

ART & CULTURE | THEATRE

Cars To Boxing Rings

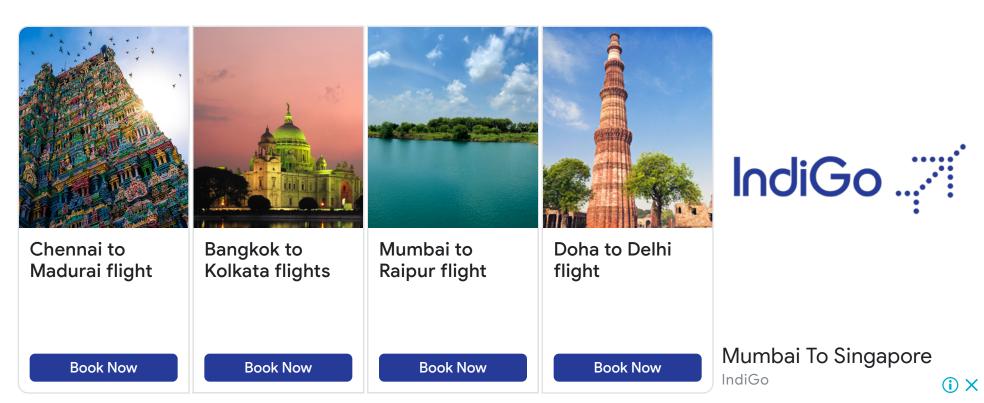
As venues get more myriad, plays become more personal

Parshathy J Nath Nath 21 Apr, 2023





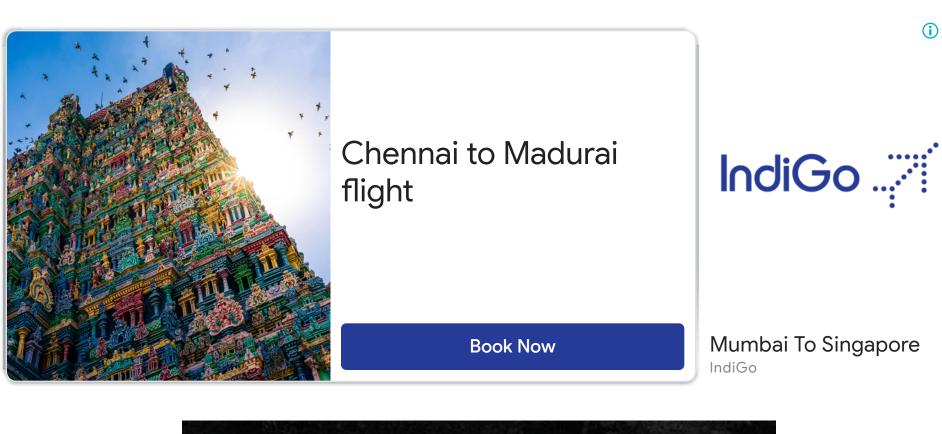
A scene from the Money Opera (Photos Courtesy: Radhika Agarwal)



HE ACTOR WAS chatting with the audience before the performance began. A few spectators mistook him for one of them as Anandsami was so unassuming just a few minutes before the opening of his solo Tamil show called Ungala Neenga Yeppadi Paakka Virumbareenga? (UNYPV), created by Perch collective, directed by Chennai-based theatre director, Rajiv Krishnan.

The play opened first in Chennai and then was performed in Bengaluru to small audiences of friends, mostly in houses. Fifty shows have been staged so far in different cities across south India. It tells the story of a factory worker who talks about his daily grind from "dragon" bosses to machines he uses to letters he writes to his mother back in his Ooru (village). Inspired by Athol Fugard's Sizwe Bansi Is Dead, a scathing criticism of racism, UNYPV deals with the questions of identity and power struggle. The play was also staged at a garment factory where the women, sitting on the stools in front of their sewing machines, were the audience. "It affected them so much, but they could not say it out loud. Some said there is a 'dragon' in their office too. They meant the supervisor," recalls Anandsami.

Made after the first pandemic wave, in February 2021, the play was an outcome of the collective's decision to create something small, compact and easily transportable. Hence, it was conceived as a solo. Homes emerged as an alternative because public spaces were closed. Director Krishnan says, "Just before the pandemic hit, we had gone to Delhi to perform at the National School of Drama (NSD) festival, and at that time a lot of us had gone to Shaheen Bagh when the anti-CAA protests were at its peak. That got me thinking. When I read Sizwe Bansi, we felt the play speaks to that issue [of identity struggle], which is going to get more important as the days go by. So, I invited Anandsami and Swaminathan [another writer], and we sat together and worked on the script. Obviously, it is much easier to work with one actor than getting a lot of people in one space."







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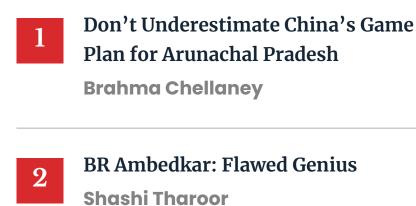


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Ungala Neenga Yeppadi Paakka Virumbareenga

Anandsami compares his performance to the old-world style of village performance cultures where the storyteller sits in front of the villagers and narrates the tale. "I can see their eyes. I can get who is interested and not. We have performed this play in proscenium spaces also. But I felt the story could not reach people so much then. They were okay shows. Even in a huge space, I have noticed the way the people seated in front experience a story is different from the way they do at the back."

Veteran theatre director Peter Brook once said, "I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged." Modern theatre practitioners are literally giving form to Brook's quote by taking the stage out of the usual proscenium/ performative space and manifesting magic between wherever the actor and the audience are. The reasons could be pandemic induced or for the sheer pleasure of a more immersive form of theatre that involves audience-actor interactions.

> "In India, money is wedded to land and buildings. So much money gets parked in real estate; it is the biggest market for money. The money opera could not have happened on stage — its most meaningful space is in a building," says Amitesh Grover, theatre director

When Lapdiang Syiem, a 34-year-old theatre practitioner from Shillong returned to her hometown after higher education in drama from Denmark, she could not find a community for theatre. She tried to find available spaces. And as a result, empty houses, museum galleries, bars, cafes, community halls and chapels have turned into stages for her work that deals with environmental issues and sexual abuse, violence and grief. At Assam State Museum, working with Desire Machine collective, on a project that looked at decolonising the museum, Syiem performed at a museum's gallery where they displayed masks. Speaking about the play Museums Are Closed at Night, she says, "To feel the energy of the audience is something that gives me a high. When I am separated and when I am on a proscenium stage, I just feel there is a barrier I need to break and I feel that more than the aesthetics. It is more about the connection that I can have with my audience."

When theatre director Amitesh Grover conceived of The Money Opera for the Serendipity Arts Festival in December last year, he was attracted to an abandoned building. "It is a place stuck in limbo — with an unfulfilled past, and an uncertain future — belonging to no one and everyone. I looked at it as a heterotopia, which 'others' inhabit; it is simultaneously disturbing, intense, incompatible, contradictory, and transformative. The Money Opera is not just one world, but worlds within worlds, mirroring and yet upsetting what is outside." This immersive, site-specific play, written by Sarah Mariam, explores the idea of capitalism from a uniquely South Asian perspective. "In India, money is wedded to land and buildings. So much money gets parked in real estate; it is the biggest market for money. The Money Opera could not have happened on stage — its most meaningful space is in a building."

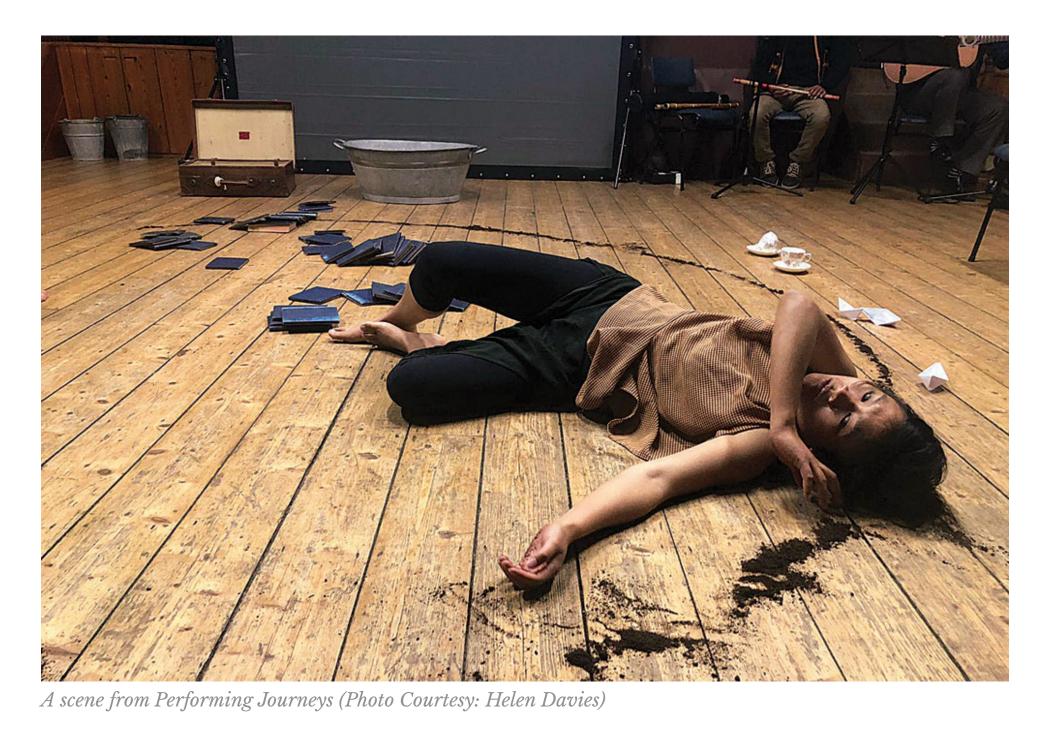


Knockout

Fifteen characters, including an oceanographer, a thief, a child goddess and real-life professionals, appear like spectres in the unnamed building, waiting to be discovered by the audience. The desolation of the five-storey building is expressed through the characters and their stories. One of the most significant characters that Mariam created is that of the owner: a panic-stricken, ringmaster of sorts, who discovers that the building is sentient, and, in small ways, has begun to disobey him.

n ambassador car turns into a performance space in Abheesh Sasidharan's Bhranthu: A Mediated Performance. The actor Kumaradas TN talks to the audience who are passengers in this car through a tablet. He wanted to make a sustainable performance, which can be performed anywhere, as mainstream theatre does not excite him any longer. "Just four people could watch and enjoy the show at a time. So, we planned 10 shows in a day, so 40

people would end up watching."



The performance delves into issues of Dalit politics in Kerala, and notions of hygiene and touch. Kumaradas says, "In the performance, the audience is so close together in the car, when the AC is on, they are freezing. In the middle of the journey, we switch it off, and suddenly everyone is aware of each other's sweat, little murmurings, a cough, and so on." The play has been performed across Kerala from garages to business complexes.

> To feel the energy of the audience is something that gives a high. When I am separated and when I am on a proscenium stage, I just feel there is a barrier I need to break, says Lapdiang Syiem, actor

In the search for a new vocabulary, Aliyar K, a postgraduate from NSD, forged new connections between sports and theatre. In his play *Knockout*, the boxing ring becomes the arena of drama. The play premiered at a school in Palakkad, built in the Victorian style, which added to the spectacle. Tapping into the inherent drama in all sports, yet divesting it of the usual dynamics of winning and losing, the director creates a new meaning. He tries to look at the factors that bind sports and art, and the fences that divide the two. The play features a mix of sportsmen and non-sportsmen. In the play we see an older man fighting against a young combatant, a combination we will never see in usual boxing matches, and it hints at old age fighting against youth.



Bhranthu, A Mediated Performance (Photo Courtesy: Sudheer C)

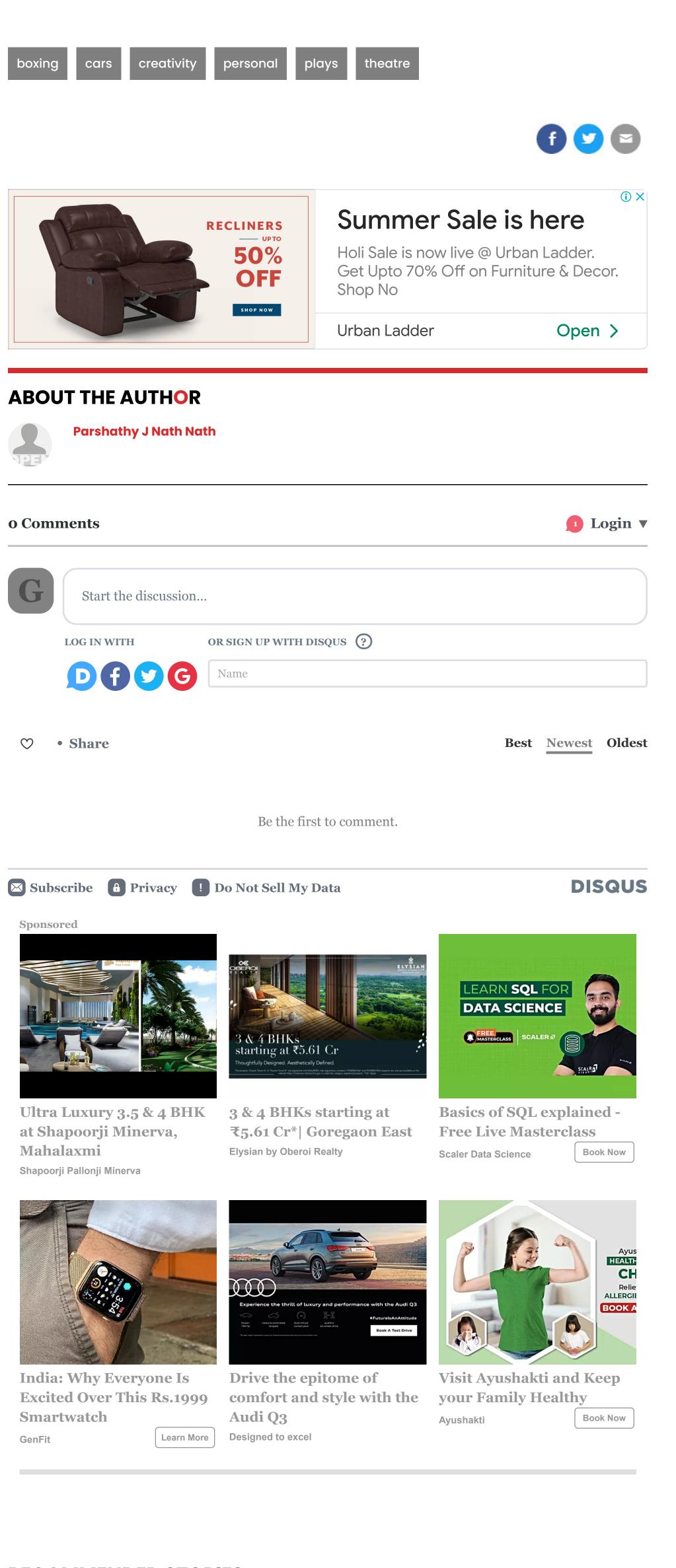
As these new theatre makers find new spaces to challenge the definitions of stage, they are asking a deeper question—what is theatre? They return us to the origin of this art form-creating an organic connection between actor and audience, while dissolving those boundaries. As Grover says the "artifice of illusion on stage" is broken.

> "In Bhranthu: a mediated performance just four people could watch and enjoy the show in the ambassador car at a time. So, we planned 10 shows in a day, so 40 people would end up watching, says Kumaradas TN, actor

Out of the proscenium, the potential is unlimited. As Syiem says, "A performance does change with every space as well, but space also changes. That is interesting for me. You break down what that space is. It is no longer fancy like a Kamani auditorium or a temple space for Koodiyattam." She recalls performing *Performing Journeys* at a chapel in Wales to a small crowd. The performance questioned what the missionaries did to Khasi tribes. As a Khasi herself, she says, "To perform at a chapel and to challenge that space is so powerful. At the same time, it gives a deeper meaning. I am not saying you sort of destroy or disrespect the space. It is understanding what that space holds and whether it will allow itself to be transformed with the stories I have."

It could also be that these "found" places abound with invisible histories. That might add their own narratives that make a performance richer. Grover recalls how while scripting and rehearsing, the building would whisper stories and characters to him and the writer. Grover modifies Peter Brook's notion of 'the empty space,' by adding, "Only the proscenium stage can be truly empty. Real spaces out there in the world are never empty. They are brimming with memories, aspirations, dreams, regrets, failures. Give it

a careful listen, and you will hear and see it all emerge in its glorious humanity."



RECOMMENDED STORIES



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