Iyengar.

The festival began with "Charandas Chor", Tanvir's enduring creation. The play was banned in Chhattisgarh this year, though the ban was lifted shortly afterwards, because it apparently offended people of the Satnami sect, around whom the play is based. Charandas, a cunning yet lovable thief takes four vows in jest, one of which is to always tell the truth. He refuses to break his vows despite orders from the tyrannical queen, a subtle metaphor for the conflict between poor but honest villagers and brutal government. Eventually, he is put to death by the queen and her soldiers.

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The Naya Theatre's actors performed with such gusto and joyousness that they overcame the language barrier. Chaitram Yadav, who played Charandas, dominated the show with his vivid performance as the lovable rogue yet man of integrity. The characters were familiar to every Indian: the incompetent policeman, the callous politician, the wily guru, the village drunk. Much of the storyline was narrated by the chorus or *nacha*, an integral part of Chhattisgarhi theatre.

Audience reactions, though, were mixed. Some of the younger members of the audience found it difficult to relate to the play, especially the tragic scenes where Charandas defies the queen. "It's good to see plays from all over, but I am not sure the theme of this play, especially the vows to always tell the truth, makes sense to a Mumbai audience. I think this play was written for a rural audience," said student Shikha Lakhnapal. "The song style narration was very difficult to follow, and it took me a while to understand it and get into the play. I don't think most people in Mumbai can follow Chhattisgarhi and Bhojpuri," said another young viewer in a Metallica t-shirt.

"These days people are in a hurry," said Kapoor wryly, "They want to see plays that they can understand right away, rather than just letting themselves feel the whole experience, even letting it simmer overnight maybe." "There will always be people who are unhappy, who will say that the plays are too experimental or too hard to understand", said Quasar Thakore-Padamsee, director and co-founder of Q Theatre Productions (QTP). "This year's theme is a bit of a mish-mash, but on the plus side you have iconic theatre troupes from far away like Nirman Kala Manch, which haven't often been seen in Mumbai". Another rural troupe, Ninasam,

brought four Kannada plays to Prithvi, one based on the Merchant of Venice, one a traditional Yakshagana dance drama, and two contemporary plays.

"I am usually a critic of festivals because they turn plays into commodities and export them without regard to their roots," said Ninasam's director KV Akshara, "but Prithvi manages to bring plays from all over India while keeping the context they are rooted in. For a very urban theatre, it displays extraordinary sensitivity to rural art forms." Ninasam Tirugata ( which means travelling around in Kannada) is one of Indian theatre's amazing success stories, touring across Karnataka for four months a year, often doing two shows a day, for gatherings of about 400 at a time. Among the plays they take to rural audiences are Shakespeare, Brecht and Moliere, along with tales from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. "I think there are very minor differences between rural and urban audiences," said Akshara.

Perhaps the most ambitious yet satisfying play of the festival was the Kolkata based dance group Ranan's "Equus". Peter Shaffer's controversial play revolves around 17-year-old Alan Strang, a boy with a bizarre obsession for horses who blinds six of them in a fit of rage. The play explores the themes of passion, worship, religion and insanity. Through a series of encounters between Alan and his shrink, Shaffer gets the audience to question what is normal, and what is not? Is it better to lead a safe, dull life or a dangerous, passionate one? Ranan's production had just the right dose of innovation, leaving Shaffer's riveting script intact. Director and dancer Vikram Iyengar drew on his years of training in kathak. His raw, powerful choreography had dancers playing horses, seamlessly weaving dance and the-

atre. "I think it's a misconception that classical dance has to be pretty," said Iyengar, who also played the role of Equus, the mythical horse. "It has to be beautiful, but it needn't be pretty. So my challenge was to express ugly emotions with classical dance in a beautiful way."

As the disturbed teenager Alan, 25-year-old Shadab Kamal commanded the stage like a seasoned actor. Kamal was a gauche and sullen teenager one moment, a passionate and powerful worshipper the next. The sequence where Kamal jubilantly rides Equus was pure theatre, combining imagery, sound, and movement in the most sublime way. At Prithvi theatre, the game cast did back-to-back performances. "It's a 2.5 hour performance, and it really takes it out of you. I had a half-hour break, and then I had to get up and do it again," said Kamal. "But performing at Prithvi gives you a great feeling and the audience just takes you along. You want to really go for it."

Unfortunately, the supporting cast weren't quite as good. Daminee Mukherjee was too ineffectual—and often inaudible—to be convincing as the authoritative psychiatrist who tries to heal Alan. The supporting cast's heavy Bengali accents were also distracting at times. But it's hard to criticise such a brave venture, especially since Iyengar had the difficult task of transforming dancers into actors and actors into dancers. "It was very difficult to find English speaking dancers in Kolkata who were willing to push the boundaries of classical dance, and who could act too. These dancers have been going to speech training for 1.5 years, and I think they have improved hugely. There is still a long way to go; it's a work-in-progress," said Iyengar.

Still, with all the variety on offer this year, many shows went half-empty. The intimate 200-seat space of Prithvi Theatre was full, as it usually is, with its regular crowd of



committed theatre fans. But the Karnataka Sangha, an alternative venue in central Mumbai with 750 seats, had barely 60-70 people on most days. Shows at the open air Horniman Circle theatre in South Mumbai were cancelled because of unexpected heavy rains, further affecting turnout.

**F**inding spaces for theatre in a city where distances are vast and public spaces limited is one of Prithvi's biggest challenges. "Prithvi has the café, children's workshops, poetry slams and film shows, all of which attract as many patrons as the theatre", said Iyengar. "The problem is in finding other spaces that we can make equally inviting. That takes time."

Given the almost non-existent interest from government and most corporates, it's amazing that the festival has continued all these years. "This year for the first time we have government support, but not funding," said Kapoor. "For our shows in Horniman Circle (a government owned park) we have always had to get licences and go through bureaucracy. This year, the Directorate of Cultural Affairs has partnered with us so we don't have to pay licence fees or jump through those hoops."

But Prithvi still gets no funds from the government. "On Prithvi's 25th anniversary a few years ago, I approached the Ministry of Culture in Delhi. I didn't want any money, just acknowledgement of the kind of work we are doing. I was told by an inner source that they discussed my proposal, then they said 'Oh well, she's from a rich family, so we don't need to give her any money,'" says Kapoor incredulously. "It's not just money we want," added Iyengar. "It's the fact that theatre is just not valued. Theatre in India has survived doggedly in spite of government policy, not because of it."

Currently, the festival is funded mostly by donations from corporate sponsors, notably the Tata Group.



Prithvi Theatre

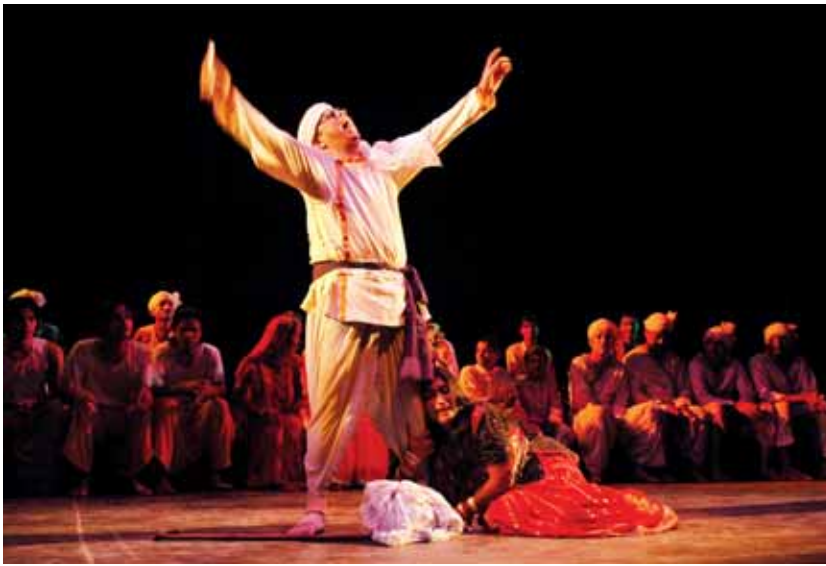
*"Equus" explores the themes of passion, worship, religion and insanity*

For the past six years, Prithvi has also been getting aid from HIVOS, a Dutch foundation, which is helping Prithvi come up with a sustainable financial plan to fund future costs. "It's nowhere near what we need," said Kapoor, "But it has helped immensely in getting a core team of people to handle the festival, so I don't have to do everything".

Prithvi remains the only viable venue in Mumbai for theatre groups that don't do commercial theatre. Says Thakore-Padamsee, whose QTP group works mainly to promote youth theatre, "The NCPA and other auditoriums are hugely

expensive for small theatre groups, charging Rs 10,000 a night or 50 percent of the profits, whichever is more. That's huge for small theatre groups like ours. Prithvi is the only venue that subsidises spaces and works with actors to pay what they can afford. Every other hall is only interested in money. And everyone knows there's no money in theatre."

So little money, in fact, that talented theatre artists are defecting to television in droves. "There's an amazing crop of talented young actors, scriptwriters and technicians in Mumbai, but we are going to lose them to film and television if we



*The classic Bhojpuri play "Bidesia" from the iconic Nirman Kala Manch*



*"Charandas Chor" is about a thief who takes four vows in jest, one of which is to always tell the truth*

can't do something about it," said Kapoor. "I am ashamed to say I pay my actors only Rs 300-500 per show, because I can't afford any more," admitted Thakore-Padamsee. "Many of my best actors work all day in television to pay the bills, then do a bit of theatre in their spare time, which leaves us very little time to rehearse." It's not just the money," said Iyengar. "If you are a theatre actor, you may be able to perform only twice a year because there are no spaces. Why would you become a theatre actor if you can't act more than twice a year?" We are approached by over 70 theatre

groups a year, but only have room for about 30 groups, and we can only stage 500 shows a year," added Kapoor.

What little government support there is goes to a certain kind of play, usually traditional Marathi plays. "The government gives a lot of financial support to Marathi plays especially the folk and traditional kind, but what about other kinds of theatre, in other languages? Mumbai is a city of many languages, after all," said Kapoor. "Many theatres charge more for Hindi and English plays than Marathi plays. This is discrimination pure and simple."

With no government aid, Prithvi, and the theatre companies it fosters, have to count on sponsors. "What we *should be doing* is to develop a corpus fund, organise events, and broaden our reach. What we *are doing* is running around looking for sponsors. And it's getting harder and harder," said Kapoor.

So Prithvi plows a lonely furrow. "In some ways, Prithvi is a failure," said Kapoor, who appears to be her own harshest critic. "We set out to establish regular, professional theatre. If being professional means finding people with passion, then we have succeeded. But if being professional means enabling people to live off their earnings in theatre and improving quality, we have failed. We would like to be choosier about quality. But since we are the only theatre in Mumbai, we need to provide a platform for everyone so they can get better."

But Prithvi, and other theatre groups, are not giving up that easily. Currently, Kapoor is working on a new initiative called the India Theatre Forum, along with other groups, which will help bring theatre groups across India together to pool resources from props to knowledge. "There will be a website and a news letter," said Kapoor. "We are looking into a social security programme for veteran actors. We are also drafting a best practice manual for theatre groups, which will deal with issues such as how to adapt scripts."

"There's all this talk about making Mumbai a world class city," said Iyengar, passionately, "Every world class city—New York, London, Paris, Hong Kong—has a budget for culture. Singapore has poured huge amounts of money into creating performance spaces, but they didn't have any theatre artistes to perform there, so they had to import them. We have so much talent—thousands of years worth of performing talent—and no space for them to perform. Ironic, isn't it?" □