

Sunil Vashishta Dec 31, 2022 · 9 min read



Money Money Money

As part of the Serendipity arts festival, Goa, I happened to see The Money Opera. I was gobsmacked to say the least. I am neither a theatre critic nor do I understand the nuances of a play but I want to write what I felt. I am not a writer as well. So, here goes nothing. (Long read alert)

TL;DR : It's a Frain-buck

When I entered, I almost dismissed the setting as a play version of a self-indulgent, post-modern abstract painting. What else would you make of people awkwardly placed in a dilapidated building. The newfound aesthetic obsession with the raw & the exposed, layered with a sense of asymmetric randomness. A setting that was predictably hipsterish. However, to my utter delight it didn't turn out to be a meaningless inversion of an artist's mind but a complex system set in motion by the mind of a genius. A system which had several moving parts not graspable through a single plain of sight.

Immediately after a few minutes of perplexing gaze at the unyielding characters, the complex layers start to reveal themselves. As anticipation builds and people start to merge with the artists, it becomes difficult to tell who's the artist and who's the art watcher. Thereby beginning to dismantle the binary between what's real and what's not; an idea that develops further as you enter into the play. As the literal boundaries between the performers and the participants diffuse you begin to feel you are a part of the play. In fact a thought flashes, if you are the one being played?

The show progresses and leads you to various floors where different kinds of performances begin to happen. You are nudged yet not decidedly guided where to move. What you catch is a matter of chance, not a matter of choice, as you don't know what unfolds where. Then you realise that the director has dismantled linearity through an interesting device of different floors of a building. Like the shards of a broken mirror, each story shows you something of a larger story yet does not come together in one instance to show you the whole picture. Belying your expectations the story doesn't progress through vertical floors but these floors are parallel universes connected through passages of a larger theme.

What these multiple window 'storeys' do, is disintegrate the linearity so that the viewer never settles in her prejudices and knowledge. The director here tricks your mind. Your mind always scampers for the shortcut to a story it is being told. It starts to find some predictable patterns to make sense of what's happening. Money opera doesn't let you arrive at a story in a hurry. Here, in what looks like a deliberate attempt, the division between form and content is not neat. The play doesn't want you to engage with the content alone but to play with the form as well. It commands a full attention; of your mind and your senses. It doesn't give you easy handles to float through the show. That's why it's pretty much impossible to grasp the full intended meaning in a single viewing. The first viewing only allows you to immerse in an experience you have never been in before. The surreality of which intrigues as much as it overwhelms.

The stories are on a loop, being performed over and over again. Perhaps they serve a functional purpose so that people are able to catch them while shuffling across floors. Perhaps they are a metaphor. A signifier of the humdrum loop of life that money forces you to be in (That being a retrospective realisation). A hamster wheel which you ride upon daily, despite realising the futility of it. Again, a theme that strengthens as you move along in the play.

जहाँ नाटक आपको आज़ादी देता है कहीं भी जाने की वहीं कहानी के पात्र आपको अपनी और खींचते हैं! कुछ कहानियां अर्धपूर्ण लगती हैं, नभी तुली सजी संवरी फूलों की क्यारियों सी! और कुछ बेमानी सी लगती हैं, जैसे किसी पुरानी ऊंची दिवार में कहीं पीपल के पौधे का फुगना उग आया हो: ये कहना चाहुंगा की बेमानी लगती हैं, बेमानी है नहीं! परन्तु अपने आप में गहरे मायने लिए हुए हैं! बस मायनों को धीरे धीरे release करती हैं, जैसे एक अच्छी scotch अपने notes धीरे धीरे release करती है! मेने नाटक का synopsis नहीं पढ़ा, और न ही दो बार देखने के बाद भी इसे पूरी तरह समझ पाया हूँ पर लगता है के हर कहानी एक आयाम है, समाज और पैसे के एक दुसरे पे निर्भरता का!

कहीं हम एक नृत्यांगना के घर पल बढ़ रही एक लड़की की कर्मकश देखते हैं तो कहीं एक wealth manager फेमिली ऑफिस की बात कर रहा है. कुछ किर्दार building की इतनी वाकफ़ियत से बात करते हैं की मानो सदियों से यहीं रह रहे हों! रह क्या रहे हों, इसी तरह loop में घूम रहे हों, social media पे gifs की तरह! हम लोग website बंद भी कर दें तो gifs चलती रहेंगी! ऐसे ही ये किर्दार भी चलते रहेंगे! कोई देखे ये न देखे! जैसे काल चक्र में घूम रहे हैं, building की अलग अलग मज़िलों पर फ़ैद!

एक और बात! आप इन किर्दारों को किसी एक काल खंड में नहीं, पर अलग-अलग खंड में घूमता पाएंगे! इस मायने में , नाटक आपको एक समय रखा मे बंधने नहीं देता! कभी एक किर्दार अचानक से किसी पौराणिक राजा का रूप धर लेता है और बीच बीच में theater की क्षणभंगुरता की बात करने लगता है! फिर किसी और सूत्र में कोई किर्दार gamification के dopamine की तरफ इशारा करता है!

एक और तल पर नाटक आपको घुनाव करने को कहेगा! भावना या तर्क के तल पर! कभी बिस्तर पर लेटे हुए कोई किर्दार आपको हू लेगा, तो कभी कोई toxicity और survival की esoteric बातें करेगा। एक नाचने वाला लड़का अपनी कहानी से आपको एक चोट सी करता है, और एक लड़की आपको, लोगों को मियालने वाली जमीन की, कथा सुनाएगी! भाव और तर्क ऐसे गडू गडू होते हैं जैसे एक अनुभवी tourist guide की बातों में होते हैं! जो अपनी सुन्दर कहानियों से सैलानियों का मनोरंजन करता है और साथ ही इतिहास के तथ्यों को उन्ही कहानियों में लपेट के आपको चखवाता है!

ऐसा लगता है की director, linearity को अनेक बंग से तोड़ने की कोशिश कर रहा है! कभी fragmented narrative से, कभी temporal विस्थापन से, तो कभी भाव और तर्क की रस्साकशी से!

किर्दारों को देख कर भी ये तय कर पाना मुश्किल है की कौन सच बोल रहा है और कौन कहानी कह रहा है! क्या इनकी ज़िन्दगी की कहानी सच है, या फिर इस बिल्डिंग की! किसको पता! कुछ किर्दार कहानी से बंधे लगते हैं, लेकिन कुछ आज़ाद हो कर अलग जा कर बैठ जाते हैं! या फिर वो दर्शकों का भ्रम है! क्योंकि वहाँ हर कोई बंधा है; बिल्डिंग से! विट्टल के भजन गाता हुआ सीढ़ियों के banister पर कपड़ा मारता हुआ बूढ़ा या फिर चमकीला कोट पहने opera गाता हुआ shakespearean नोजवान!

एक लड़की कहानी और कविता पढ़ती है अपनी लय मे! अरे ये तो मनमौजी है! इस पर तो पैसे की कोई बंदिश नहीं! फिर वो आपको कुरेदना शुरू करती है, अपने शब्दों से! एक शल्य चिकित्सक के जैसे, जो कुशल है पर निशुुर भी! ऐसा लगता है की वो लड़की building का अंतर्मन है! जो चाहता तो है की आप इस building मे रहें पर जानता है की आप कभी रह नहीं पाएंगे! इसलिए न चाहते हुए भी आपको वहां से निकल जाने को बोलता है! Building का अंतर्मन बिल्डिंग से तरल हो अलग दिखाई दे सकता है, अलग है नहीं!

एक और किर्दार है जिसे देख कर बाहर से ऐसा लगेगा की ये किर्दार तो स्वछंद है! काले कपड़े पहन कर एक लड़की बेरोक टोक, अपनी मर्जी से जहाँ जाना चाहे जाती है! जाती क्या है एक काली बिजली के जैसे कोधती है! और कभी एक काली बिल्ली के जैसे construction pipes पर अंगड़ाई लेती है! वो loop मे नहीं बंधी तो स्वतः सबको अपनी तरफ खींचती है! She has a deep sense of mystery that draws you in. She never utters a word yet she beckons you in her intriguing manner with a great sense of compulsion. She is like Schrodinger's cat. A cat locked in the building; simultaneously existent and non existent. ऐसा लगता है की ये लड़की एक किर्दार नहीं, काला युबार है! जैसे की किसी बहुत पुरानी building की पूरी कालिमा ने एक शकल पा ली हो! और वो जीना चाह रही है अपनी अपूर्वी खाहिशों को! पर उसकी खाहिशें अपूर्वी हैं, infinite हैं! Infinity is the biggest myth. It creates a sense of more, a sense of tomorrow, a sense of never ending-ness in a way that we fail to realise that infinity also is a loop. Albeit a twisted one. Her act also neither has a beginning nor an end but is laced with a continued sense of anticipation. The ghost girl's yearnings would never end, and she would never leave the building. Does she embody (or un-embodiy) the never ending, never fulfilled desires of the building itself?

And then it dawns upon you की इस कहानी की सूत्रधार building है! इस कहानी को समझने के लिए building को समझना पड़ेगा!

There's a silly joke around buildings. 'Why are buildings called buildings when they are already built?' Come to think of it, it inadvertently reflects a deeper truth. It turns out to be a philosophical joke that makes for the undercurrent of The Money Opera. Buildings are never fully built. Which building has ever been completed? By the time the structure is ready, the inhabitants start thinking about modifying the different spaces in their own ways, to fulfil their desires which they had been postponing for years. And it keeps taking newer forms and shapes as it gets old. Then one day it becomes too old to accommodate the ever expanding lust of the inhabitants. Either the inhabitants leave or the old building is fallen to make space for a shiny new building which can mirror their dreams on its mirage like facade. Thus, every building is stuck in a painful loop of its own creation. Choosing a dilapidated building is neither a coincidence nor merely an 'interesting' stage for the show. It carries something of absolute essence for the show. Buildings are destined to be 'building' forever. The show, you realise, is signalling something even through the choice of the venue name. An 'unnamed' building. A building which has no address, no name. It tries to threadbare the essence of life. A building is a skeletal of bare necessities, a shelter for your survival not a showcase for your assumed identities.

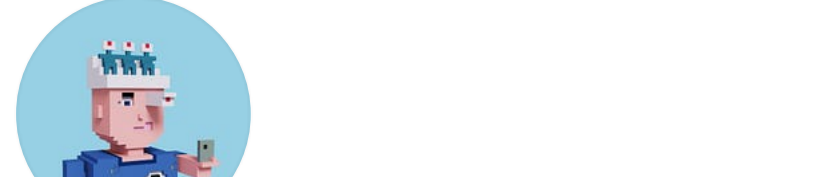
At the end of the show, the building opens up suddenly, like the lid of a pressure cooker. All the stories simmering with-in different nooks and corners of the building gush out towards the terrace. The building can no longer contain the burden of disillusionment, frustrations and discontent lives it is so far pretending to give shelter to. The culmination act is a stirring expression of an attempt by one of the characters to reach the pinnacle of the building, both literally and metaphorically. It's where the money makes man fall under the illusion that he is God. A modern day Hiranyakashyapu. The character draws upon the idea of video games as a game of life. Video games make you feel like God, even though momentarily. That's what money makes you do; feel like God momentarily. And once you are cursed by that feeling, you can never return back to a feeling of mortality.

While you are never able to see all the stories and actors at once glance when they are with-in the building, you see them on the terrace on the same plane of sight. In a way, telling you that the specifics of the stories might be different but they all point to the same thing: The couched (and sometimes not) vulgarity of money. The last act reveals how money creates a sense of addiction, leading you to a mad euphoria. So much so that you forget where your story started and what is its destiny. It makes you forget that it is actually not the ladder of ambition that you are on but a loop where you are stuck through a permanent glitch created by your unfulfilled yearnings. Like the never ending building, even this write-up is unable to come to a sense of completion. There are several untold, emotions untouched, songs unsung and money unearned.

The Money Opera is truly a masterpiece. I tip my customary hat to the creators. My congratulations to the director, the assistant director, the writers, the actors and the whole team for creating this stunning commentary on our twisted relationship with money.

Theater Review

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