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Celebrating Otherness

At ITFoK, one of the most political theatre festivals of India, first-time curator Amitesh Grover attempts to mirror the fissures of India on stage.

Written by [Dipanita Nath](#) |

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A scene from play Eidgah ke Jinnat.

Since the autumn of 2019, a series of instructions have been coming up on billboards at the Goethe-Institut/ Max Mueller Bhavan in Kolkata and Delhi every day, urging people towards certain actions. “Combat/ the terror/ of everything. Spare/ nothing that a /majority makes,” read the board one day. There was also “Stage/ Dramatise/ Inflate/ Oversell/ Aggrandize/ Blowup, Accelerate/ Human rights”.

“Every day, for 100 days, the board unveils a new activity to be performed, to find out what our relationship with the world might be under the special conditions of an instruction. These instructions are inspired by the precarious conditions we live in, and by those who experience precarity in profound ways,” says Amitesh Grover, a performance creator and faculty member of the National School of Drama (NSD) in Delhi, who has created the display boards as part of a cultural initiative called Five Million Incidents of the Goethe-Institut / Max Mueller Bhavan in collaboration with Raqs Media Collective.





Amitesh Grover

Grover has carried his politics to his new role, as curator of the International Theatre Festival of Kerala (ITFoK), one of the boldest political art events of India. Being held in Thrissur till January 29, ITFoK has distilled a series of global and national problems into a dozen plays from India and seven international productions. The span of subjects is from *Eidgah ke Jinnat*, about the human cost of the conflict in Kashmir, to *Avyahat*, set in 3rd-century BC, after the Kalinga war, when Ashoka is gradually increasing his influence on the Buddhist monastic order; and *Chillara Samaram*, in which people protest against “anti-human” town development plans. If you see a parallel with real life, Grover intends it that way. Excerpts from an interview:

How has ITFoK grown as an idea different from other theatre festivals?

It is the best theatre festival run by a government organisation in the country; it is fully funded by the Kerala government. They have, from the very beginning, involved artistes at every level to plan, organise and run the festival. It is not ambitious in scale, and tries to include representation from not just India but the entire world, with a focus on non-Eurocentric artistic creations. ITFoK, in the past, has forged exchanges with Latin America and several African countries.

In terms of politics, ITFoK has always sought to define what is the contemporary voice in the nation. It has invited plays that are taking a fair bit of political risk to say something that needs to be said. It has invited work that has been censored

elsewhere and given it a free and fair platform.

What was your curatorial idea?

The question I started with was, 'What could a theatre festival contribute to the present time, especially at the time of fake news and disinformation and unceasing attacks of the idea of culture'. This led me to ask: 'What kind of communities do theatre performances envision?' When a play takes place, does it imagine a new kind of community, one of audiences and people, even if it is temporary? Does it have a role to play in the larger category of what is society and the nation today? Can a festival of theatre be in dialogue with this? I began looking for plays that imagine communities in different ways and provoke us to think about communities that are forgotten, alternative ways of defining what a community is, and the challenges that communities face today, especially in the intolerant times we live in.

A scene from play Avyahat.

Which are some current political narratives reflected in the plays?

There are plays that present narratives about Kashmir, minority communities, forced migration within the country and the relationship between big cities and rural areas and what happens when people go back and forth between these territories. Several plays deal with the narratives of the marginalised communities and ask questions that are being attacked by the majoritarian forces. We have plays talking about non-Hindu communities, their contribution and intertwined history

and mixed cultural identities. One way to think about this festival is as the festival of otherness, where topics of the other body, person, community or culture are being foregrounded.

For a festival that upholds voices from the margins, all the directors from across India belong either to well-known institutes or have already shown at major national festivals. Is it a challenge to find new voices from the sidelines?

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The younger directors, Avijit Solanki, director of the play Kala Dhabba Badal Ki Tarah Aa Raha hai, and Bhagyashree Tarke, performer of the play Salma Deewani, are both NSD graduates, but the former is from Bhopal and the latter from Hyderabad. One must keep in mind that the performance and theatre scene in India presents quite a challenge to a lot of theatre production. I know, from my NSD experience and from seeing a lot of theatre, that there are several hundred theatre groups but challenging work that is worthy of being curated for a festival is extremely rare. At ITFoK, we were limited by the open call, and the jury had to choose from among whoever applied.



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