

Report From ...Kerala

International Festival of Theatre Schools (IFTS) 2023

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The sound of drums could be heard drifting amongst the trees, rivers, and humidity of the beautiful campus of the School of Drama and Fine Arts, University of Calicut, Kerala. The sound was a calling, a gathering of students and teachers, practitioners and pedagogues to join together for the inaugural International Festival of Theatre Schools (IFTS) between 1st - 5th February 2023. As the participants are drawn towards the Prof. Ramanujan Studio Theatre at the edge of the campus, the source of the drumming is revealed: it is the Panchavadyam played by the students of Kerala Kalamandalam. The sound could be felt in the belly and the throat, it was so loud that it shook through the body, moving it whilst standing still. The banner of the festival was unveiled, the theatre filled and there was a buzz of excitement. The open auditorium (the stage and space for the audience blend with open entrances and exits to the outside) was suddenly packed with students from all over the world. When the drumming stopped there was a ringing in the ears and through the body. It was a fitting introduction to a festival that would be lifted and carried on the energy of, and centred on, the students and their work. The campus itself transformed by the students, with large pieces of theatrical scenography, light trails and wall paintings adorning the buildings and trees.

The festival was a collaboration between the host school and the International Theatre Festival of Kerala (ITFOK) curated by Professor Balakrishnan Ananthakrishnan, Mr Deepan Sivaraman and Professor Anuradha Kapur under the curational theme 'Humanity Must Unite'. The concept of the programme was to present, share and collaborate around pertinent issues in theatre and performance teaching practices, curriculums, and pedagogy from a progressive perspective. Teachers, students, and practitioners were invited from international institutions to consider their practices and process with an orientation to theatre pedagogy. The programme, brilliantly conceived and delivered by a partnership of universities ¹, includes teaching demonstrations, seminars, expert practitioner talks, workshops, a Kathakali performance of Mazha Mizhi, a fire dance - Theyyam - performed on the banks of a river and a performance of exquisite facial gestures and music, the

¹ Alongside with the host School of Drama and Fine Arts, University of Calicut, Kerala, the Festival was a partnership between; Kerala Sangeetha Nataka Akademi; Sree Sankaracharya, University of Sanskrit; Kerala Kalamandalam; International Theatre Festival of Kerala (ITFOK) and supported by the Sher-Gil Sundaram Arts Foundation.

Koodiyattam. Alongside these events and central to the festival, were a series of teaching demonstrations and short performances from the students of the participating institutions, an opportunity to see theatre and performance teaching and making in action.



Figure 1: *Inauguration Ceremony IFTS.* Photo by Richard Allen.

After the reverberation of drums had shaken itself from our bodies and the inauguration ceremony had officially opened the festival **Figure 1**, a concurrent set of making workshops began for the students at the school. These included workshops in acting and performing, such as Director David Zinder's approach to the Psycho Physical Image and the Chekov Technique, Artist Carlos Gegarra's Movement Analysis, and Artist Giovanna Summo's Dance Theatre Workshop, alongside workshops in design orientated practice such as Designer Pete Cooke's Scenographic Workshop, Lighting Designer Neil Fraser's Lighting Design as well as my own on Headphone Theatre. The centering of making processes - of how teachers and lecturers actually *do* theatre and performance teaching - is a refreshing counterpoint to the conventional conference structure that foregrounds examples of illustration and reflection on practices that happen elsewhere. Most strikingly, throughout the festival, the students were present, centred and often leading the discussions and debates about the teaching itself. In my own teaching practice, although often engaged in

collaboration with students about how they wish to construct their learning, I primarily work with an invisible pedagogy, one which is operating imperceptibly in the room. To observe the students of the school (and of other participating institutions) engaged in the debates of how pedagogy is set up, framed and sustained was energising and revelatory as to how their agency and politics might impact and influence how theatre and performance pedagogy evolves.

To realise my own workshop on Headphone Theatre, I had set off from London two days previously with a bag full of headphones and a binaural microphone. I wanted to explore how pedagogical tasks and teaching structures could be developed through a technological frame, arguing towards a non-hierarchical approach to theatre making that challenges the primacy of text and action towards a centering of listening and constructing sonic environments. In the workshop, the students were asked to create a short piece of headphone theatre using the binaural microphone. Participants were led through a series of making exercises that introduced the fundamentals of sound design and the composition of headphone performance, led by the possibilities and limits of the binaural and headphone technology **Figure 2**.



Figure 2: *Headphone Theatre Workshop*. Photo by Richard Allen.

The workshop began with a series of deep listening exercises **Figures 3 & 4**, locating sounds in the landscape and exploring how audiences might experience dissonance and cohesion between what they see and what they are hearing. Throughout the four days, students would use their experiments in field recording, foley sound effects and sonic dramaturgy to create a 'one take' live performance of a journey through a snowy forest landscape: the opposite of the humid conditions in which we were working. The student participants were from a range of courses, both in theatre practice, acting and music, which infused the sessions with experimentation from an interdisciplinary perspective.



Figure 3 & 4: *Headphone Theatre Workshop*. Photo by Richard Allen.

As these pedagogy workshops animated the campus, they were located alongside seminars and discussions. From a design perspective, a key conversation that emerged concerned the relation of hierarchies in theatre and performance making. This was considered through how this operates at the level of theatrical production, but also how design disciplines are taught in different international models. The conventions of the conservatoire model were considered alongside university studies-based learning and processes of interactive practice in an art school mode. Fasyali Fadzly Saipul Bahri from Aswara, Kuala Lumpur, offered a pedagogy demonstration of how disciplinarity had evolved within his programmes and

showed examples of how a Performance Design Exchange - a programme of seminars, performances and lectures - had been developed by the theatre faculty of Aswara. This included the wonderful example of how 'Design Jamming' sessions have been conceived and developed, where a guest designer would set up in a space and design 'live' in response to materials, participants and stimuli, a technique taken from musical improvisation. In the pedagogy seminar, I offered a model developed at The University of the Arts London in which a more horizontal approach to theatre making processes could allow for design practices and process to lead how theatre and performance is made. This is achieved through project-based learning, be that costume-led, technology-led, object-led, acting-led and so on. The debates and discussions around these approaches brought to the surface the decolonising and radical potentials of flattening disciplinary hierarchies, not only from a design subject-based perspective but also through the use and application of text, and how the processes and practices of acting and performing are conserved or protected.

In the evenings, the focus turned to the student work itself, which is arguably the best demonstration of pedagogy in action. Sree Sankaracharya, The University of Sanskrit presented a tale of rural India with exuberant energy and a cleverly conceived evolving and moveable scenography of sandbags, transforming tree branches and lit torches **Figure 5**. The Prof. Ramanujan Studio Theatre has great flexibility and energy built into its architecture and can be transformed into many configurations. The theatre's access to the outside with various large openings also allowed the transitions of scenes and objects a fluidity within the space. This was embraced by the students and the production demonstrations ping from one configuration to another. There were two Anton Chekhov adaptations from short stories, from Lovely Professional University and Christ University, both played for comedy and an original work from Aswara, Kuala Lumpur, with a sinister visitor from another world. The School of Fine Arts and Drama, University of Calicut presented a meditative demonstration of the teaching in the school through choreographed movement and music, underpinned by rigorous physical training and musicianship, an excellent example of contemporary theatre making practice built upon the rich traditions of theatrical performance within the country.



Figure 5: *Production Demo, Sree Sankaracharya, The University of Sanskrit.* Photo by Richard Allen.

On day three, the festival visited the Kerala Kalamandalam, a public institution for the preservation and promotion of Kerala's traditional performing arts. Originally an institution for the training of Kathakali, it is now a residential training institution that encompasses a range of traditional performance practices including Mohiniyattam, Thullal, Kutiyattam (male and female), Panchavadyam, Carnatic Music, and Mridangam. The training provided to the students is based on the ancient Gurukula Sampradaya, a mode of pedagogy that centres on a deep bond between the teacher and the student. Participants to the festival were granted access to see how the training is built and we were invited to wander the network of discipline focused buildings spread across the hillside campus **Figures 6 & 7**. I started in a space where a group of students were lying patiently on the floor with others attending silently to their faces. They are learning how to apply the Kathakali Chutti make-up. It is a painstakingly slow process building up layers of face paint and material to create the astonishing masks that provide a framing for the facial gestures found in the form. I consider how this process of transformation, particularly the time and physical labour it requires, is something that is held within the form itself, restrained and intense, like the energy of mark making found in a painting. Outside, I followed the sound - 'clack clack clack' - of heavy wooden mallets on small wooden teaching tables. As I approached the next set of buildings, I see that the mallets are keeping the rhythm and focus for the exercises being undertaken.

The buildings have open windows and spaces for coolness and observation. The size and intensity of these spaces are constructed simply for a pedagogy of repetition (in the form of drumming, dance, or movement). I was struck by the focus of both student and teacher, the spaces are charged and unrelenting. It is clear to see how an intensity of respect and focus is built between the teachers and students through this context, and space for analysis is separated from the rigour of craft and technique. Alongside the generous opening up of the teaching spaces, students performed a stunning version of Mazha Mizhi, a performance that encompasses many of the traditional training practices but also gestures towards a progressive future for the practices.



Figures 6 & 7: *Teaching Studios, Kerala Kalamandalam.* Photos by Richard Allen.

On the last night of the festival, the campus was transformed by the MA Performance Studies students from Ambedkar University in Delhi who presented a series of solo performance actions **Figures 8 & 9**. I was led around from space to space - inside and outside - jostling to see what actions and images might appear. The humidity and heat were particularly intense and there was a charge and energy to the encounter, which was carefully curated to manage the large audience around the various spaces of the campus. What I discovered included arresting interventions based around clearly defined visual images including a collaborative dandruff painting, where a student traced the word 'beautiful' in glue on a large piece of paper and invited the audience to shake their dandruff onto the word to

complete the image, a body wrapped in cling film, a politically provocative toilet cleaner, a text work that became apparent through the audience wearing constructed sunglasses, a skeleton of bones and flowers and the climax of a burning coffin on the bank of the river. I was reminded of how earlier in the week, the students presented on how the pedagogy of their course drew from a range of international perspectives, both in terms of theatre, performance, and visual arts practices and specifically how the place of political interventions might operate through performance making. I was struck by the bravery and precision of the choices made and how open and alive the evening became.



Figures 8 & 9: *Performance Actions Students form the MA Performance Studies, DR. B.R. Ambedkar University.* Photos by Richard Allen.



Figure 10: *Listening Auditorium.* Photo by Richard Allen.

Just before dusk fell, the students working on the headphone theatre workshop set up a listening auditorium at the centre of the campus **Figure 10**. The students had produced a short audio work in four days that transported the listener on a journey through the woods in the snow, surrounding the ears with dogs, fire, crunchy footsteps, ice skating, music, and the swoosh of the wheels of a passing carriage. It was a piece of aural storytelling with an openness, collaboration and intelligence that has permeated the festival and it was met by their peers with an equal sense of openness and inquiry about how theatre and performance is taught and what the future of the pedagogy might be. As I packed up my headphones ready to return to London, I thought about how the scale and richness of the five days might be built upon and expanded to invite more voices and perspectives. I wondered about how the festival oscillated between vertical hierarchies of teaching and making, in which conventional structures of theatrical production are preserved, and the debates and impulses towards a more horizontal structures in both pedagogy and production This was the inaugural IFTS, one that should be considered a great success, placing the practice of pedagogy at the centre of debate and discussion and one that will hopefully continue to grow in future iterations.