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'The actors ask questions and the audience decides what they want to see': Atul Kumar

Actor Atul Kumar on *The Last Poet*, an interactive theatre performance that throws light on the status of poets and thinkers in this country today.

DEEPALI SINGH (HTTPS://WWW.MONEYCONTROL.COM/AUTHOR/DEEPALI-SINGH-15981/) SEPTEMBER 24, 2021 / 04:29 PM IST

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Atul Kumar in 'The Last Poet', on from September 24-26. (Photo courtesy Amitesh Grover)

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Interdisciplinary artist Amitesh Grover's interactive theatre performance *The Last Poet* premiered at SA Virtual, an annual Arts and Performance Festival commissioned by Serendipity Arts Foundation 2020.

Described as a 'show about an enduring poet, a fascinating journey through his city on the web', it brings together theatre, film, sound art, creative coding, and digital scenography, among other things.

The story: a poet has disappeared. The mystery of his disappearance is solved gradually as the audience meet characters who tell them about the vanished poet.

Atul Kumar, artistic director of The Theatre Company, is one of five actors who bring the audience closer to the poet's world in the show. Excerpts from a conversation with Kumar:

Have you worked with Amitesh Grover before?

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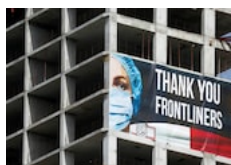
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I have never worked with him before. I met him at the National School of Drama (NSD) where we both taught. It has been a dream to work with him because he has been working in digital interface for a long time.

What is the play trying to convey?

There is a poet who has gone missing from the city. This was our last poet. If you look around, that is what is happening in our country with students, journalists, thinkers, philosophers and stand-up comedians. They are all disappearing and being put behind bars without any due process. The play is a sort of metaphor to bring that to people's notice. You will meet about 20-25 characters played by these five actors who are linked to this poet's life. Either they are very close to him or they are looking at him from far, people who are connected with him or unconnected, people who are on his side, and those who are the so-called perpetrators who have put him away. They talk about him and the audience gets to understand his world, his life, his point of view, and his politics through these people.

Tell us about the characters you play.

I am playing five different characters. What is interesting is that I will suddenly be the poet's dearest friend who has been to second-hand bookshops to collect poetry books with him and sat late in the evening discussing art, literature, politics and wanting to change the world with him to suddenly playing another character who is one of the gatekeepers of social fabric within a community that wants to put the poet away. It's great fun. The audience decides who they want to see because there is a poll. The actors ask questions to the audience and the audience decides what they want to see.

It is an interactive performance that brings together theatre, film, sound art, creative coding, and digital scenography. Was this all very new for you?

Not for me because I have been watching some of this stuff internationally. This is a realm that most Indian theatre-makers were not really able to understand and get in touch with during the first and second waves (of Covid). We were limiting ourselves to recording our plays in-camera and then showing them, which was hardly cyber theatre. I have been simultaneously making a piece that uses a lot of different art forms. So, for me, the form was not new but the details with which he (Amitesh Grover) was working were unique. In fact, I am trying to see if I can create my project as a semi-live piece – a sort of exhibition performance in an art gallery perhaps.

What projects is The Company Theatre working on now?

The digital project will definitely go up soon in collaboration with an art gallery. It will be partly live and partly digital. We are doing a play called "Taking Sides" on arts and politics which might happen in January. There is another on the Constitution of India which might happen in April or May.

Do you see yourself continuing to be a part of digital or other forms of theatre even when theatres are allowed to function properly?

Yes, I have a feeling and I really hope that it opens up new ways of looking at theatre as well. One can never say, because things are changing so fast. Who knows, we may even stop doing theatre. Maybe something more meaningful might come up, who knows?

The Last Poet will **stream online** (<https://insider.in/event/the-last-poet-sep17-2021/buy>) on September 24, 25 and 26. Tickets on Paytm Insider.

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