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THEATRE

The Zoukak mystique



Show Caption

A Lebanese theatre group engaging with the sociopolitical crises of its native land, which resonates with people's movements everywhere, was the highlight of ITFoK 2016. By VIKHAR AHMED SAYEED in THRISSUR

THE International Theatre Festival of Kerala (ITFoK), held annually in Thrissur, has become a global landmark of sorts among theatre jamborees in the brief period since it began in 2008. Now in its eighth year, ITFoK brings avant-garde theatre from different parts of the world to an appreciative audience. The 2016 edition, held between January 10 and 16, lived up to its reputation and presented a mouth-watering smorgasbord of 20 performances spread over seven days.

The audience, patient and discerning, is an integral part of the ITFoK experience. Every day, theatre aficionados would queue up hours before the tickets were sold and then would line up quietly an hour before the start of any performance. At Rs.20 per show, the ticket price was nominal, and the audience, which cut across class barriers, surprised many of the visitors from different parts of India and the world. Some 14,000 tickets were sold, and many visitors had to be turned away from some of the popular performances. The class diversity of the Thrissur audience was refreshing and invigorating for the performers who are often used to an elite audience that patronises theatre. This was the highlight of the theatre experience for the non-Kerala viewers.

This avid interest of the regular visitor to ITFoK can be traced to the communist movement and its use of people's theatre (which emphasised sociopolitical themes) that left a legacy of appreciation for theatre. This is a tradition that goes back more than 70 years. Add to this the proliferation of cultural institutions in the vicinity of the Kerala Sangeetha Nataka Akademi (where ITFoK is held annually) which has led to Thrissur being hailed as the "cultural capital of Kerala". This appellation is honoured by the residents of the city who come in droves to watch plays.

The theme of this year's festival was "Body Political", and in the words of Sankar Venkateswaran, the artistic director at ITFoK, the emphasis was on performances that showed how the "body becomes the metaphor" for a host of social relations among people. He expanded on this theme: "The body is often used as a metaphor to describe functions of a state, an organisation or a group of people working together. Words and terms such as head of state, headmaster, general body meeting or a 'body of people' are all structures where the head and the rest of the body are interdependent. At the top of the body is the head, which can't move or do anything by itself but can generate the intention and the will to act. At the bottom are the feet that work to execute the head's intentions, but don't have any agency in making the decisions.... The body as a metaphor is particularly useful when assessing the 'health' and 'fitness' of a society or a nation-state, and it may now be time to turn our lenses to an entirely different set of bodies."

With this overarching theme, the emphasis at ITFoK was to challenge the dominant discourse on the control of bodies. The well-known dancer Chandralekha's last creation "Sharira" (The Body) set the tone of the festival, and the tempo was maintained throughout, culminating in Mallika Taneja's award-winning performance in "Thoda Dhyaan Se" (Be Careful). Groups from other parts of India such as Delhi, Chennai and Pune performed at ITFoK. Foreign theatre groups from Malaysia, Lebanon, Iran, Japan, Turkey, Germany, Iraq and Singapore also participated in the event. Between 150 and 180 theatre groups had sent in applications to be part of ITFoK; the selection is competitive and the curation is a thoughtful and multilayered process.

Crowd favourite

While lengthy queues were the norm at ITFoK, the longest ones were for the performances of Zoukak, a Lebanese theatre group, which performed here last year and which was the only one to be invited again. This affinity of the Kerala audience for Zoukak, an Arabic word that means "alley", is partially to do with the themes of its plays.

The troupe was founded in 2006 in Beirut, a land embroiled in geopolitical turmoil that has become a metaphor for the West Asian region. Emerging from this tumultuous context, Zoukak's engagement with the sociopolitical crises of its native land has led to the development of an interesting and collaborative theatre that resonates with people's movements everywhere.

Take its expansive play *The Battle Scene*, for instance. It starts, shockingly, with the actors plunging their faces in pails of water continuously and furiously. Keeping their heads immersed for as long as they can, the actors yank their heads out gasping

spasmodically for breath. With the crepuscular light, the actors' shadows danced as they dived in and out of their pails and in the process sprayed the front rows with water. As the play progressed, we saw that this action could be read as a metaphor for the many refugees from West Asia who drowned as they made their precarious way to Europe by sea. A shallow mound of sand representing a beach and a kitschy boat in the shape of a swan completed the minimal accessories to the performance. With Zoukak, there is no fourth wall and the actors addressed the audience, thus implicating them in the saga of crimes being enacted on stage.

Several dialogues in the play do this. Sample this by one of the actors: "The audience members and the actors on stage are asking themselves, when you represent hell you're not trying to find a way to remove people from it."

The Actor Murali Theatre, an open theatre where this performance was held on January 14, accommodated more than 700 people, but Zoukak had enthralled the audience in such a way that the collective silence was broken only by occasional clucks of appreciation. The only flaw in the performance was the inadequate and awkwardly placed digital monitors that displayed the English subtitles (should the viewer read the subtitles or watch the play?). This seemed trivial to most people in the audience as the sound of the lyrical Arabic dialogues found an inexplicable resonance with them.

Visual spectacle

The Battle Scene was a grand visual spectacle with several actors, but the strength of Zoukak comes from the versatility of its artistes. This was evident in two other performances it gave at ITFoK that were more intimate. In *Heavens*, which was performed in the "Thoppil Bhasi Black Box", a smaller venue where there is hardly any physical space between the performers and the audience, the actors engaged with the complicated history of Lebanon.

The violence in Lebanon has replayed itself farcically over hundreds of years and this is what Zoukak showed as its actors dealt with this "incomplete historical empire" that they see their country as. The violence that ravaged their country has left emotional debris that this generation is picking up. "There was or there was not, in this era of content," is a litany that is present through the 50-minute performance. Sung, declaimed and screamed out, the actors' words emphasised the rhetoric of loss and mourning through the performance. As one of the actors read out the names of young men who had disappeared in wars and the women mourned, it was hard not to see the similarities with the events in the valley of Kashmir where women tortuously wait for news of their young male relatives who are lost forever.

Only 50 people were allowed to Zoukak's site-specific performance called *Silk-Thread*, in which the viewers had to keep up with the actors as they led them through seven different locations. The play itself is in the form of a tapestry. The tryst with Lebanese heritage continued in this innovative performance as well. The play investigated inherited social structures that shape gender stereotypes. While it focussed on Lebanese society, the message that was creatively imparted echoes in a country like India where gender-based violence is common and patriarchy is the norm.

Last year, Zoukak held four performances which were received enthusiastically. During one repeat performance in 2015 of their visually acclaimed play *Lucena: Obedience Training*, a scuffle broke out as a few viewers sneaked in through a side entrance disrupting the discipline that marked the audience. It is not very difficult to understand why Zoukak has come to acquire such rapturous support at ITFoK with its politically aware and aesthetically appreciative audience.

Nevertheless, it is not easy to discuss and analyse the theatre of Zoukak because its members are not given to detailed explanations of their performances. This does not mean that they are notoriously eccentric or indulge in bombastic balderdash. On the contrary, they are inherently self-effacing. It is easy to walk up to them and share a cigarette and talk about the vibe at ITFoK, but they are reluctant to discuss their work unless asked specific questions. They also work as a collective with six core team members and it is a little tough to get all six of them to sit down in one place to have a conversation.

This seeming discursiveness of Zoukak spills into its performances sometimes. This is slightly misleading as the actors bring in a great cohesiveness in their output, but this awareness comes only if a viewer is aware of the Lebanese context in which the theatre was born and is strongly rooted in.

All the members of the group are in their early to late thirties and have grown up with war all around them and represent the religious diversity of Lebanon.

Zoukak sees theatre as revolutionary but refuses to toe any ideology as it is claustrophobic for a group as discursive as Zoukak is. In response to a question by *Frontline* on any ideological agenda that drove their theatre, Maya Zbib, a founding member of the group and director of *Silk-Thread*, said: "The main drive is to collectively perform our theatre and this leads to a hybrid and messy aesthetic." This constant emphasis on collaboration and the collective is a little confounding, but when one sees its body of work, it becomes evident that its members see theatre as having a reformatory and soothing power. Omar Abi Azar, a founding member of Zoukak and director of *The Battle Scene*, added: "War is happening all over the planet. Doing theatre and watching theatre is a protest against people who are trying to rot our minds."

In a post-ideological world where the global fault lines have appeared in the form of religious ideologies, particularly Islamic fundamentalism versus a spectrum of liberal philosophies, Zoukak's theatre has a certain mystical hope about it. Its repertoire is vast and diverse, but a core humanism that recognises the dignity and equality of individuals pervades its work. Its aesthetic does not have the cleanliness of traditional theatre, but it is its untidiness that appeals to audiences.

In an earlier interview that the group gave to a Spanish magazine, one of its members stated: "We make theatre because we believe of the glimpse of hope it is capable of providing for our futures and because we believe that the medium itself has a future [sic]."

ITFoK seems to love Zoukak and the actors must have gone back to Lebanon enthused by the massive response they received here. Considering its popularity, it might even be invited for an unprecedented third time to the prestigious theatre festival. Well, the audience is ready for Zoukak.