

April saw me take off to the land of pizza and pasta on invitation of the Cantieri Teatrali Koreja, for their annual theatre festival in Lecce, Italy, titled, 'RAISING WALLS, BUILDING BRIDGES'. Lecce is historic city in the south of Italy and one of the most important cities of the district of Apulia. Because of its Baroque architecture, it has been nicknamed the 'Florence of the South'. It has a traditional affinity to Greek culture. To this day in the Grecia Salentina, a group of towns not far from Lecce, the ancient Griko language is still spoken. Lecce is a land of monuments made of limestone, ceramic pottery, olive oil, wine and brilliantly designed paper mache articles.

Typical to many East European countries where theatres have been designed out of abandoned buildings, factories and houses, this theatre too has been designed out of a former brick making factory. But for a old brick making machine installed in the corner of the foyer which serves as an exhibition table or a table top serving food, the transformation into a theatre space is complete. A two storied building, it has a main auditorium and a small intimate theatre space. State of the art light and sound equipment makes it a performer's dream. Costume designing, set construction, an equipment room, rooms for resident actors or travelling groups, an in-house kitchen and an administration section completes the make up of this theatre. This is probably one of the biggest theatres in this small town, which has striven hard to build its own audience pool. This was evident, if one were to go by the people who braved the wintry cold, snow and rain to watch the plays. Participants, apart from the Italians, also represented countries like Slovenia, Montenegro, Macedonia, Georgia, France, Brussels, Germany, Turkey, Serbia, Bulgaria, Canada, Brazil, Iran, U.K, Finland, Lithuania and Albania. This conglomeration brought a heady exchange of ideas and practices as set up in their respective spaces.

This festival was divided into two main sections – one, round table discussions and deliberations on issues plaguing theatres across the world, and the other, viewing productions staged by the Cantieri Teatrali Koreya. Topics ranged from 'THEATRE AS A COMMON GOOD', 'OUTSKIRTS, SOCIAL MINORITIES AND THEATRE' to 'IDENTITY OF PLACES, IDENTITY OF THEATRES'. These were panelled by not only practitioners of theatre but also local cultural policy makers who were quite candid in bringing to the fore their efforts and the shortcomings they face in chalking out projects and procuring funding to hold these cultural events. In most of these talks the strong lament of the dwindling interest of the government to fund the arts and especially theatre in terms of monetary and physical support was palpable at a discomforting level. The recent reforms brought about by the Italian politburo and the shaky state of political and economic affairs of the state seemed contributing to this acutely felt dilemma, to the extent of the fear that at this pace there could arise a situation which forced the theatres to shut down. A memorandum for continued monetary support and the relevance of continuing theatre activity, signed by the participating delegates was later submitted to the local council.

Among these academic discussions a couple of presentations were of interest and seemed a departure from the mundane, primarily as they raised issues which were pertinent social issues and showed directives of how the arts could be and have been utilised to confront them.

1. Presentation of the DOSTA (Enough!) campaign! This was mainly to work for the inclusion of the ROMA community, who have been loosely labelled as Gypsies. It was initiated by The Council of Europe in the framework of a 2006-2007 joint programme with the European Commission in five countries of South East Europe – all of them members of the Decade for Roma Inclusion: Albania, Bosnia, Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. In 2008-2009, within another CoE/EU joint programme, the campaign was extended to Moldova and the Ukraine. In 2008, The Council of Europe opened the campaign to all its member states. Since then other countries joined in namely Bulgaria, Croatia, Italy, Latvia, Romania, and Slovenia. The Greek ministry of Education has also announced a forthcoming launch of the campaign. Turkey will launch it in the context of its CoE in May 2011, Kosovo in April 2011 followed by others like Germany, Spain and Sweden. Through films, concerts, artistic events, music, documentaries, photo exhibitions, media, theatre etc, it is gaining momentum in other parts of the world. In its own capacity the Cantieri Teatrali

Koreja has involved the small Roma community in the outskirts of Lecce, by roping in the children for workshops and summer activities and the youth in theatre productions, as was seen in the play BRAT.

2. Introduction to the establishment and activities of interact – a world theatre networking programme, and the need for networking and collaborations. This enables more interaction and the possibilities of viewing works done across the world. It was interesting to note that there are many such networks, like SEAS, NETA etc, working in parts of the world having their own agenda, focus and reach. This session not only zeroed in on performing practices but also deliberations on developing local communities, audiences, public and private partners, etc.
3. In Lecce from 22 to 24 September 2011, the 6th edition of ARTLAB – dialogues about cultural management – will be launched. Artlab is a unique public space where artistes, cultural managers, researchers, and decision makers discuss and share their experiences and ideas about the state of art of cultural management and politics in Italy and the international arena, while inviting ideas and suggestions of the local professionals and organisations.

Turning to the other part of the festival – viewing some performances, which though not exceptional were at times unique in their approach and presentation.

The highlight of the festival was the staging of BRAT (Brother), from a Roma opera, an adaptation from John Gay's 'The Beggars Opera'. It is a production that lampoons the corruption, injustice and politics of 18th century Britain. It started as an endeavour by Italian director and founder of the Cantieri Koreja, Salvatore Tramacere, to highlight the plight of the Roma community outside of Smederevo, an industrial city some 70 kms from Belgrade. The injustice meted out to this community finds ample space in this production. The troupe consists of 8 Serbian actors and 11 Romas who enrolled for a workshop – some of them have never been on stage before. The text in Serbian draws both on Gay and on Bertold Brecht and Kurt Weill's 1928 musical 'The Three Penny Opera', focussing on a drama of passion and betrayal.

DOCTOR FRANKENSTEIN, a free adaptation from *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelly, is a dialogue between the eccentric scientist and his abnormal creation, who challenges the doctor's intention in creating him, but not allowing him to go into the world and live a 'normal' life. The scientist updates his experiments and conquests and in the process creates ghastly imperfections that lack memory and emotion. He is aware of the consequences of letting them go free, but is unable to give reasons why, leading to the conflict between the two. The two character play was played to perfection, drawing the audience into the world of illusion and disbelief.

PALADINS OF FRANCE, is the tragic and comic story of Charlemagne's Paladins as they tell the story of the massacre in Roncevaux. The irony lies in the storytellers – mere innocent puppets – old and beautiful things, ravaged and torn by the horrors of war, yet portraying characters, prototypes of conquerors, depicting portrayal of death with a moving tenderness, but eventually broken into a hundred pieces, still tied to a torn paper sky. The use of four live actors getting into the costumes of numerous characters and enacting their role as puppets has been brilliantly achieved. The story, though more than five hundred years old, seems so contemporary, compounded by the deftness with which it has been told by the use of this form of puppetry.

THE PASSION OF THE TROJAN WOMEN is a work which tries to conjugate Euripides's *The Trojan Women* with the theme of The Passion of the Christ, choosing to start a dialogue with the traditional ancient dialect quite similar to the ancient Greek language. Recreating the tragedy, the play makes use of live music by musicians who soon merge to take on characters from the story. Here femininity is the strongest element: the figures of Andromaca, Hecuba and Cassandra emerge first. Even though they must accept a cruel destiny, they do not renounce their dignity, they do not fall before the cruelty of the Greeks, and they show with all their pain and indignation how cruel and terrible is the war between men.

The death of innocent Astianax, the plight of the wailing women, the maddening violence all lend a heightened sense of helplessness, which is more evident in the current times.

PLASTIC GARDEN is a trip into the world of fantasy, where creativity is in abundance. Colours, lights, sound meet aliens, Samurai's, angels, and fairies, leaving ample room for memories, dreams and feelings. There is no specific script as the three actors play with plastics used in day to day life to juggle up situations, and it is a visual treat.

IANCU is played by a single character – seen through the eyes of an eight year old child. It is a story off a day – a Sunday in August 1976 when history invades life and streets of a village in Salento. A famous bandit, who escapes from a prison in Lecce, is recognised while hiding in the countryside of the village. Thus a manhunt begins, in which everyone is involved, children included. It is a story of childhood and of deceptions and illusions that surround it – a strange and deformed fresco of the years in the deep south – a south that no longer exists: places and communities have been emptied and have decayed. With the eyes of the child, sometimes wide open, sometimes narrowed, sometimes sleepy and dreamy, a world, pieces of history, fragments of men and women, battles between rival gangs and dangerous games are narrated. A world full of mythical characters, peasants, priest, grandparents, dragonflies, porno magazines and a great desire to become an adult.

Interacting with the local delegates I felt their strong resentment and concern towards the new Italian government policy of removing funding for the arts, especially theatre. In these parts theatre is an important avenue for entertainment and in most of the theatres it enjoys local patronage and a long and successful history. Being deprived of it, many fear that in such an eventuality the theatres will have to shut shop and this is really tearing at their hearts. The other concern of Italians is the growing immigrant population, especially the Roma community, and the indifference shown by the government towards them. Though this theatre has done its best in terms of staying connected with them, by involving the children and the youth in their theatre, the overall scenario is rather grim. Compounding this dismal picture was the fact that many of them are principally from the East European countries, who themselves were striving hard to bring their theatre to the world. They were unaware of the theatres of India. Images of India being Exotic was all that stood out in their conversations. Still they were very curious to know what it had to offer and were more than forthcoming in getting their respective audiences to have a glimpse of Indian Theatre.

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