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THEATRE

I make the audience complicit in my art: Amitesh Grover



Parshathy J Nath

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Amitesh Grover | Photo Credit: Special arrangement

The festival director of the International Theatre Festival of Kerala, which begins on January 20, he says that the theme of the fete reflects the times we live in and the multiple and interactive roles of art and theatre

Amitesh Grover is one of those young theatre practitioners of India who have transcended the barriers of disciplines to journey with the spectator through a meditative, intimate experience. A recipient of Ustad Bismillah Khan National Award, Amitesh is festival director of the International Theatre Festival of Kerala (ITFoK), which is themed on 'Imagining Communities'. In an email

interview, Amitesh, assistant professor at the National School of Drama, talks to *FridayReview* about the festival, its theme and the theatre scene today.

What is your vision of ITFoK this year?

The plays included this year bring profoundly moving narratives, complex subjective and artistic authorship that present an opportunity to scrutinise not only the shifting political implications of our world, but are also an interrogation of the relationship between art and community. The year 2019-2020 is significant for people's movement in India. Through multiple and spontaneous protests across the country, the notion of the public has been expanded from a geographical scope of India as a territory, to a constitutional proposition – what is the idea of India?

ITFoK 2020 stands witness to a 'change of heroes', from an individual to a collective, from one person in the crowd to the crowd itself, from one leader for the many to the many who are leading together today.

Your works freely flow between the genres of performance, art, digital media, installations...

My work occupies the intermediate space between **theatre**, performance and interactive art. I have created work on Grief, on Sleep, on Happiness, and on several other ephemeral grounds of knowledge. My work has a strong orientation towards experiencing philosophy-in-performance. I have been developing a practice of intimate performance.

I have been interested in how the conditions of intimacy shape time, labour, technology, and art. I build my work by deploying myself in several capacities and roles – that of an imposter, observer, guest, director, interviewer, coder, worker, writer, pedagogue, researcher and artist.

I spend extensive time researching and immersing myself in a site/location/context, learning a new routine, an alien body vocabulary. And when I think I am ready, I begin to insert intimate gestures and performances in the environment, which sometimes leave a residue in the form of photographs,

film or live art.

During previous research phases, I have collaborated with scientists, philosophers, hackers, gamers, politicians, stock-brokers, cleaners and so on. For instance, my year-long work on the phenomenon of sleep clamours after the ineffability of 'downtime' as an everyday experience, even as my work on mourning engages with the volume of disappearance and loss. I engage non-artists in my work as a way to rethink subjectivities, artistic ownership and friendship, to reflect upon shared fields of silence, subversion and resistance.

How did the exposure at the University of London (UAL) mould your contemporary understanding of theatre?

At UAL, I had colleagues from all over Asia, Africa, and Europe. My colleagues came from a broad range of practices, from architecture, film-making, fashion, puppetry and performance. I shared studio space with painters, sculptures and graphic artists.

You can imagine what a spectacularly fertile ground this can be for all manner of experimentation.

To support my scholarship, I worked as an intern at The Barbican and The Battersea Arts Centre, as a cleaner and backstage worker. My daily tasks entailed mopping and cleaning the stage and the green rooms, and getting the auditorium ready for the evening show, and putting everything back in order after the show ended. This gave me free access to the works of great masters like Robert Lepage, Peter Brook, Tim Etchells, and many many more, from the wings, in exactly the same manner as I learnt from great masters like Habib Tanvir in India while preparing for their shows as a volunteer worker. I was in London for nearly two years, and the immersion and exposure to various art forms and practices helped me identify with cultural sensibilities on a global scale.

How does the digital space excite you as a performance maker?

In an attempt to comprehend the rapidly colliding worlds of our times, I find that the digital space is a liminal state, a state lying in-between – between chaos and order, between real and fictional. The digital is a space embedded with memories, associations, links, authenticity, anonymity, fantasy and falsity. It is not possible to keep all these worlds separated online.

Of course, these associations could lead one anywhere, force one to make unexpected connections; but this is the unpredictability on which digital theatre relies for its existence.

I make the audience complicit in my art – the viewer is my collaborator, and also a participant. I propose that the viewers are themselves a site of performance. In my work, performers/audiences and technology is uncomfortably near, speaking directly, implicating everything and everybody into the performance. The audience is impelled to respond, because they are

being addressed, and they can affect the way the performance progresses. It is a moment of immense responsibility and power. Audience members can watch other members too, and the experience becomes more real.

At the NSD, as a teacher, what are the new discourses you encounter with new theatre practitioners?

Teaching art and performance has significantly changed in the 21st century. The teacher is no longer the provider of information, because information is freely available online.

Teaching spaces are no longer organised along the lines of old hierarchies – gurus/shishya or other traditionally established arrangements. We have had to re-make the processes and tools with which we teach art and performance.

One significant shift that I have noticed in my approach to teaching now is the emphasis on the relationship between theory and practice, between thinking and doing. Art institutions' privileged practice and the training curriculum was predominately shaped to produce the practitioner of art in the past, with little or no valence given to reading, writing, or the philosophy of art. But this approach has been significantly questioned and revised now, and many teachers in my generation are encouraging students to think about their practice in multi-modal ways, and to inculcate habits of thinking, reading, and doing as artistic practice.

The author is a theatre artiste and festival executive.

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