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'We cannot say with certainty things will change next year', theatre experts on entering a new year

Yearender 2021: Workshops, shows and festivals have been planned for 2022 but, as December draws to a close, the threat of the new variant, Omicron, and a third wave, has reinforced old uncertainties and anxieties.

Written by Dipanita Nath | Pune |
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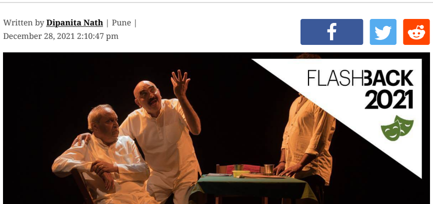

A scene from 'Kanta Mattu Kanta', a Sanket production. The play as part of Ranga Shankara Theatre Festival - Staying Alive!

Suri Surendranath held the premier of his Kannada play *Kantha Mattu Kantha* at the Ranga Shankara theatre festival in Bengaluru on October 26 to a house full crowd. Four more shows have followed, all sold out. In Assam's Goalpara, local residents from around the dense Sal forest, which is the venue of a unique theatre festival called Under The Sal Tree in December, welcomed the plays from Tamil Nadu, Bengal and Manipur, among others.

In a year when theatres have alternated between being open and shut and artists have battled health and financial crises, performers and audiences are facing one another with the awareness that this is a privilege. Workshops, shows and festivals have been planned for 2022 but, as December draws to a close, the threat of the new variant, Omicron, and a third wave, has reinforced old uncertainties and anxieties.

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"Theatre has been among the worst-affected art forms. We had spent months without touching the light board or setting foot on stage. When plays started, the audiences lapped it up. Many of them were in tears as were theatre directors. Again, we are performing and trying to forget, like we did in December 2020. Again, we are holding on to hope, like we did in December 2020. There is a sense of Deja vu," says Surendranath. A number of other theatre practitioners spoke to us about entering a new year in the shadow of the old one:

Amrapali Punekar, *Tamasha artiste*

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"I pray that everything becomes like before and we can go back to performing for big audiences again," she said.

My mother and father were tamasha artists and their mother and father and I have grown up performing on the stage. I liked being a star performer and draw huge crowds to fairs from villages around Nashik, Sangli and Satara in Maharashtra to watch me sing, dance and act. But, during the pandemic all shows closed and we were left with no option. I began to work in the field because I have four children, my parents and my grandmother to look after. I had never worked with mud before but we had to take up whatever job was available. Now, there are one or two shows happening. It is not like it was before the pandemic. We don't get that many programmes but, at least, we have started to get invited to perform. I pray that everything becomes like before and we can go back to performing for big audiences again.

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Paresh Rawal, *Chairman, National School of Drama*

At the National School of Drama (NSD), there is more than 15,000 hours of data about plays, which is lying unused and unprotected, and we will be working on digitisation of these. At a time when there is a dearth of good content in theatre, it is important to preserve the data that is present at the school. It is wishful thinking but I have a vision of creating an OTT platform in the future that is entirely for theatre. The content created by NSD would reach all corners of the world and generate awareness and revenue because NSD should also be self-sustaining. We need a business model for it. After a gap, the Bharat Rang Mahotsav (BRM) will be held from February 4, 2022, so we can expect more plays to be performed and recorded.

"I am appalled and heartbroken that the NSD, which is such a great institute, isn't functioning at its peak efficiency," Paresh Rawal said.

NSD is also looking at opening as many centres as we can, provided the city has an inclination towards theatre and have a vibrant theatre scene. Gradually, we will try to get affiliated with the university in that city. On the campus, the redevelopment of buildings is taking place though funds of around Rs 32 crore that had been given way back in 2016 but were not used. We have to expedite this project. We are putting up a building behind the heritage structure of Bahawalpur House.

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I also feel that the work ethics need to be improved. I am appalled and heartbroken that the NSD, which is such a great institute, isn't functioning at its peak efficiency. The wastage of funds needs to be stopped. Coming from Mumbai theatre, I know that it is possible to create powerful plays using less money. Here, I have heard that lakhs of rupees are spent on productions of which there are only a couple of shows. I have been doing professional theatre since 1971, and I know that theatre does not need hefty amounts of money. If you reduce the budget, your imagination opens.

Sunil Shanbag, *Theatre director*

"We are not taking on any ambitious project. I always had three or four plays running at any given time, but no longer," the theatre director said.

One of the biggest learnings for us has been to scale down and be more flexible and agile because we cannot say with any degree of certainty that things will change next year. We thought 2022 might be the turning point, but who knows now with omicron? I think theatre artists are cautious about starting something new because it requires more time, energy and resources and there is no certainty of performing it over any length of time. We are not taking on any ambitious project. I always had three or four plays running at any given time, but no longer. The big shows are on the back burner. But, let's also talk about what happens between lockdowns. At Studio Tamasha, we are continuing to perform and trying to make it easier for other artists to perform live for audiences of 25-30. This is more psychological than anything else. A lot of smaller theatre companies and practitioners cannot afford the risk that comes with a live performance. We are trying to create a support system so that some of the cost gets underwritten. We are also started training programmes for young actors to keep the morale up. After six months, we will take stock. If another lockdown happens, we will be trying to keep theatre activity going.

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Amitesh Grover, *Performance Maker*

The pandemic brought about a permanent shift in the way I think about theatre. I made The Last Poet, a digital theatre piece that is performed live, and learnt a lot about how to think about digital performances and why live theatre is even more important in the online world than in the physical one. These are the lessons that I am going to put into practice, whether Omicron hits and third wave comes.
The Last Poet is about a poet who disappears suddenly. In a world without boundaries, we meet a range of characters, such as a weaver, a prosecutor and a publisher, who speak about the poet and unravel the mystery behind his disappearance. I had the fortune of showing The Last Poet at the Serendipity Arts Festival in December 2020 to audiences of 400 people. I realised I would have never got such an audience in a physical space over a weekend but it happened for this online show. Then, I did the second round of The Last Poet, in collaboration with Paytm Insider in 2021. I learnt a lot about theatre publicity and online advertising. How do you get audiences online? How does attention work? The fact that people stayed till the end of the show, tells me that something is happening right.

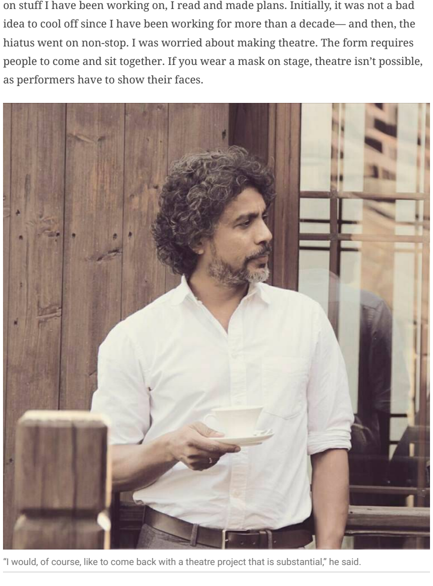
"The last year has also taught me a lot about online performances as a director and creator," Amitesh Grover said.

We also went to the Canadian Theatre Biennale this year, where the audience were South Asians in Toronto, who don't come to watch theatre. After the show, there were heartwarming comments from people who were listening to this dialect of Hind after a long time. Going forward, I am working with coders to transform The Last Poet into a permanent show online. Next year, when you search for The Last Poet, you will be led to a website, where you can buy a ticket and enter the show that runs for 90 minutes.

The last year has also taught me a lot about online performances as a director and creator. I curated an online theatre show for Ranga Shankara in Bengaluru, which made me think about how to bring politically sharp and provocative work online while also protecting the artists from any abuse or assault. That was a major concern because one has less control over digital distribution of theatre than you have in a physical space.

Deepan Sivaraman, *Theatre director and actor*

Just before the pandemic began, we had planned a series of shows of Khasakkinte Itihasam, a mega production based on the iconic work of OV Vijayan, at Thrikkaripur, a village in northern Kerala. There were to be five shows in April. In March, the lockdown began and, slowly, everything closed down. We had to shelve that plan and many others, such as producing Ubu Roi, a play that comments on fascism, among other ills. When the world locked down, I took a break. I reflected on stuff I have been working on, I read and made plans. Initially, it was not a bad idea to cool off since I have been working for more than a decade— and then, the hiatus went on non-stop. I was worried about making theatre. The form requires people to come and sit together. If you wear a mask on stage, theatre isn't possible, as performers have to show their faces.


"I would, of course, like to come back with a theatre project that is substantial," he said.

I had been thinking about a cinema project much before the pandemic began. The COVID situation might have helped me finalise my ideas. Cinema is the only form that immediately started to flourish because OTT platform can come to your space. The other art forms were shelved. Malayalam cinema, for instance, was transformed as people across India began to see films which they would not otherwise, because these films aren't released nationally.

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I realised I could step into a place nearby to theatre by making a film. In cinema, I could invest my understanding of visual theatre. I have been working on a film project and am in the process of completing the screenplay with a writer from the industry. We have a cast, producer and crew ready. We will begin shooting in the second half of next year. I would, of course, like to come back with a theatre project that is substantial. It could be Ubu Roi, a play to talk about contemporary political realities.

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