Carnival of Pedagogy: Theatre and Ethics



SCHOOL OF DRAMA AND FINE ARTS,
UNIVERSITY OF CALICUT, THRISSUR, KERALA, INDIA

Carnival of Pedagogy: Theatre and Ethics



Edition

School of Drama and Fine Arts,
University of Calicut, Thrissur, Kerala, India

IFTS 2025 Festival Book

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Preface

Every festival leaves behind more than memory. It leaves behind ideas, exchanges, and questions that continue long after the last performance ends. This volume is an attempt to preserve that continuity, drawn from the third edition of the International Festival of Theatre Schools, held in 2025 under the theme Carnival of Pedagogy: Theatre and Ethics. The idea of carnival has always carried a sense of freedom, a space where roles blur and learning happens through play, where seriousness and joy exist side by side without contradiction.

The pages that follow trace the festival day by day. Performances that pushed boundaries, workshops that blurred the line between teacher and student, paper presentations, panel discussions, the Teachers Meet and Students Meet, cultural evenings, and special sessions are all arranged in sequence, so that readers who were not present can still follow the pulse of the festival from beginning to end.

Beyond this record, the volume brings together the voices that shaped it. Write ups, reports, articles, and interviews offered by scholars, pedagogues, practitioners, and panelists reflect on theatre education, ethics, social responsibility, tradition, and intercultural exchange. Through these contributions, the questions raised during the festival continue to live beyond the event itself.

None of this would have been possible without the quiet labour of many hands. Academic institutions and cultural organisations offered support, practitioners and advisors offered guidance, and sponsors and volunteers offered time and resources. This volume stands as a tribute to that collective effort as much as it is a record of what it achieved.

What follows, then, is not simply a report of a festival that took place. It is an archive of ideas still in motion, offered to educators, students, researchers, and practitioners as both a reference and an invitation, to keep asking what it means to teach, to perform, and to act with ethics in a world that rarely pauses to ask such questions of itself.

Editor

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ABOUT

International Festival of Theatre Schools

IFTS: Reframing Theatre Education through Pedagogy, Ecology, and Ethics

The International Festival of Theatre Schools (IFTS) is a pedagogy-focused international platform that brings together theatre academicians, practitioners, and students to critically examine how theatre is taught and learned today. Initiated alongside International Theatre Festival of Kerala (ITFOK) in 2023, IFTS foregrounds dialogue between practice and academia through the concept of the Carnival of Theatre Pedagogy. Its subsequent editions expanded this inquiry to relationship of theatre with ecology and ethics, engaging interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary perspectives. Across its first three editions, IFTS has evolved into a distinctive space where theatre education is approached as a reflective, ethical, and socially responsible practice.

The International Festival of Theatre Schools (IFTS) has emerged in recent years as a distinctive intervention in the global landscape of theatre festivals and academic gatherings. Conceived as a platform dedicated to theatre pedagogy, IFTS brings together academicians, practitioners, students, and cultural workers to examine how theatre is taught, learned, and ethically situated within contemporary society. Rather than foregrounding performance as an end product, the festival places pedagogy, process, and dialogue at its core.

IFTS was initiated alongside the International Theatre Festival of Kerala (ITFOK) in 2023, during the conceptualisation of that festival. Its emergence responded to a growing disjunction between theatre practice and theatre education, particularly in a global context where academic institutions increasingly function as the primary sites for training theatre practitioners. While theatre festivals and conferences proliferate worldwide, there has been limited space for sustained engagement with the pedagogical, methodological, and ethical questions that underpin theatre training. IFTS was conceived to address this absence.

Organised under the leadership of the School of Drama and Fine Arts, University of Calicut, Thrissur, in collaboration with Sree Sankaracharya University of Sanskrit and Kerala Kalamandalam Deemed University, IFTS is supported by academic institutions, cultural foundations, and public agencies. From its inception, the festival has been envisioned as a meeting ground for diverse pedagogical traditions, disciplinary perspectives, and cultural practices.

Carnival of Theatre Pedagogy, IFTS 2023

The first edition of IFTS, held from 1 to 5 February 2023, was structured around the



A snap from IFTS First Edition (2023)

concept Carnival of Theatre Pedagogy. Rather than adopting a narrowly defined thematic focus, the inaugural edition functioned as a foundational exploration of theatre pedagogy itself. It sought to initiate dialogue on the conditions, challenges, and responsibilities of theatre education in a rapidly changing global environment. Participants included faculty and students from theatre schools, independent practitioners, scholars, and traditional artists. Through pedagogy presentations, workshops, student productions, discussions, and cultural performances, the festival examined how institutional training shapes theatrical practice and how pedagogical models differ across regions and traditions. The first edition positioned pedagogy not as a background process but as a performative and critical practice worthy of collective reflection.

Carnival of Pedagogy: Theatre and Ecology, IFTS 2024

Building on the dialogic foundation of its first edition, IFTS 2024 introduced a clearly articulated conceptual framework with the theme Carnival of Pedagogy: Theatre and Ecology. This edition expanded the scope of inquiry by situating theatre within ecological thinking, moving beyond environmental representation to examine theatre as an ecological practice embedded in material, social, and cultural systems. The festival explored how theatre interacts with environments, bodies, resources, and

communities, as well interdisciplinary approaches that connected performance with environmental humanities, social sciences, and cultural studies. The structure of the festival was further formalised through programmes such as Parliament of Ideas, Teachers Meet, Students Meet, workshops, long-duration production camps, student productions, cultural tours, and fellowship initiatives. IFTS 2024 marked a shift from exploratory dialogue toward conceptual consolidation and interdisciplinary engagement.

Carnival of Pedagogy: Theatre and Ethics, IFTS 2025

The third edition of IFTS, held from 3 to 8 February 2025, represents a significant deepening of the festival's intellectual and philosophical concerns. Under the theme Carnival of Pedagogy: Theatre and Ethics, IFTS 2025 examined the ethical dimensions of theatre practice and pedagogy across disciplinary boundaries.

Responding to contemporary global crises, including political conflict, ecological precarity, and social inequality, the festival focused on questions of responsibility, power, representation, and care. Central concerns included ethics in teacher–student relationships, the relationship between power and knowledge in educational systems, the ethical implications of representation and violence in performance, and the challenges of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary pedagogies. Drawing from philosophy, law, history, gender studies, technology, and community-based practices, IFTS 2025 framed theatre as a method of ethical inquiry rather than a self-contained artistic discipline. Conclusion

Across its first three editions, IFTS has developed into a distinctive international platform that resists conventional classifications of both theatre festivals and academic conferences. By foregrounding pedagogy as its primary concern, the festival offers a sustained critique of how theatre education is structured, transmitted, and ethically positioned within contemporary society.

IFTS proposes a model of theatre education grounded in dialogue, interdisciplinarity, and ethical reflection. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing global debates on arts education, cultural responsibility, and the role of theatre in shaping critical and socially engaged practitioners. As a recurring platform, IFTS demonstrates how festivals can function not only as sites of display but as laboratories for rethinking the future of theatre education.

CONCEPT NOTE

Carnival of Pedagogy: Theatre and Ethics

Abstract:

The International Festival of Theatre Schools (IFTS) 2025, themed "Carnival of Pedagogy: Theatre and Ethics," aspires to explore and implement multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinary models within diverse educational frameworks. This initiative underscores our commitment to fostering a pedagogy of ethics by fusing artistic expression and innovative educational strategies. The history of education is a testament to the enduring pursuit of knowledge and the evolution of societies. Across countless nations, the principles of pedagogy, training, and curriculum have consistently adapted to meet the challenges of each era, ensuring that knowledge continues to be a beacon of progress in our digital world.

Inspired by artists' intrinsic qualities as educators and ethical agents, the festival aims to emphasise imagination and creativity as essential tools for ethical education. Central to this vision is the concept of a "poiesis of peace," which highlights the imaginative and emotional sensibilities of the heart and soul, fostering empathy, care, and nonviolence. This approach draws on the deep interconnectedness and relationality inherent in artistic practices, promoting a holistic understanding of ethics that transcends traditional educational paradigms.

By integrating arts-based methods into ethical education, IFTS 2025 seeks to cultivate empathy and interconnectedness, establishing a robust foundation for a more ethical world. The festival will demonstrate how the arts can access, create, and reinforce beliefs and emotions, tapping into our deepest fears and desires to inspire profound changes in perceptions and actions towards ethics.

This philosophy extends beyond the realm of arts and humanities, offering valuable insights into disciplines such as Business, Natural and Applied Sciences, and others. In business, fostering a culture of empathy and creativity can lead to more ethical and sustainable practices. In the sciences, incorporating imaginative thinking can enhance problem-solving and innovation. Across all fields, the poiesis of peace encourages a shift towards collaborative and compassionate approaches essential for addressing global challenges.

IFTS 2025 aims to inspire educators and students to imagine, invent, and create cultures of ethics, providing a transformative experience transcending conventional educational boundaries. By highlighting the significance of the artist's role in ethical education—such as holding creative tensions, fostering perspective shifts, and inspiring hope—the festival advocates for embodied pedagogies that promote interdependence, care, and vulnerability. IFTS 2025 will explore and implement artistic and imaginative approaches to ethical education, striving to create empathetic and interconnected communities and ultimately contributing to the vision of global ethics.

Carnival of Pedagogy: Theatre and Ethics

The Carnival of Pedagogy blends disciplinary approaches from various education systems with a pedagogy of ethics education. Theatre and Ethics celebrate the transformative potential of theatre as a dynamic medium for expression and social change. In an era marked by rapid global challenges, the convergence of disciplinary approaches becomes increasingly vital for addressing complex issues comprehensively. By embracing multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinary models, we transcend the limitations of traditional compartmentalised education, forging paths toward accelerated progress and innovation in pedagogy and ethics-building.

These holistic approaches empower individuals to navigate the complex and interconnected challenges of our era, fostering a more integrated understanding of the world. However, the richness of such models comes with the risk of producing individuals who are "jacks of all trades, masters of none," potentially diluting depth for breadth. Moreover, the inherent danger lies in assuming that interdisciplinarity intrinsically promotes ethics. History, with its collection of lessons, reveals the impact of interdisciplinary efforts. It sometimes shows how blending anthropology and science during the colonial era led to harmful ideologies about racial hierarchies. This serves as a reminder to pursue knowledge that promotes enlightenment and unity rather than division and oppression. Thus, while the promise of these educational paradigms is vast, they must be pursued with critical awareness and ethical rigour to truly harness their potential for fostering knowledge and harmony. Through dialogue and debate, IFTS 2025 provides a platform for educators, practitioners, and scholars to share insights on theatre and interdisciplinary approaches, fostering intercultural awareness and cooperation.

Background:

The history of formal education dates back to the first written records of ancient civilisations. Historical studies encompass virtually every nation. The Carnival of Pedagogy: Theatre and Ethics advocates exploring inherent possibilities and alternative sources of inspiration through ancient ages to tribal wisdom and subaltern experiences, moving beyond explicit messages. Our goal is to amplify often marginalised voices by highlighting unique perspectives and alternative imaginations from diverse communities, including those from coastal, tribal, and underprivileged areas. Recognising the intrinsic connection between human rights, the environment, and theatre, we advocate for transdisciplinary approaches to uphold human dignity and promote harmonious coexistence.

This IFTS may also urge a rethinking of how cultures are preserved and transmitted, advocating for a balance that honours the fluidity of oral traditions and the stability of written records. It calls for recognising freedom as an active, creative process enriched by cultural diversity and playful pedagogy rather than stifled by rigid officialdom or text-centric approaches. It may also explore informal education in addition to formal education. The conversation may also centre on the tangible and intangible cultural heritage of human civilisation.

By drawing insights from various disciplines, including science, ethics, and traditional practices, we seek to develop a comprehensive framework for addressing anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric issues. Through collaboration and innovation, we aim to synthesise diverse perspectives into holistic solutions that align with our collective values.

Education and Wisdom:

Throughout history, education has been a privilege used by the elite to

maintain power. In ancient civilisations, educated leaders used their knowledge to control narratives about divinity and warfare, reinforcing their rule. Until the 18th century, education was mainly for the wealthy, leaving most people uneducated. The rise of science and technology brought a shift towards universal education in Europe, America, and other countries, aiming to elevate society and foster progress. However, the World Wars showed widespread education did not guarantee global peace or moral advancement, often fuelling nationalism and technological warfare. Is the education system in India perpetuating class and caste inequality, legitimising class hierarchy, and serving the interests of corporate employers? In today's India, a paradox appears: the less educated resist divisive politics, while the educated majority support governments that foster division. The relationship between power and knowledge has been evident throughout the history of Education. This challenges the belief that education inherently leads to wisdom and ethical behaviour.

The role of artists and arts in peacebuilding highlights a different approach to education. Peace education involves creativity and emotions, promoting interconnectedness and nonviolence. "Moral imagination" refers to the ability to recognise significant moments and potential outcomes, envision new possibilities, develop ideas about what is ethical and just, and implement the best ideas for the benefit of others and interconnectedness. This can ultimately lead to emphasising empathy and relational existence, which are crucial for peace education. The "poiesis of peace" framework suggests that education for peace should embrace emotional and relational human experiences. Arts-based methods in peace education cultivate empathy, interconnectedness, and shared humanity, aligning with more profound aspects of wisdom. Does modern education often focus on standardised testing, neglecting wisdom, which involves moral depth, reflective judgment, and compassionate action? Should wisdom in education integrate knowledge with ethical sensitivity and empathetic engagement? Through arts-based, imaginative, and relational approaches, can education foster true wisdom, contributing to a more peaceful and compassionate world? Is the word 'Wisdom' any more relevant, archaic, or ideal in relation to Education?

Education and Wealth:

In the global market, the interplay between education and wealth starkly contrasts the objectives and outcomes of socialist and capitalist educational frameworks. In capitalist systems, education often serves as a tool to maintain social hierarchies. The wealthy have superior access to educational resources, thus perpetuating their economic dominance and perpetuating class structures, and in the case of India, also perpetuating the caste system. This approach views education primarily as a private good, a commodity to be purchased, thereby reinforcing existing inequalities. Conversely, the socialist perspective advocates for education as a public good, essential for fostering class consciousness and driving societal transformation toward equality. In this model, education is universally accessible and intertwined with practical industrial production, promoting an egalitarian society. The divergence in these educational philosophies underscores a fundamental debate: whether education should perpetuate the status quo of wealth concentration or serve as a catalyst for social equity and collective advancement. This discussion is pivotal in analysing how education systems worldwide influence and are influenced by economic structures, shaping the future of global socio-economic landscapes. Other than these two binaries in a global world where we have the capitalist and the socialist model, can we break free from this dichotomy and consider a new model of education intertwined with wealth or without wealth?

Teacher- Student Ethics:

An Exploration of Teacher-Student Ethics- This IFTS may delve into and discuss the ethical considerations in teaching and learning, covering various perspectives, including teachers and students. It may emphasise the importance of fair and inclusive evaluation of students, ethical selectivity in teaching, relevant and comprehensive curriculum decisions, and the commitment to the teaching profession. From the student's perspective, the IFTS may highlight the responsibility to respect teachers, make ethical learning choices, balance academic commitments with personal responsibilities, and engage in both formal and informal learning. This festival may emphasise what 'student-led education' means and what it means for a teacher to be updated constantly. It may also discuss the importance of the teacher-student relationship based on mutual respect, trust, and ethical responsibility.

Objectives:

The Carnival of Pedagogy: Theatre and Ethics seeks to:

- *Foster dialogue and collaboration among participants from diverse disciplinary backgrounds.*
- *Showcase innovative theatrical performances that engage with interdisciplinary themes.*
- *Promote understanding of the interconnectedness between theatre and various branches of knowledge.*
- *Provide a platform for exchanging ideas and best practices in interdisciplinary research and artistic expression.*
- *Inspire participants to adopt holistic approaches to education and problem-solving grounded in empathy and care.*

Key Themes:

The festival will explore:

- *Theatre as a Catalyst for Interdisciplinary Dialogue for Ethics-building: Exploring the role of theatre in fostering empathy, dialogue, and ethical understanding.*
- *Transdisciplinary Approaches to Ethical Education: Integrating diverse disciplines to address complex societal challenges and promote sustainable ethics.*
- *Multidisciplinary Collaborations in Theatre for Social Change: Investigating the Intersection of Theatre with Fields such as Psychology, sociology, and Environmental Studies to Effect Positive Social Transformation.*
- *Bridging Realities: The Intersection of Theatre with Various Fields of Knowledge: Examining how theatre can bridge cultural divides and promote cross-cultural understanding and solidarity.*
- *Power and Knowledge- Has the relationship between power and knowledge been evident throughout the history of education?*
- *The Ethics of the Student-Teacher Relationship: An Inquiry into Education, Knowledge and Wisdom.*
- *Limitations of state or corporate-funded education models- whether education should maintain the status quo of wealth concentration or drive social equity or should raise the question of exploring a new education model beyond these binaries.*
- *Alternative Models of Education for the Betterment of the Planet: The Purpose of non- global-non-industrial education models, independence from global networks, independent learning communities, a localised and community-oriented approach, Recognition & accreditation and a call to support and advocate for diverse educational initiatives.*

Poises of Peace as a Module:

"Poises of Peace" remains a central theme within the context of Ethics and Liberal Arts. It will be featured as a key module, exploring not only its application in art and teaching but also in daily life. This module will delve into the poiesis of peace, fostering empathy, care, and nonviolence through creative and imaginative practices. Participants will explore how ethical behavior can counteract the painful effects of the struggle for survival, proposing that societal progress relies on nurturing ethical principles that transcend social Darwinism and gladiatorial theories of existence.

Ethics and Liberal Arts:

Ethics, also known as moral philosophy, investigates the nature of morality and the principles governing the moral evaluation of conduct, character traits, and institutions. It examines obligations, right and wrong behaviours, and how to lead a good life. Key questions include "How should one live?" and "What gives meaning to life?" Ethics is normative, governing what people ought to do rather than what they actually do, want to do, or what social conventions require. Liberal arts encompass a broad range of academic disciplines aimed at developing intellectual, creative, and moral capacities. Liberal arts education is interdisciplinary, encouraging students to explore connections between different fields of knowledge. It fosters critical thinking, communication, problem-solving, and ethical skills applicable to any field of endeavour. The concept of liberal arts dates back to ancient Greece and Rome and has evolved to include humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, and arts. In recent years, the relevance of liberal arts in India has grown, with a focus on fostering skilled, versatile workers, promoting innovation, and creating a more inclusive society.

Liberal arts education helps students become well-rounded, adaptable, innovative, and responsible citizens. It prepares them for lifelong learning, enabling them to pursue their passions and potential. By understanding everyday life as a critical concept, liberal arts provide a perspective from which to understand theatre and its relation to daily activities.

Ethical Legacy and Theatre:

Historians are not responsible for what happened but for interpreting the past with ethical norms and values. This ethical legacy influences present-day activities and cultural frameworks. IFTS may examine various pasts, question dominant narratives of history, and grapple with ethical issues, emphasising transparent historiographic methods and ethical representation.

Embracing the Carnival of Pedagogy:

The Carnival of Pedagogy represents a profound reimagining of education, weaving together the threads of ethics and creativity. We seek to cultivate a more compassionate and interconnected world by embracing interdisciplinary collaboration and artistic expression. In this transformative journey, we harness the power of theatre to inspire positive social change and foster cultures steeped in ethical reflection. Through the synergistic blend of Theatre and Ethics, we embark on an odyssey of exploration, collaboration, and enlightenment, shaping the future of pedagogy and theatre education in our collective quest for peace and harmony.

Format:

The festival will showcase a diverse range of events, including theatrical performances, Parliament of Ideas (a talk by a renowned thinker and subject expert on the theme of IFTS 2025), panel discussions, workshops, academic presentations, cultural tours, teachers' meet, winter camp, student productions, cultural exhibitions, intercultural theatre production, social extension programs, traditional performing arts performances, awarding four junior Fellowships, and many other programs.

New Programs:

This year, IFTS 2025 is working hard to

launch these two new programs for which IFTS strives to raise the necessary funds.

IFTS Senior Fellowship:

The IFTS Senior Fellowship is designed to pave the way for exceptional students, scholars, academicians, and professionals from India and around the world to pursue opportunities in studying, researching, and teaching both domestically in India and globally. This award will help one Indian national pursue an academic program abroad and one foreign national engage in academic programs in India. Candidates will be selected through a meticulous application and interview process, with the award covering academic fees and stay, including food, for a period of one year.

Deliverables:

1. ***Participants:***

- *Access to a diverse range of events, including theatrical performances, panel discussions, workshops, academic presentations, cultural tours, and traditional performing arts performances.*
- *Opportunities for artistic expression and collaboration through student productions and intercultural theatre productions.*
- *Networking opportunities with educators, practitioners, and scholars from diverse disciplinary backgrounds.*
- *Eligibility for four fellowships awarded to outstanding participants, providing support for one year as part of the IFTS extension program.*

2. ***Delegates:***

- *Engagement in the Parliament of Ideas, featuring talks by renowned thinkers and subject experts on the theme of IFTS 2025, stimulating intellectual discourse and exchange of ideas.*
- *Participation in panel discussions addressing key themes such as theatre as a catalyst for interdisciplinary dialogue, transdisciplinary approaches to peace education, and multidisciplinary collaborations in theatre for social change.*
- *Access to workshops and cultural exhibitions offering practical insights and hands-on experiences in interdisciplinary research and artistic expression.*

3. ***Collaborators:***

- *The platform for showcasing innovative theatrical performances and collaborative projects that engage with interdisciplinary themes and promote social change.*
- *Opportunity to exchange ideas and best practices in interdisciplinary research and artistic expression, fostering collaboration and knowledge-sharing.*
- *Recognition and visibility as contributors to the advancement of peace education and theatre pedagogy through participation in IFTS 2025 programs and events.*

4. ***Funders:***

- *Impactful investment in initiatives that promote ethical & peace education, cultural exchange, and artistic innovation, contributing to positive social change and community development.*
- *Recognition and appreciation for supporting an inclusive and collaborative platform that fosters dialogue, creativity, and interdisciplinary learning.*
- *Opportunities for partnership and collaboration with leading institutions and organisations in the field of education and the arts, leveraging collective resources for more significant impact and sustainability.*

5. ***Communities near the School of Drama and Fine Arts:***

- *Engagement in social extension programs aimed at promoting community involvement*

and cultural enrichment through theatre and artistic expression.

- *Access to cultural events and performances that celebrate local heritage and traditions, fostering a sense of pride and belonging among community members.*
- *Opportunities for participation in workshops and educational initiatives that promote empathy, dialogue, and social cohesion, nurturing a culture of ethics, peace, trust and mutual understanding.*

By delivering these comprehensive offerings to participants, delegates, collaborators, funders, and communities, IFTS 2025 aims to foster a transformative experience that inspires positive social change and cultivates cultures of peace through the power of theatre and interdisciplinary collaboration.

IFTS Award - Educator Excellence Honour:

The Educator Excellence Honour recognises the lifetime achievements of pedagogues who have revolutionised the education landscape. These distinguished individuals have dedicated their careers to crafting innovative pedagogies and methodologies that resonate far beyond the confines of their classrooms. Their visionary approaches have garnered global recognition and inspired countless educators worldwide, shaping the future of teaching and learning. This honour celebrates their enduring legacy and the indelible mark they have left on education and the arts.

We Envision a Pluriversity Instead of a University:

As we embrace IFTS 2025: "Pluriverse," we invite you to a celebration that transcends conventional boundaries and redefines our understanding of interconnectedness. Inspired by Arturo Escobar's vision, this festival critiques the universalism of Western modernity, advocating for the recognition of multiple cosmologies and places. We seek to highlight the dynamic interconnections between humans, cultures, and the earth's myriad beings, emphasising the importance of exteriorities that hold the promise of radical alternative knowledge trajectories beyond the confines of modernity and coloniality.

Addressing the profound impacts of neoliberalism on cultural production, digital media, liberal arts, and education, IFTS 2025 underscores the necessity for decolonial and emancipatory pedagogies across all disciplines. This festival is committed to acknowledging and embracing the plurality of interconnected worlds and pedagogies our shared planet nurtures. We envision a Pluriversity instead of a University—a multicultural learning environment enriched by diverse sources of knowledge, including scientific, traditional, and spiritual insights.

Through the Carnival of Pedagogy, we will work hard to take a bold step towards reimagining education through the lenses of ethics and creativity. By fostering interdisciplinary collaboration and artistic expression, we aspire to cultivate a more compassionate and interconnected world. Join us on this transformative journey as we harness the power of theatre to inspire positive social change and foster cultures of ethics. Together, we embark on a journey of exploration, collaboration, and enlightenment, shaping the future of pedagogy and theatre education in our pursuit of ethics and harmony.

Prof. Abhilash Pillai

IFTS 2025

Festival Report

International Festival of Theatre Schools 2025

Third Edition Report

The International Festival of Theatre Schools 2025 (IFTS 2025), the third edition of the festival, was inaugurated on 03 February 2025. The opening ceremony witnessed the participation of institutional delegates, individual delegates and scholars, and several distinguished personalities from the fields of theatre, academia, and culture. The festival unfolded through a wide range of programmes conducted both within the campus and through outreach activities, creating an inclusive platform for artistic practice, pedagogy, and scholarly exchange. The third edition of IFTS formally concluded on 08 February 2025.

Presented here is a brief overview of the of the edition

Collaborators and Supporters

The successful realization of IFTS 2025 was made possible through the collective support of various governmental as well non-governmental organizations, whose contributions included monetary assistance, sponsorships, infrastructure, logistical support, and the involvement of resource persons. The festival was supported by the Kerala Forest Research Institute, Sher-Gil Sundaram Arts Foundation, Takshila Foundation, University of Calicut, South Zone Culture Centre, Lotus Design Foundation, Rakesh Bharadwaj Foundation, The Raza Foundation, Kerala Kalamandalam, Kerala State Financial Enterprises Ltd, Kerala Institute of Local Administration, Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, and the Azim Premji Foundation, whose combined efforts played a crucial role in the successful conduct of the festival.

Pedagogues and Scholars

The academic and pedagogic foundation of the festival was significantly strengthened by the participation of national and international pedagogues and scholars. Renowned practitioners and educators such as Steina Ohman (Finland), Sachiko Tange (Japan), Sasitharan Thirunalan (Singapore), Barbara MacKenzie-Wood (United States of America), Vidya Rao (India), and Jyothish M G (India) contributed to the festival through workshops and critical engagements. They actively participated in scholarly platforms including the Parliament of Ideas, panel discussions, paper presentations, and academic dialogues, thereby enriching the intellectual depth, pedagogic discourse, and intercultural exchange central to the festival.

Delegations

Delegates formed the core of the International Festival of Theatre Schools 2025 and were broadly categorised into institutional delegations and individual delegates. The presence of diverse delegations ensured active participation across performances, workshops, scholarly engagements, and cultural exchanges, contributing significantly to the academic and artistic vibrancy of the festival. The institutional delegations comprised reputed institutions engaged in

theatre and visual arts from both national and international contexts. Participating institutions from India included Lovely Professional University (Punjab), Amity School of Film and Drama (Uttar Pradesh), Visva Bharati University (West Bengal), Jawaharlal Nehru University (Delhi), Shri Shivakumara Rangaprayoga Shaale (Karnataka), the Department of Dramatics at The Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda (Gujarat), Kerala Kalamandalam, Dr B R Ambedkar University Delhi, Kala Academy Goa College of Theatre Arts (Goa), K R Narayanan National Institute of Visual Science and Arts, Sree Sankaracharya University of Sanskrit, and the University of Hyderabad (Telangana). International institutional delegations included Carnegie Mellon University and Texas A and M University (United States of America), the National Institute of Dramatic Art (Australia), the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (Israel), the Aleksander Zelwerowicz National Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw (Poland), and the University of Jaffna (Sri Lanka).

The individual delegates were primarily young theatre practitioners from Kerala who, despite having limited formal academic training in theatre, are actively engaged in theatre practice with strong enthusiasm and commitment. Their participation enabled meaningful interaction between academic theatre traditions and practice driven approaches, enriching peer learning, collaborative exchange, and the inclusive pedagogic ethos of the festival.



IFTS PROGRAMMES

From the inaugural day to the closing ceremony, IFTS 2025 featured a wide range of programmes across academic, artistic, pedagogic, and cultural domains. These programmes were designed to facilitate dialogue, critical engagement, creative exchange, and experiential learning, aligning closely with pedagogic vision and thematic focus of the festival. The major programmes conducted during the festival are briefed below.

Parliament of Ideas

The Parliament of Ideas was conceived as a dedicated intellectual platform for the exchange, deliberation, and discussion of critical and ground breaking ideas related to theatre, culture, ethics, and society. The sessions encouraged reflective dialogue between theory and practice, foregrounding ethical responsibility and cultural consciousness in contemporary performance. Presentations were delivered by T Sasitharan, Singapore based theatre director, actor, educator, and cultural advocate; Ruwanthie De Chickera, Sri Lankan playwright, screenwriter, theatre director, actor trainer, and cultural activist; and Dr P N Vijayakumar, MA, LLB, PhD, retired Justice and former State Information Commissioner, presently Chairman of the Human Ethics Committee, University of Calicut.

Panel Discussions

Panel discussions facilitated focused engagement with the festival theme through diverse pedagogic, artistic, and socio political perspectives. Three panel discussion sessions were conducted during the festival. The first session, held on 04 February 2025, featured Ana Mirtha and Sebastian Rad, who shared perspectives rooted in research led performance practice and pedagogy. The second session, conducted on 06 February 2025, included Malavika Binny and Jim Niesen, who reflected on ensemble theatre practice, historical research, and social inquiry. The third session, held on 07 February 2025, brought together T S Syam Kumar, Kalki Subrahmaniam, and Baiju Chandran, who discussed theatre's engagement with politics, ideology, gender, and cultural activism.

Teachers Meet

The Teachers Meet aimed to promote collaborative learning and exchange of ideas among faculty members of participating theatre schools, with a focus on theatre education and pedagogic strategies aligned with the festival theme. The Teachers Meet was held on 03 February 2025, during the second half of the opening day, at the Smart Room, School of

Drama and Fine Arts. The session enabled meaningful dialogue on curriculum, training methodologies, and contemporary challenges in theatre pedagogy.

Students Meet

The Students Meet was designed to create a safe and supportive space for students to engage in dialogue, share insights, and reflect on their creative practices. The first session was held on 03 February 2025 at the La Sala Seminar Hall, School of Drama and Fine Arts, where student participants presented papers addressing ethical questions in performance and music, focusing on embodiment, self discipline, cultural practices, authorship, and ethical frameworks shaping performance traditions. The second session was held on 08 February 2025 at the same venue, where graduating students from the National Institute of Dramatic Art, Australia, presented their graduation productions and discussed cross cultural devising, representation, identity, community engagement, and contemporary performance making.

Cultural Tour

The Cultural Tour enabled delegates and guests to step outside the campus for meaningful cultural exchange and institutional interaction. The tour facilitated engagement with regional cultural landscapes and knowledge systems beyond the academic setting. The destinations included the Kerala Forest Research Institute and Kerala Kalamandalam, offering participants insights into ecological research, traditional performance practices, and institutional heritage.

Workshops

IFTS 2025 hosted seventeen workshops covering diverse aspects of theatre, performance, music, design, and pedagogy. These workshops were conducted by national and international resource persons and offered intensive, practice oriented learning experiences. The workshop themes ranged from embodied expression, physical theatre, acting psychology, intercultural theatre, folk performance, music and theatre, lighting, scenic art, costume and wearable art, to gender politics and theatre in conflict contexts. Together, the workshops formed a core pedagogic component of the festival, fostering skill development, critical inquiry, and collaborative exploration.

Student Productions

Student productions provided insight into contemporary theatre practices, including devised work, reinterpretations of classical texts, site responsive performances, and practice

based research. On 03 February 2025, The Passage of the Bird was staged at SDFA Sankramanam as an immersive site based production exploring exile, migration, and identity through movement, choral voice, and multilingual expression. On 04 February 2025, performances at Prof S Ramanujam Theatre and its premises included The Secretion of Posthumous Customs and Blind Opera, addressing themes of love, death, desire, prejudice, and social blindness. On 05 February 2025, Rasik Sampādak (The Playful Editor), Manimekalai, and Echoes in the Fractured Landscape: A Performance Walk were presented at Prof S Ramanujam Studio Theatre. On 06 February 2025, performances such as Mitra Ki Kahani, Kalki's Performance, Performance Actions, and Helena explored themes of identity, ethics, trauma, resistance, memory, and survival.

Cultural Exhibition

The Cultural Exhibition showcased the richness of regional traditional and folk art forms, enabling international participants and delegates to engage closely with local cultural heritage. The exhibition featured Pulikkali, BASURI, Phag and Ghumar, and Kolkali and Dhuff Mutt, highlighting the diversity and vibrancy of traditional performance practices.

Paper Presentation

Paper presentation sessions were conducted on 04, 06, and 07 February 2025 as an integral component of the academic programme. These sessions provided a platform for scholarly research, critical reflection, and academic dialogue. Presentations were delivered by Prof. Marcin Bartnikowski, Ameet Parameswaran, and Łukasz Chotkowski on 04 February 2025; by Ms R Thavachchelvi and Dr Dinesh Yadav on 06 February 2025; and by Dr Mrityunjay Kumar Prabhakar and Dr Suzanne Osmond on 07 February 2025.

IFTS Fellowships

IFTS Fellowships were initiated with a vision to connect the learning of the festival to communities beyond the academic arena. Each fellowship carries financial support of INR 10,000 per month for one year, with selection based on participation in festival workshops or camps. Fellows are expected to engage in part-time collaborations with specific communities, fostering long-term cultural and pedagogic impact. Four fellowships were awarded under two titles: the KSFE IFTS Fellowship, supported by Kerala State Financial Enterprises Ltd, and the Vinay and Rakesh Bharadwaj IFTS Fellowship, supported by the Rakesh Bharadwaj Foundation.

Organisation and Management

The International Festival of Theatre Schools 2025 was organised by the School of Drama and Fine Arts, University of Calicut, and hosted at its campus, John Mathai Centre, Aranattukara, Thrissur. The festival was executed through a structured organisational framework involving faculty members, students, research scholars, and administrative staff, ensuring effective coordination, smooth implementation, and academic rigour across all programmes.

Committees and Operational Structure

The execution of IFTS 2025 was facilitated through multiple functional committees, ensuring distributed responsibility and effective workflow. These committees were staffed by students and research scholars of the School of Drama and Fine Arts under faculty supervision. The organisational structure included the Festival Director, Festival Coordinator, Programme Coordinator, Documentation and Media Publicity Committee, Food Committee, Ambience Committee, Hospitality Committee, Reception Committee, Workshop Committee, Technical Committee, and Festival Book Committee. Detailed committee compositions are annexured separately.

Faculty Coordinators

The overall academic and administrative leadership of the festival was undertaken by a team of faculty coordinators. Prof. Dr. Abhilash Pillai served as the Festival Director, with Vinod V Narayanan as the Chief Coordinator and Najmul Shahi A as the Festival Secretary. Reception and health responsibilities were coordinated by Sri. Sandeep Kumar, while documentation and publicity were overseen by Sri. Vinayak G Krishnan. Hospitality and logistics were managed by Dr. Syamraji S S, and workshop coordination was led by Dr. Surabhi M S. Festival publications were handled by Vipin M, and food and refreshments were coordinated by Arackal Nandakumar. Technical direction was undertaken by Shymon Chelad, programme coordination by Shibu S Kottaram, and ambience design and coordination by Dr. Sreejith Ramanan.

Curatorial Committee

The curatorial vision and academic direction of the festival were shaped by the Curatorial Committee, comprising senior academicians, theatre practitioners, and cultural administrators. The committee members were: Prof. Dr. Abhilash Pillai, Vinod V Narayanan, Najmul Shahi A, Vipin M, Shibu S Kottaram, Dr. Anuradha Kapur, Dr. Chandradasan, K S Geetha Rangaprabhath, Kumaradas T N, Dr. Peter Cooke, Sukumaran Chaligadha, Dr. V Venu IAS, and Dr. (h.c.) Vijayarajamallika.

Festival Coordinators

The day to day coordination and on ground execution of the festival were supported by the Festival Coordinators: Athul A K, Aparna S K, and Sindhya Viswanath.

Office Staff Support

The organisation and administration of IFTS 2025 were further supported by the office staff of the School of Drama and Fine Arts, University of Calicut. Mr. Vikas V, Section Officer (Higher Grade), Ms. Reshma M D, Junior Librarian, Ms. Sheeja K, Computer Assistant (Selection Grade), Mr. Manoj P P, Office Attendant (Higher Grade), Ms. Sheeba T R, Full Time Sweeper, and Ms. Sukanya P, Personal Assistant to the Director, provided essential administrative and operational support. Their assistance in coordination, logistics, documentation, and institutional processes played a crucial role in ensuring the smooth and efficient functioning of the festival.

Opening of the Festival

The first day of the International Festival of Theatre Schools 2025 marked the formal inauguration of the six day international academic and cultural gathering. The day began with breakfast at the Prof. G Sankara Pillai Auditorium, followed by registration at the IFTS Office, where delegates from participating institutions collected their registration materials through multiple counters arranged for smooth coordination.

The welcoming event commenced with Pulikkali at the entrance of the campus, setting a vibrant and festive tone for the festival. This was followed by the "Getting to Know Each Other" session at the Open Space near Teacher Education Ctntre, which provided delegates an informal platform to interact, introduce themselves, and begin building connections across institutions and cultures. After lunch, participants were given a free hour to explore the campus and engage in informal exchanges.

The afternoon was dedicated to parallel academic engagements. The Students Meet, held at the "La Sala" Seminar Hall, featured presentations and discussions led by research scholars from Jawaharlal Nehru University, offering students a space to share ideas and interact with peers. Simultaneously, the Teachers Meet was conducted at the Smart Room, focusing on dialogue around pedagogy, ethics, and evolving teaching methodologies in theatre education.

The formal opening ceremony of IFTS 2025 took place at the Prof. Ramanujam Theatre. The ceremony was graced by Dr. R. Bindu, Minister for Higher Education and Social Justice, as the Chief Guest, with filmmaker and theatre director Syam Prasad as Guest of Honour and veteran theatre artist Nilambur Aysha also present. The ceremony included addresses and cultural elements that reflected the spirit and objectives of the festival.

The first day evening witnessed the cultural programme "Basuri," presented by the South Zone Cultural Centre, featuring a rich array of traditional performances. The perfromaces including Karagam, Kaaliyattam, Dummy Horse Dance, Silambattam, Manattam, Peacock Dance, etc... The day concluded with dinner followed by a student production of Shool of Drama and Fine Arts, the host instituion, titled Sankramanam – The Passage of the Bird, which bringing the first day to a reflective and performative close.

The inaugural day successfully established the festival's atmosphere of cultural exchange, academic dialogue, and collaborative engagement, setting the foundation for the days that followed.

Opening Day Programmes

The opening day programmes of the International Festival of Theatre Schools 2025 marked the formal beginning of the festival with a series of carefully planned activities. The day commenced with the registration of delegates, followed by a vibrant Pulikkali welcoming performance that set a festive tone. The "Getting to Know Each Other" session brought together delegates and pedagogues in an informal and interactive setting, encouraging early connections and cross cultural exchange. The opening day also featured the official inauguration of the festival, formally launching IFTS 2025 and setting the stage for the academic, artistic, and cultural engagements of the days that followed.

Registration

The registration of delegates marked the first phase of the International Festival of Theatre Schools 2025. This process focused on verifying the reporting of delegates and distinguishing between individual participants and institutional delegations. Dedicated registration counters were arranged to ensure smooth coordination, enabling delegates to collect their materials efficiently while completing the necessary verification procedures. The registration process also served as the initial point of orientation for participants, helping streamline subsequent sessions and ensuring accurate documentation of attendance throughout the festival.





Pulikkali : Welcoming Cultural Programme

Following the registration, a welcoming cultural programme featuring Pulikkali was conducted to receive the guests and delegates. The vibrant and colourful performance created an energetic opening for the festival, immediately setting its festive rhythm. The dynamic movements, striking costumes, and rhythmic percussion offered many participants a new cultural experience, especially for those encountering the art form for the first time.

The Pulikkali performance gradually evolved into a procession, with delegates joining the performers and moving together through the campus. This shared moment of participation fostered a sense of cross cultural exchange and collective celebration, marking an engaging and memorable beginning to the International Festival of Theatre Schools 2025.





Getting to Know Each Other

Following the Pulikkali welcoming programme, the session titled “Getting to Know Each Other” was conducted as part of the welcoming events of the festival. All delegates, pedagogues, and invited participants gathered at the open space near the Teacher Education Centre of the host campus. The session was designed to create an informal and inclusive environment that encouraged interaction among participants from diverse institutions, regions, and cultural backgrounds. Through introductions and open interaction, the session facilitated early connections, helping participants familiarize themselves with one another before the commencement of academic and artistic engagements. This collective gathering played a significant role in establishing a sense of community and collaboration, setting a welcoming tone for the days of shared learning and exchange that followed.



Inaugural Ceremony

The Inaugural Ceremony of the International Festival of Theatre Schools 2025 was held at the Sri Ramanujam Studio Theatre, School of Drama and Fine Arts, Dr. John Matthai Centre, Thrissur. The ceremony marked the formal commencement of the festival and brought together academicians, theatre practitioners, cultural administrators, and distinguished guests from various fields. The programme began with a welcome address by Dr. Abhilash Pillai, Director of the School of Drama and Fine Arts, who outlined the vision and significance of the festival. This was followed by the presidential address delivered by Dr. P. Raveendran, Hon'ble Vice Chancellor of the University of Calicut, who reflected on the role of theatre education and academic exchange in contemporary times.

The festival was officially inaugurated by Dr. R. Bindu, Hon'ble Minister for Higher Education and Social Justice, Government of Kerala. Mr. M. K. Varghese, Mayor of Thrissur Corporation, attended the function as the Chief Guest. Nilambur Ayisha, veteran theatre and film personality, was honoured as the Guest of Honour, while filmmaker and theatre director Syamaprasad participated as the Celebrity Guest. The keynote address was delivered by Prof. Ananthakrishnan, Hon'ble Vice Chancellor of Kerala Kalamandalam, who emphasised the pedagogical and cultural dimensions of theatre practice.

The ceremony also included the presentation of the IFTS 2023–24 report by Najumul Shahi A., Head of the School of Drama and Fine Arts. Felicitations were offered by distinguished guests representing academic, cultural, and administrative institutions, acknowledging the collective effort behind the organisation of the festival.

The inaugural ceremony concluded with a vote of thanks proposed by Vinod V. Narayanan, Chief Coordinator of IFTS 2025. The programme set a dignified and inspiring tone for the festival, underscoring its commitment to theatre pedagogy, cultural dialogue, and collaborative learning.






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and Fine Arts, University of Calicut, Thrissur, Kerala, India
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Special Programmes at the Inaugural Ceremony

The special performances presented during the inaugural ceremony of the International Festival of Theatre Schools 2025 embodied the festival's commitment to dialogue between tradition and contemporary practice. By bringing together a classical international performance form and a creative academic presentation, the programme highlighted the shared values of discipline, pedagogy, and artistic excellence that define theatre across cultures. These performances set an inspiring and reflective tone for the festival, affirming its emphasis on learning through performance and intercultural exchange.



Noh Performance

As part of the inaugural ceremony of the International Festival of Theatre Schools 2025, a Noh performance was presented by Reijiro Tsumura, an esteemed Noh actor and a Human National Treasure, recognised as an Important Intangible Cultural Asset holder in the art of Noh. His extraordinary performance marked a profound and dignified beginning to the festival, offering the audience a rare opportunity to witness a classical performance tradition of international significance. The presentation added exceptional artistic depth to the inauguration and set a reflective and elevated tone for the festival.



Dance Performance by School of Drama and Fine Arts Students

In addition to the Noh performance, a dance presentation by students of the School of Drama and Fine Arts was staged as part of the inaugural programme. Choreographed by Rahul Sreenivasan, PhD Scholar of the School, the performance reflected the creative engagement, discipline, and pedagogical ethos nurtured within the institution. This presentation complemented the classical performance by bridging traditional heritage with contemporary academic practice.





Pedagogues and delegates participating in the International Festival of Theatre Schools 2025 shared positive reflections on the overall experience of the opening day. Many appreciated the careful organisation of the initial programmes, noting that the registration process and welcoming activities ensured a smooth and inclusive start to the festival. The cultural welcoming through Pulikkali and the "Getting to Know Each Other" session were frequently highlighted as meaningful moments that encouraged interaction and cross cultural exchange among participants. These events created a sense of community and openness, enabling delegates from diverse institutions and regions to connect beyond formal academic settings. The combination of cultural tradition, academic presence, and artistic expression on the first day was widely seen as setting a strong foundation for dialogue, collaboration, and shared learning throughout the festival.




DIRECTOR

Closing Day of the Festival

The sixth and concluding day of the International Festival of Theatre Schools 2025 marked the culmination of six days of intensive engagement, reflection, and shared artistic practice. The day began with workshop presentations, during which participants and facilitators reflected on the processes, methodologies, and creative outcomes that emerged from the workshop sessions conducted over the festival period. These presentations highlighted the diversity of approaches and the collaborative learning that defined the workshop experience

The Students Meet, held at the La Sala Seminar Hall, provided a platform for student participants to share their experiences, insights, and reflections on the festival. Contributions by Pratha Nagpal, Chinmaya Madan, and Temuulan Jargalsaikhan offered perspectives shaped by international training and interdisciplinary practice, enriching the dialogue among participants.

Following lunch and a free hour that encouraged informal interaction and cultural exchange across the campus, the afternoon featured a feedback session titled "Until We Meet Again." This session served as a collective space for reviewing the festival, allowing delegates and pedagogues to reflect on the academic, artistic, and organisational dimensions of IFTS 2025. The exchanges underscored the sense of community and continuity fostered through the festival.

The day concluded with the closing ceremony, formally marking the end of the third edition of the festival. This was followed by Kottikkalasam, a celebratory gathering that brought participants together in a spirit of friendship, joy, and shared accomplishment. The final day resonated as both a conclusion and a moment of looking forward, affirming ongoing connections and the possibility of future collaborations beyond the festival.
















Presentation of Workshops

The presentation of workshops marked a significant moment of reflection and consolidation within the International Festival of Theatre Schools 2025. witht the presenation participants shared the processes, methods, and creative explorations developed during the workshop sessions, offering insights into the diverse pedagogical approaches and artistic practices engaged over the course of the festival.

These presentations highlighted the collaborative nature of the workshops, emphasising learning through practice, experimentation, and intercultural exchange. The session provided a collective space for observation, discussion, and feedback, allowing both participants and pedagogues to reflect on the outcomes of the workshop engagements and their relevance to contemporary theatre training.





Feedback, Until We Meet Again, and Kottikkalasam

After the closing ceremony, feedback sessions titled Feedback, Until We Meet Again, and Kottikkalasam were held. These sessions provided a space for participants to share their reflections on the festival, express gratitude, and bid farewell to one another. The interactions reflected the sense of community and collective learning fostered during the festival. Following the completion of all formal sessions, the festival concluded with an open DJ session, allowing participants to celebrate together and mark the joyful conclusion of the third edition of IFTS.





















International Festival of Theatre Schools (IFTS) 2025
School of Drama and Fine Arts Thrissur, Calicut University

COLLABORATORS


KFRI


SHER-GIL SUNDARAM
ARTS FOUNDATION


TAKSHILA
तक्षशिला


UNIVERSITY OF CALICUT


SZCC


Amba Dalmia
FOUNDATION


RAKESH
BHARADWAJ
FOUNDATION




रज़ा फ़ाउण्डेशन | THE RAZA FOUNDATION




Kerala
Kalamandalam


KSFE
(ഒരു കേരള സർക്കാർ സ്ഥാപനം)


KILA
Kerala Institute of
Local Administration


KIRAN
NADAR
MUSEUM
OF ART


Azim Premji
Foundation

COLLABORATORS

IFTS International Festival of Theatre Schools 2025 Edition

University of Calicut

University of Calicut has played a comprehensive and enabling role in supporting the School of Drama & Fine Arts in organizing the International Festival of Theatre Schools (IFTS). As the parent institution, the University extends academic, administrative, financial, and infrastructural support, ensuring the successful conception and execution of the Festival in all its editions.

Founded in 1968, the University of Calicut is one of the largest public universities in Kerala and is recognized for its commitment to higher education, research, and cultural development. Its support for IFTS reflects the University's broader vision of integrating arts practice with academic inquiry and international collaboration. Through policy backing, resource allocation, logistical facilitation, and institutional legitimacy, the University enables the School of Drama & Fine Arts to function as a global meeting point for theatre schools, educators, and practitioners. The University's role extends beyond sponsorship to active facilitation, allowing IFTS to engage meaningfully with global pedagogical trends while remaining rooted in local cultural contexts. By supporting IFTS in all possible ways, the University of Calicut affirms its commitment to theatre education, interdisciplinary learning, and the promotion of cultural exchange at an international level.

IFTS International Festival of Theatre Schools 2025 Edition

Raza Foundation

रज़ा फ़ाउण्डेशन | THE RAZA FOUNDATION

Raza Foundation has played a significant role in supporting the International Festival of Theatre Schools (IFTS) through consistent monetary assistance. The Foundation extended financial support to the Festival during its second and third editions, contributing substantially to its successful realization and its emergence as an international platform for theatre pedagogy and artistic exchange. The third edition of IFTS is being realized in continued collaboration with the Raza Foundation, marking the sustained nature of this association. This ongoing support reflects the Foundation's commitment to strengthening theatre education, fostering intercultural dialogue, and encouraging collaborative artistic practices at both national and international levels.

Raza Foundation is a non profit cultural organization based in New Delhi, founded in 2001 by the renowned modern artist Sayed Haider Raza. Conceived as a space for dialogue and creative exchange, the Foundation works to nurture the arts, ideas, and critical thinking across disciplines. It actively supports visual arts, poetry, music, dance, theatre, and intellectual discourse through exhibitions, lectures, fellowships, and public programs held across India. By encouraging emerging artists and scholars while honoring established practitioners, the Raza Foundation continues Raza's vision of culture as a living, inclusive, and transformative force in society.

SHER-GIL SUNDARAM ARTS FOUNDATION

Sher-Gil Sundaram Arts Foundation (SSAF) was established in 2016 with the mandate to carry forward the legacy of the scholar and photographer Umrao Singh Sher-Gil (1870–1954). The Foundation seeks to create meaningful conjunctions of artistic and cultural practices that engage deeply with historical memory while also building critical expectations for the future. Its vision positions art as an active, questioning practice that responds to social realities and evolving cultural contextsSSAF is firmly committed to advancing creative independence rooted in freedom of expression and a secular ethos. It actively supports practices that are alternative, experimental, and heterodox in nature, encouraging artists and thinkers to challenge dominant narratives. The Foundation also works in solidarity with initiatives that address the concerns of marginalized communities, recognizing art and culture as vital tools for social engagement, inclusion, and ethical reflection.

In alignment with these principles, SSAF has extended sustained monetary support to the International Festival of Theatre Schools (IFTS). The Foundation supported the first edition of IFTS in 2023 and continued its financial assistance for IFTS 2024. This support has been further extended to the third edition of IFTS in 2025, marking a continuing association. SSAF's sustained engagement reflects its long-term commitment to theatre education, intercultural dialogue, and the strengthening of critical artistic pedagogy at national and international levels.

IFTS International Festival of Theatre Schools 2025 Edition

Sher-gil Sundaram Arts Foundation

KIRAN NADAR MUSEUM OF ART

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Rakesh Bharadwaj Foundation

The Rakesh Bharadwaj Foundation is one of the sponsors of the IFTS Fellowship, announced as part of the IFTS Extension Programme. The Foundation sponsored two out of the four fellowships instituted under this initiative. The fellowship, titled Rakesh Bharadwaj IFTS Fellowship at the School of Drama and Fine Arts, University of Calicut, is intended to support students demonstrating academic promise, creative imagination, and social commitment.

Rakesh Bharadwaj (1949 to 1997) represented the aspirations, anxieties, and energies of youth in independent India. His generation carried a deep understanding of India's civilizational and cultural ethos and believed in collective strength to overcome the distortions of colonial rule while moving toward a modern era of knowledge, science, and technology. This vision included building a just, humane, and environmentally conscious social and cultural order.

As a gifted student and later a political science scholar and teacher at Delhi University, Rakesh Bharadwaj was known for his intellectual rigor, oratory skills, and deep empathy. Despite limited means, he supported students who struggled with financial and personal hardships, often contributing from his own modest income. As a family of teachers, the Foundation offers this support to continue his legacy by enabling students with imagination, integrity, and resolve to grow, learn, and contribute meaningfully to society.

IFTS International Festival of Theatre Schools 2025 Edition

Kerala Institute of Local Administration

KILA
Kerala Institute of
Local Administration

The Kerala Institute of Local Administration (KILA) is an autonomous institution functioning for the local governments of Kerala. It is registered under the Travancore Cochin Literary, Scientific and Charitable Societies Act, 1955. KILA has been actively engaged in strengthening local self governance through a wide range of capacity building interventions, including training programmes, action research, publications, seminars, workshops, consultancy, documentation, handholding, and information services related to decentralisation and democratic governance.

KILA has been a consistent institutional supporter of the International Festival of Theatre Schools (IFTS) from its first edition onwards. As IFTS enters its third edition in 2025, KILA's continued association reflects its commitment to interdisciplinary learning and cultural engagement beyond conventional administrative training frameworks.

Across all three editions of the festival, KILA has extended crucial support by providing accommodation facilities and facilitating the participation of resource persons. This assistance has played an important role in enabling workshops, academic sessions, and interactive exchanges between theatre practitioners, educators, and students from India and abroad. By supporting IFTS, KILA has contributed to fostering dialogue between theatre pedagogy, social practice, and community engagement. Its sustained involvement has significantly strengthened the festival's infrastructure and academic depth, making it an essential institutional partner in the growth and continuity of the International Festival of Theatre Schools.

Kerala Forest Research Institute

The Kerala Forest Research Institute (KFRI) is a multidisciplinary research institution comprising experts engaged in advanced studies on tropical forests and forestry. Founded in 1975, KFRI was envisioned as a Centre of Excellence in Tropical Forestry, providing scientific support for policy formulation and decision making related to forestry, with particular emphasis on conservation, sustainable utilization, and scientific management of natural resources. Over the past three decades, the Institute has made significant contributions to tropical forestry research and biodiversity conservation.

KFRI has been a key institutional supporter of the International Festival of Theatre Schools (IFTS), extending its support from the first edition through the third edition of the festival. During the first and second editions, KFRI facilitated essential infrastructure that enabled the smooth organization of festival activities, academic sessions, and interactions among participants.

Beyond infrastructural support, IFTS has also benefited from the intellectual and academic contributions of Dr. T. V. Sajeev, whose engagement enriched the festival's interdisciplinary discourse. His knowledge and perspectives strengthened dialogues connecting ecology, culture, and performance practices.The collaboration between KFRI and IFTS exemplifies a meaningful partnership between scientific institutions and cultural platforms, underscoring the role of interdisciplinary engagement in addressing contemporary social, environmental, and artistic concerns.

IFTS International Festival of Theatre Schools 2025 Edition

Kerala Kalamandalam

Kerala Kalamandalam

Kerala Kalamandalam (Deemed to be University) is the oldest institution in Kerala dedicated to imparting systematic training in classical and traditional art forms. Situated on the banks of the Bharata Puzha river, the institute was founded by the visionary poet Vallathol Narayana Menon, with the aim of preserving and revitalizing Kerala's rich artistic heritage. Over the decades, Kerala Kalamandalam has emerged as a premier centre for traditional performing arts education in India.

The institute collaborated with the School of Drama and Fine Arts (SDFA) in organizing the International Festival of Theatre Schools (IFTS) 2025, continuing its association from the first edition in 2023 and the second edition in 2024. As part of this collaboration, Kerala Kalamandalam hosted one of the six days of the festival and facilitated a curated cultural tour for the international and national delegates.

This engagement offered participants a unique experiential opportunity to witness and interact with the traditional training systems of classical and folk art forms practiced at the institute. The visit enriched the festival experience by providing direct exposure to living traditions, pedagogical methods, and performance practices rooted in Kerala's cultural landscape. The collaboration significantly enhanced the cultural and educational depth of IFTS 2025, making it a memorable experience for all participants.

Azim Premji Foundation

The Azim Premji Foundation is one of India's leading philanthropic organizations, working towards building a just, equitable, humane, and sustainable society. Established in 2001, the Foundation focuses primarily on strengthening public education systems, improving governance, and supporting initiatives that contribute to social transformation. Through long-term engagement, research, institutional support, and capacity building, the Foundation has played a significant role in advancing education and social development across India.

The Azim Premji Foundation extended monetary support to the International Festival of Theatre Schools (IFTS) 2025, the third edition of the festival organized by the School of Drama and Fine Arts, University of Calicut. This support contributed to the successful organization of the festival by enabling key academic, artistic, and collaborative components of IFTS 2025, including performances, workshops, lectures, and interactions among theatre practitioners, educators, and students from India and abroad.

By supporting IFTS 2025, the Azim Premji Foundation reaffirmed its commitment to interdisciplinary learning and the role of arts and culture in education and social engagement. The Foundation's association with IFTS highlights the importance of integrating creative and critical practices within broader educational and social frameworks. Its contribution significantly strengthened the festival's academic and organizational capacity, supporting the continued growth and international relevance of the International Festival of Theatre Schools.

IFTS International Festival of Theatre Schools 2025 Edition

Amba Dalmia Foundation Trus

Amba Dalmia FOUNDATION

The Amba Dalmia Foundation Trust, established in 2013 and based in New Delhi, is a non profit organization committed to advancing women's education, gender equality, and youth empowerment. The Trust places strong emphasis on life skills development and innovative educational practices, with a distinctive focus on sports as a transformative tool for social change. Through its flagship initiative, EduTennis, the Foundation integrates tennis coaching with life skills education to support children from government and low income schools, enabling them to build confidence, discipline, and resilience.

The Trust's work is directed toward breaking cycles of poverty by equipping young people with essential skills that enhance employability, self belief, and social participation. By addressing structural challenges in education and access, the Amba Dalmia Foundation Trust has made a meaningful impact on the lives of children and young adults, particularly within the context of India's broader social and educational inequalities.

The Amba Dalmia Foundation Trust has been a significant collaborator of the International Festival of Theatre Schools (IFTS), extending monetary support to the 2024 and 2025 editions of the festival. Its support contributed to the successful organization of key academic and artistic components of IFTS, reinforcing the festival's commitment to education, creativity, and social engagement. The Foundation's association with IFTS reflects a shared belief in the transformative potential of education and cultural practice.

South Zone Cultural Centre

The South Zone Cultural Centre (SZCC) is a regional cultural institution functioning under the Ministry of Culture, Government of India. Established to preserve, promote, and disseminate India's diverse cultural heritage, the Centre works actively to support traditional and folk art forms across the southern region of the country. Through festivals, documentation, training programmes, and artist support initiatives, SZCC plays a vital role in sustaining community based cultural practices and facilitating inter regional cultural exchange.

As part of its continued engagement with cultural and educational platforms, the South Zone Cultural Centre extended its support to the International Festival of Theatre Schools (IFTS) 2025, the third edition of the festival. The Centre sponsored two collective traditional performance presentations: Phag and Ghumar: Expressions of Rhythm, Grace, and Community and Basuri: A Collective Presentation of Traditional and Folk Performance Forms.

These performances brought together artists rooted in folk and traditional practices, offering festival participants a vibrant experience of rhythm, movement, music, and community based expression. The Centre's support enabled the participation of traditional performers and ensured the authentic presentation of living cultural forms within the festival. The contribution of the South Zone Cultural Centre significantly enriched IFTS 2025, strengthening the festival's engagement with India's intangible cultural heritage and expanding the dialogue between theatre pedagogy and traditional performance practices.

Takshila Foundationa

Takshila Foundation is an organization committed to empowering youth and communities in India through skills development, vocational training, and employability programmes. Operating under the aegis of IJRTS Takshila Foundation, the foundation works with a broad network of centres across small towns and villages to provide practical, job oriented education that enhances employability and supports entrepreneurial opportunities for learners. It focuses on delivering certification-linked training alongside formal schooling and college study, enabling students to gain meaningful skills that help them enter the workforce or start their own ventures. The foundation's training ecosystem is supported by accredited programmes and recognised partnerships aimed at strengthening livelihood outcomes and holistic development for participants. Takshila Foundation's commitment to inclusive education and skill building aligns with initiatives that bridge academic learning with real world application. As one of the supporters of the International Festival of Theatre Schools 2025, the foundation contributed to the festival's goal of fostering creativity, exchange, and global engagement among institutions, students, and faculty. Visit takshila.org.in for more information about its programmes and activities.

Kerala State Financial Enterprice

Kerala State Financial Enterprises (KSFE) extended significant support to the International Festival of Theatre Schools 2025 by sponsoring two of the four fellowships instituted under this initiative. These fellowships, awarded under the title KSFE–IFTS Fellowship, were conceived to enable meaningful aca-demic, artistic, and intercultural exchange among theatre students and emerging practitioners.

The KSFE–IFTS Fellowships were designed to support participation in the festival by reducing financial barriers and facilitating access to international theatre pedagogy, performances, and collaborative learning environments. Through this support, KSFE contributed directly to nurturing young theatre artists and scholars, allowing them to engage with diverse performance traditions, contemporary prac-tices, and global educational frameworks. KSFE's involvement reflects its broader commitment to social responsibility, cultural development, and educational advancement within Kerala and beyond. By sup-porting fellowships within an international cultural platform, KSFE reaffirmed its role in encouraging learning, creativity, and professional growth among youth.

The sponsorship of these fellowships played a crucial role in strengthening the festival's inclusive vision, ensuring wider participation and deeper engagement. The KSFE–IFTS Fellowship stands as a meaningful example of how public sector institutions can actively support arts education, cultural exchange, and the future of theatre practice through targeted and impactful initiatives.

DELEGATED INSTITUTIONS





Dr. B.R. Ambedkar University Delhi

Carnegie Mellon University





K.R.NARAYANAN NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF VISUAL SCIENCE AND ARTS

The Film Institute Established by Government of Kerala



TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY®





SRI SHIVAKUMARA RANGAPRAYOGA SHALE

SANEHALLI, KARNATAK



THE HEBREW UNIVERSITY OF JERUSALEM



AMITY SCHOOL of FILM & DRAMA



National Institute of Dramatic Art

NIDA THEATRES





Jawaharlal Nehru University Delhi

AKADEMIA TEATRALNA







The International Festival of Theatre Schools 2025 witnessed the active participation of delegating institutions representing diverse geographical, cultural, and pedagogical contexts. Theatre schools, universities, and training institutions from different regions came together, reaffirming the festival's commitment to intercultural exchange, academic collaboration, and artistic dialogue.

The delegating institutions participated through student productions, faculty presentations, workshops, lectures, and panel discussions. Their presence enriched the festival by bringing varied theatrical traditions, contemporary practices, and educational methodologies into conversation with one another. The delegates comprised students, teachers, researchers, and theatre practitioners who engaged deeply with the festival theme and programme structure.

The interactions among delegating institutions fostered meaningful exchanges on theatre pedagogy, performance practices, research methodologies, and cultural perspectives. Collaborative learning environments were created through workshops and discussions, enabling participants to reflect on shared concerns and distinct approaches within theatre education across contexts.

The participation of these institutions strengthened the academic and artistic dimensions of IFTS 2025, reinforcing its role as a global platform for theatre schools to connect, collaborate, and contribute to evolving discourses in theatre training and performance. The presence of multiple delegations underscored the festival's vision of building sustained networks among theatre institutions worldwide and promoting mutual learning through performance and pedagogy.

IFTS International Festival of Theatre Schools 2025 Edition

Lovely Professional University

Lovely Professional University (LPU), Punjab, participated in the International Festival of Theatre Schools with a delegating team, contributing to the festival's academic and cultural exchange. The delegation comprised students and faculty members engaged in theatre education and performance practice, reflecting the University's commitment to experiential learning and interdisciplinary engagement.

During the festival, the LPU delegation actively participated in performances, workshops, discussions, and interactive sessions with theatre practitioners and institutions from India and abroad. Their presence added to the diversity of pedagogical perspectives and creative approaches represented at the festival. The interactions enabled meaningful dialogue on contemporary theatre practices, training methodologies, and collaborative possibilities across institutions.

The participation of Lovely Professional University strengthened the festival's objective of fostering inter institutional exchange and nurturing young theatre practitioners through exposure to varied performance traditions and educational frameworks. The University's engagement as a delegating institution contributed positively to the collective learning environment of the festival and reinforced IFTS as a platform for collaboration, reflection, and growth in theatre education.

IFTS International Festival of Theatre Schools 2025 Edition

Amity School of Film & Drama

AMITY UNIVERSITY
AMITY SCHOOL of FILM & DRAMA

The Amity School of Film and Drama, Amity University, Noida, participated in the International Festival of Theatre Schools 2025 with a delegating team comprising both students and faculty members. The delegation represented the School's active engagement with contemporary theatre, film, and performance pedagogy, and its commitment to experiential and practice based learning.During the festival, the participating students and faculty took part in performances, workshops, lectures, and interactive academic sessions with theatre educators and practitioners from India and abroad. The engagement provided valuable exposure to diverse theatrical traditions, training methodologies, and interdisciplinary approaches, enriching both artistic practice and academic discourse.

The participation of the Amity School of Film and Drama contributed meaningfully to the inter institutional exchange that lies at the core of IFTS. The presence of faculty alongside students enabled critical reflection on pedagogy, performance, and curriculum, while encouraging collaborative dialogue across institutions. The delegation's involvement reinforced IFTS 2025 as a dynamic platform for learning, cultural exchange, and the nurturing of emerging theatre and performance practitioners.

IFTS International Festival of Theatre Schools 2025 Edition

Visva-Bharati University

Viswabharathy University participated in the International Festival of Theatre Schools 2025 with a delegating team comprising students and faculty members. The delegation represented the University's engagement with theatre education and performance practice, and its interest in academic exchange and collaborative learning.

During the festival, the students and faculty from Viswabharathy University took part in performances, workshops, lectures, and interactive sessions with theatre practitioners, educators, and institutions from India and abroad. Their participation contributed to discussions on contemporary theatre practices, training methodologies, and interdisciplinary approaches to performance.

The involvement of Viswabharathy University added to the diversity of institutional perspectives present at IFTS 2025. The delegation's active engagement supported the festival's objective of fostering inter institutional dialogue, strengthening pedagogical exchange, and providing meaningful exposure for students and educators within an international theatre education framework.

IFTS International Festival of Theatre Schools 2025 Edition

Jawaharlal Nehru University

Jawaharlal Nehru University Delhi

Jawaharlal Nehru University is one of India's premier central universities, known for its strong emphasis on interdisciplinary scholarship, critical inquiry, and social engagement. Within the University, the School of Arts and Aesthetics offers the Theatre and Performance Studies programme, which integrates the study of theatre, dance, music, and performance. The programme is recognised for its rigorous engagement with history, theory, and practice, and for its focus on both traditional and contemporary performance forms.

The students and faculty of the Theatre and Performance Studies programme participated in the International Festival of Theatre Schools 2025 as a delegating team. Their participation contributed to the festival's academic and artistic exchanges through involvement in workshops, lectures, performances, and interactive sessions with theatre educators and practitioners from India and abroad. The presence of JNU enriched the intellectual discourse of IFTS 2025 and strengthened inter institutional dialogue within the field of theatre and performance studies.

IFTS International Festival of Theatre Schools 2025 Edition

Shri Shivakumara Rangaprayoga Shaale

SRI SHIVAKUMARA RANGAPRAYOGA SHAALE
SANEHALLI, KARNATAKA

Shri Shivakumara Rangaprayoga Shaale, located in Sanehalli, Karnataka, is a pioneering residential institution dedicated to theatre education and performance. Founded under the visionary guidance of Dr. Shivakumara Swamiji of the Taralabalu Samsthana, the school has played a crucial role in nurturing generations of theatre practitioners while strengthening the traditions of Kannada theatre.

The institution offers rigorous and immersive training in acting, direction, stagecraft, and scriptwriting. Its pedagogy brings together classical, folk, and contemporary theatre practices, ensuring the holistic artistic development of students. A strong emphasis is placed on socially relevant themes, encouraging students to engage deeply with community issues and cultural realities through performance.

A distinctive feature of the school is its in house theatre repertory, which performs extensively across Karnataka and other regions. The repertory is widely recognized for its innovative productions that blend folk aesthetics with modern theatrical techniques, contributing significantly to the evolution of regional theatre practices.

Students and faculty of Shri Shivakumara Rangaprayoga Shaale participated in the International Festival of Theatre Schools 2025 as a delegating team. Their presence at the festival highlighted the institution's enduring commitment to theatre as a medium of education, cultural continuity, and creative exploration.

IFTS International Festival of Theatre Schools 2025 Edition

M.S.University of Baroda

Shri Shivakumara Rangaprayoga Shaale, located in Sanehalli, Karnataka, is a pioneering residential institution dedicated to theatre education and performance. Founded under the visionary guidance of Dr. Shivakumara Swamiji of the Taralabalu Samsthana, the school has played a crucial role in nurturing generations of theatre practitioners while strengthening the traditions of Kannada theatre.

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IFTS International Festival of Theatre Schools 2025 Edition

Kerala Kalamandalam

Kerala Kalamandalam, established in 1930 by the visionary poet Vallathol Narayana Menon, is a premier institution devoted to the preservation, practice, and advancement of Kerala's traditional performing arts. Located at Cheruthuruthy in the Thrissur district, along the banks of the Bharathapuzha River, the institution has played a seminal role in reviving classical forms such as Kathakali, Mohiniyattam, Kudiyattam, Thullal, and Nangiar Koothu, many of which were facing decline in the early twentieth century.

Conceived as a sanctuary for rigorous training and artistic continuity, Kerala Kalamandalam today holds the status of a Deemed University for Art and Culture, recognized by the Government of India. The institution offers intensive, practice oriented training grounded in strong theoretical frameworks, along with instruction in traditional percussion forms including chenda, maddalam, and mizhavu. Its pedagogical model emphasizes discipline, lineage based learning, and performance as the core of artistic transmission.

A defining architectural and cultural feature of the institution is its Koothambalam, a traditional theatre space adorned with granite pillars inscribed with 108 karanas, uniquely constructed outside a temple complex. As a collaborating institution for the International Festival of Theatre Schools 2025, Kerala Kalamandalam is associated with the festival's intercultural and academic exchange, with students delegated to attend and engage with contemporary global theatre practices, dialogues, and performances.

IFTS International Festival of Theatre Schools 2025 Edition

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar University Delhi

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar University Delhi

The School of Culture and Creative Expressions (SCCE) at Dr. B.R. Ambedkar University Delhi, established in 2012, is a pioneering academic space dedicated to interdisciplinary artistic practice and innovative pedagogy. Located in New Delhi, SCCE fosters a sustained dialogue between creative practice, critical inquiry, and academic research, offering a vibrant environment for artists and scholars. SCCE offers programmes across diverse disciplines including Visual Art, Creative Writing, Performance, Cinema, and Dance. Its curriculum integrates theoretical perspectives with hands on artistic processes, encouraging students to explore intersections between art forms and develop a holistic understanding of creative expression. This approach enables students to engage meaningfully with contemporary cultural and aesthetic concerns. A key objective of SCCE is to position art within broader social and political contexts. The school emphasizes socially engaged practices and the role of creative work in civil society, supporting projects that address issues of identity, equity, and public discourse. The faculty comprises accomplished artists, writers, and scholars who actively mentor students through research led and practice based learning.

SCCE regularly hosts workshops, seminars, and performances, supported by well equipped studios, performance spaces, and library resources. As part of its commitment to international exchange, SCCE is participating in the International Festival of Theatre Schools 2025, with faculty and students delegated to engage with global pedagogies, performances, and critical dialogues in contemporary theatre and performance studies.

Kala Academy Goa

Kala Academy Goa's College of Theatre Arts is a premier institution committed to theatre education and performance training in the state of Goa. Functioning under Kala Academy Goa and affiliated with Goa University, the college offers structured academic training aimed at nurturing professional theatre practitioners.

The institution offers a Bachelor of Performing Arts (BPA) degree in Theatre Arts, with a curriculum encompassing acting, direction, stagecraft, playwriting, dramaturgy, and theatre history. Emphasizing the integration of theory and practice, the programme encourages students to participate in productions, workshops, and internships, enabling sustained engagement with contemporary theatre practices. The faculty consists of experienced theatre practitioners and scholars who mentor students through practice based and research oriented learning. The college also regularly invites theatre professionals for guest lectures, workshops, and masterclasses, fostering exposure to diverse artistic methodologies. Located within the cultural complex of Kala Academy Goa, the college benefits from well equipped auditoriums, rehearsal spaces, and library resources. Actively involved in regional and national theatre festivals, the institution plays a significant role in Goa's cultural landscape.

Continuing its commitment to artistic exchange, Kala Academy Goa's College of Theatre Arts is participating in the International Festival of Theatre Schools 2025, with faculty and students delegated to engage with international theatre practices, performances, and pedagogical dialogues.

IFTS International Festival of Theatre Schools 2025 Edition

Carnegie Mellon University | USA

Carnegie Mellon University

The School of Drama at Carnegie Mellon University, established in 1914, is the first degree granting drama institution in the United States. Located in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, the school is part of the College of Fine Arts and is internationally recognized for its rigorous conservatory training and innova-tive approach to theatre education.

The School of Drama offers a wide range of undergraduate and graduate programmes, including Bache-lor of Fine Arts degrees in Acting, Music Theater, Design, Directing, Dramaturgy, and Production Tech-nology and Management, along with Master of Fine Arts degrees in Design, Directing, Dramatic Writing, and Production Technology and Management. The curriculum integrates intensive practical training with strong theoretical foundations, preparing students for professional practice across diverse theatri-cal contexts. A defining feature of the School of Drama is its emphasis on interdisciplinary collabora-tion, technological innovation, and contemporary performance practices. Students are encouraged to engage with new modes of creative expression and cross disciplinary projects. The school is also deeply committed to diversity, equity, and inclusion, cultivating an environment that values multiple perspec-tives and artistic voices.

Continuing its engagement with global theatre education, the School of Drama at Carnegie Mellon Uni-versity participated as one of the delegated institutions at the International Festival of Theatre Schools 2025, with faculty and students attending the festival to engage in international exchange, perfor-mance sharing, and pedagogical dialogue.

IFTS International Festival of Theatre Schools 2025 Edition

Texas A&M University

TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY®

Texas A&M University, established in 1876, is a leading public research institution located in College Station, Texas. As the first public university in the state, it has grown into one of the largest universities in the United States and is a member of the Association of American Universities, reflecting its strong commitment to academic excellence, research innovation, and global engagement.

The university offers a wide range of programmes across its colleges and schools, spanning engineering, sciences, humanities, and the arts. Within this academic landscape, the School of Performance, Visualization and Fine Arts plays a significant role in advancing creative practice and interdisciplinary collaboration. The school contributes actively to theatre, performance studies, film, and digital media through rigorous academic programmes, productions, and research initiatives.

Texas A&M University is also known for its strong institutional traditions, leadership culture, and emphasis on service. The Aggie spirit, grounded in values of integrity, excellence, and community responsibility, shapes student life and institutional identity. Through its integration of science, technology, and the arts, the university fosters innovation while supporting cultural and artistic expression.

As an institutional delegate to the International Festival of Theatre Schools 2025, Texas A&M University participated in the festival with faculty and students, engaging in international dialogue, performance exchange, and collaborative learning within the global theatre education community.

IFTS International Festival of Theatre Schools 2025 Edition

National Institute of Dramatic Art

National Institute of Dramatic Art
NIDA
THEATRES

The National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA), established in 1958 in Sydney, Australia, is one of the world's most prestigious institutions for performing arts education and professional training. Internationally recognized for its rigorous and industry focused pedagogy, NIDA offers programmes across acting, directing, design, technical production, writing, and related disciplines spanning theatre, film, and television.

NIDA's curriculum is grounded in a strong integration of theoretical inquiry and intensive practical training, enabling students to develop creative, technical, and collaborative expertise. The institute is supported by state of the art infrastructure, including multiple performance venues, rehearsal studios, and production workshops, which provide students with immersive, real world learning environments aligned with contemporary professional practices. The institute's distinguished alumni include globally acclaimed artists such as Cate Blanchett, Mel Gibson, and Baz Luhrmann, reflecting NIDA's longstanding contribution to international performance culture. Alongside its conservatory ethos, NIDA places strong emphasis on innovation, interdisciplinary collaboration, and engagement with evolving artistic forms.

Through extensive industry partnerships, research initiatives, and outreach programmes, NIDA continues to play a vital role in shaping global performing arts education. As a delegated institution to the International Festival of Theatre Schools 2025, NIDA participated with faculty and students, contributing to international exchange, performance sharing, and critical dialogue within the global theatre education community.

IFTS International Festival of Theatre Schools 2025 Edition

Hebrew University Jerusalem

THE HEBREW UNIVERSITY OF JERUSALEM

Hebrew University of Jerusalem, founded in 1918 and officially opened in 1925, is one of Israel's foremost institutions for higher education and research, internationally recognized for academic excellence and interdisciplinary scholarship. The university fosters innovation across the humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, and technology through a diverse community of scholars and students.

The university's commitment to the arts is reflected in the Faculty of Humanities, particularly through the Department of Theatre Studies. The department plays a significant role in advancing research and pedagogy in theatre history, performance theory, dramaturgy, and contemporary practice. Faculty and students actively engage with both classical and modern performance traditions, contributing to global academic and artistic discourse. Located in Jerusalem, the university benefits from a culturally and historically layered environment that enriches artistic inquiry. Its engagement with theatre extends beyond academia through collaborations with cultural institutions, artists, and research initiatives that connect scholarship with practice.

As an institutional delegate to the International Festival of Theatre Schools 2025, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem participated in the festival with faculty and students, engaging in international exchange, performance dialogue, and critical conversations on contemporary theatre education and practice.

IFTS International Festival of Theatre Schools 2025 Edition

K R Narayanan National Institute of Visual Science and Arts

K.R.NARAYANAN NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF VISUAL SCIENCE AND ARTS

The Film Institute Established by Government of Kerala

The K. R. Narayanan National Institute of Visual Science and Arts (KRNNIVSA) is a premier institute for film and audio visual education located in Kottayam district, Kerala. Established in 2014 by the Gov-ernment of Kerala and named after former President of India K. R. Narayanan, the institute was inaugu-rated in 2016 and has since emerged as a significant centre for professional training in cinema and digi-tal media.

KRNNIVSA offers three year full time postgraduate diploma programmes in Script Writing and Direc-tion, Cinematography, Editing, Audiography, Animation, and Visual Effects, along with diploma train-ing in Acting. The curriculum integrates strong theoretical foundations with intensive practical training, enabling students to develop artistic vision, technical proficiency, and industry readiness. The institute is equipped with advanced infrastructure including shooting floors, theatres, classrooms, a well re-sourced library, digital intermediate facilities, and residential hostels, supporting immersive learning and production based pedagogy. Academic guidance is provided by an Academic Council comprising eminent professionals from the film and television industry, ensuring contemporary relevance and pro-fessional standards.

Committed to nurturing creativity, innovation, and critical engagement in visual storytelling, KRNNIVSA contributes actively to India's cultural and cinematic landscape. As an institutional delegate to the In-ternational Festival of Theatre Schools 2025, the institute participated with faculty and students, en-gaging in interdisciplinary exchange, screenings, and dialogues connecting theatre, film, and perfor-mance practices.

IFTS International Festival of Theatre Schools 2025 Edition

The Aleksander Zelwerowicz National Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw

AKADEMIA TEATRALNA WARSZAWA

The Aleksander Zelwerowicz National Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw, established in 1946, is one of Poland's most prestigious institutions dedicated to theatre education and research. Named after the eminent actor and director Aleksander Zelwerowicz, the academy is housed in the historic Collegium Nobilium building in Warsaw, reflecting its deep connection to European theatrical heritage.

The academy offers rigorous programmes in acting, puppetry, directing, and theatrology, combining intensive practical training with strong theoretical grounding. Known for its high academic and artistic standards, the institution prepares students for professional careers in theatre, film, and television within both national and international contexts. A defining feature of the academy is its engagement with diverse theatrical traditions and methodologies. Students are trained in classical approaches influenced by Konstantin Stanislavski while also engaging with modern and experimental practices associated with figures such as Jerzy Grotowski and Tadeusz Kantor. This balanced pedagogical framework encourages both discipline and innovation.

The academy is also an active cultural hub, organizing international events such as the International Theatre School Festival ITSelF and the International Festival of Puppet Schools LALKANIELALKA, which foster intercultural exchange and collaboration. As a delegated institution to the International Festival of Theatre Schools 2025, the academy participated with faculty and students, engaging in performances, workshops, and pedagogical dialogue within the global theatre education community.

IFTS International Festival of Theatre Schools 2025 Edition

Sree Sankaracharya University of Sanskrit Kaladi

Sree Sankaracharya University of Sanskrit (SSUS), established in 1993 and located in Kalady, Kerala, is a prominent academic institution dedicated to the study and advancement of Sanskrit, Indian knowledge systems, and allied disciplines. Named after the philosopher and theologian Adi Shankaracharya, the university carries forward a legacy of intellectual inquiry rooted in classical thought while engaging with contemporary academic practices.

SSUS offers a wide range of undergraduate, postgraduate, and doctoral programmes across Sanskrit and other Indian languages, social sciences, fine arts, and foreign languages. The university is recognized for its rigorous academic standards and a curriculum that integrates theoretical scholarship with practical and performative approaches. This pedagogical framework supports both disciplinary depth and creative engagement. A distinctive feature of SSUS is its emphasis on interdisciplinary studies, encouraging dialogue between classical texts, philosophy, aesthetics, performance traditions, and modern critical frameworks. The university actively promotes research and innovation through dedicated research centres and scholarly projects that contribute to India's cultural and academic landscape.

Extending its academic engagement beyond the classroom, SSUS participates in national and international academic and cultural exchanges. As an institutional delegate to the International Festival of Theatre Schools 2025, the university took part with faculty and students, engaging in intercultural dialogue, performance discourse, and pedagogical exchange within the global theatre education community.

IFTS International Festival of Theatre Schools 2025 Edition

University of Jaffna

University of Jaffna, established in 1974, is a leading institution of higher education in Sri Lanka, known for its commitment to academic excellence, research, and cultural development. Located in the Northern Province, the university has played a vital role in advancing knowledge and nurturing intellectual and artistic growth, particularly within the arts, sciences, medicine, and technology.

The Faculty of Arts is one of the university's distinguished academic centres and has been instrumental in promoting literature, theatre, and the performing arts. Theatre studies and dramatic practice occupy a significant place in both academic and extracurricular life, encouraging students to engage critically with performance as a medium for cultural expression and social reflection. Through theatrical work, students explore historical narratives, socio political realities, and contemporary concerns, positioning theatre as a tool for dialogue and transformation. The University of Jaffna has made notable contributions to the preservation and evolution of Tamil theatre in Sri Lanka. Its vibrant theatrical tradition reflects a deep engagement with cultural heritage while embracing innovation and experimentation.

Extending this commitment to international exchange, the University of Jaffna participated as an institutional delegate to the International Festival of Theatre Schools 2025, with faculty and students, engaging in intercultural dialogue, performance exchange, and pedagogical interaction within the global theatre education community.

IFTS International Festival of Theatre Schools 2025 Edition

University of Hyderabad

University of Hyderabad (UoH), established in 1974, is one of India's premier institutions of higher education, widely recognized for academic excellence, advanced research, and a vibrant intellectual culture. Located in Hyderabad, Telangana, the university is set on a sprawling 2,300 acre green campus that supports an immersive and interdisciplinary learning environment.

The university offers a wide range of postgraduate and doctoral programmes across the sciences, humanities, social sciences, management, and technology. Known for its strong interdisciplinary orientation, UoH encourages critical inquiry, innovation, and cross disciplinary research. Its academic strength is supported by distinguished faculty, advanced research centres, state of the art laboratories, and a comprehensive library system. In recognition of its academic standing and national importance, the university has been conferred the status of an Institution of Eminence by the Government of India. Beyond academics, the University of Hyderabad is known for its culturally active campus life, with student led literary, artistic, and social initiatives that foster diversity and dialogue. The campus environment supports holistic development alongside scholarly rigor.

Extending its academic engagement to international platforms, the University of Hyderabad participated as an institutional delegate to the International Festival of Theatre Schools 2025, with faculty and students, engaging in intercultural exchange, academic dialogue, and collaborative learning within the global theatre education community.

PEDAGOGUES

Steina Ohman



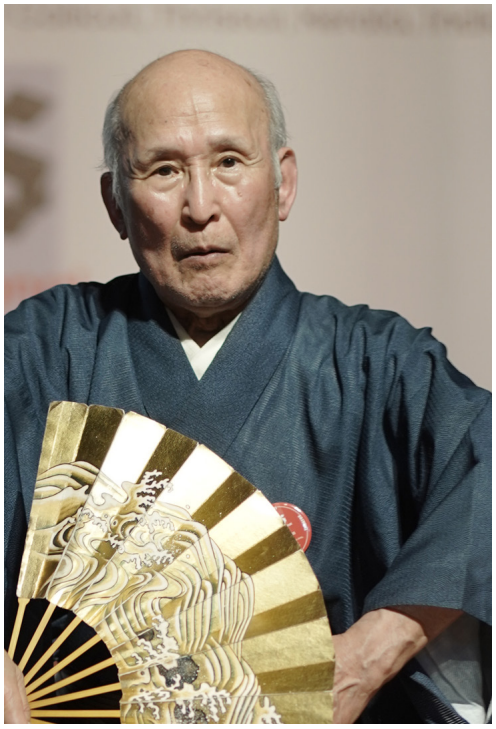
Steina Öhman is an actress, director and theatre teacher based in Finland. In physical theatre she continues and develops the tradition that Maya Tångeberg-Grischin started as a genre in theatre education. Öhman works with different techniques of the performing body, and is interested in finding the actor's personal expression and infinite creativity. This workshop will focus on basic physical theatre exercises that are designed to develop the practitioner's expressive possibilities.

Sachiko Tange



Sachiko was born in Tokyo, Japan, and trained as an actress at the renowned Bungakuza Institute of Drama. She has extensive experience in film, theatre, and television commercials in Japan and Europe. Her notable performances include the leading role in the Japanese production of Two for the Seesaw and a prominent role in Nikkatsu Production's 70th anniversary film Anshitsu (Dark Room), directed by Kirio Urayama. Alongside acting, she studied traditional Japanese dance for over twenty years and received a Masters Diploma from the Onoe School. Since 1990, Sachiko has focused on cross cultural theatre practices and training programmes, working widely across Europe. After intensive study at NIDA, she made her debut as a director and later completed a Master of Fine Arts in Directing there. In 2007, she joined Tokyo Institute of Technology as a lecturer, contributing actively to both academic and creative work.

Tsumura Reijiro



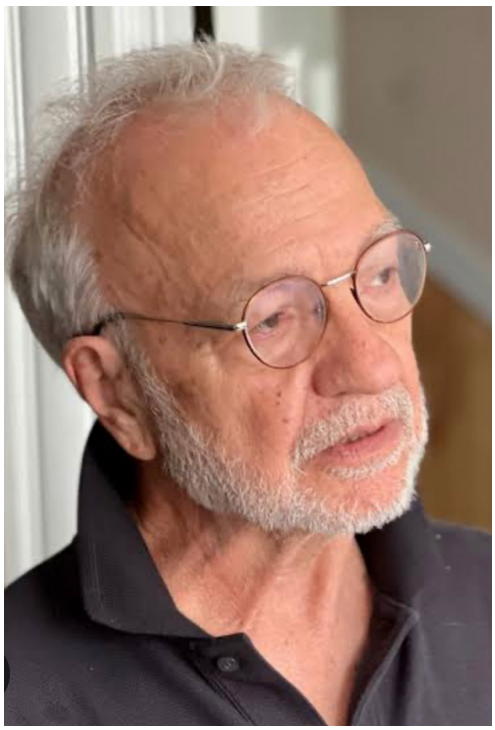
Reijirō Tsumura, born in 1942, is a distinguished Japanese Noh actor renowned for his contributions to the traditional art form. He pursued studies in economics at Hitotsubashi University while simultaneously receiving acting instruction from Kimiko Tsumura. In 1974, Tsumura assumed leadership of the Ryokusenkai acting troupe within the Kanze Noh school. Since 1979, he has organized and directed the annual Takigi-Noh performances in Koganei. Tsumura's international engagements include performances in countries such as the United Kingdom, Belgium, Spain, Singapore, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and Indonesia. Beyond traditional Noh plays, he has been involved in new productions and collaborations with opera singers and ballet dancers. In 2010, as a cultural ambassador of Japan, he visited Russia and Hungary. In 2014, he performed "Hakurakusei," a piece for Noh actors, ballet, and piano, based on a text by Niizawa Iwao.

Barbara MacKenzie-Wood



Barbara MacKenzie-Wood is an actor, director, and university professor who holds the Raymond W. Smith Endowed Chair at the Carnegie Mellon University School of Drama. She taught acting there for thirty seven years and received the Henry Hornbostel Award for Teaching Excellence from the College of Fine Arts. As a professional actor, she has performed in more than sixty five roles in New York City, major American regional theatres, as well as in stock theatre and film. She is a founding member of the Obie Award winning Irondale Ensemble, a Brooklyn based theatre company with which she has toured internationally, including Russia, Germany, and South Africa. Her teaching and directing work includes the Moscow Art Theatre Carnegie Mellon University Graduate Acting Program, the Drama Centre in London, the Royal Welsh Conservatory of Music and Drama in Cardiff, and the META Festival in Florence, Italy. She is the author of The Game Guide: Experimental Strategies for the Classroom and is featured in Acting Teachers of America: A Vital Tradition and Shakespeare and Stanislavsky: A Practical Guide for Actors, Directors, Students, and Teachers.

Jim Niesen



Jim Niesen has served as Artistic Director of the Irondale Ensemble Project since its founding in 1983, directing more than eighty productions. His work includes nine plays by Bertolt Brecht, among them the three play cycle Brecht in Exile comprising Galileo, The Good Soul of Szechuan, and Mother Courage, as well as sixteen plays by Shakespeare. Notably, he directed the epic marathon 1599, in which Henry V, Julius Caesar, As You Like It, and Hamlet were performed in a single evening. He created Irondale's production of You Can't Win, which received the Grand Prix at the International Drama Festival in St Petersburg, Russia. Along with Barbara MacKenzie Wood, he devised the theatre programme for Global Camps, a non profit organisation working with children affected by HIV and AIDS in Africa. In 2018, he was named a Distinguished Alumnus of Ohio University and serves on its College of Fine Arts Leadership Council. He was part of United States cultural delegations to major international theatre festivals in Chile and China. He is listed in Who's Who in America, named one of the hundred most influential figures in Brooklyn culture by Brooklyn Magazine, and regularly publishes essays and columns on theatre.

Daniel Collins



Daniel began working in professional theatre in the early 1990s and is largely self taught. After initially exploring prop making and set design, he realised that scenic art was his true vocation. In the early 2000s, he became Head of Scenic Art at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, a role that required him to articulate and formalise an instinctive practice so it could be effectively taught. Over the years, he has refined both his craft and his pedagogical approach, a process rigorously tested during the pandemic when practical training successfully moved online. Daniel has worked in theatres across the United Kingdom, from Pitlochry to Ipswich, and internationally in locations including the United Arab Emirates, Vienna, and several Legoland sites. He is also involved in the training of scenic art apprentices at the Royal Opera House and the National Theatre. Alongside teaching, he continues to develop his own painting practice and has attended courses at the Slade School of Fine Art. While he has worked in film, television, museums, and themed environments, live theatre remains the most rewarding aspect of his work. Daniel has led the scenic art courses at RADA since 2007 and currently mentors first year technical students.

Neil Fraser



Neil Fraser is a highly respected lighting designer and educator with over three decades of experience in theatre, opera, and live performance. His work spans productions across the United Kingdom and internationally, with credits at major venues including the National Theatre, the Royal Opera House, and West End theatres. Known for technical precision and artistic clarity, his lighting designs contribute significantly to atmosphere and narrative across diverse performance forms. Fraser trained at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, where he later became Director of Technical Training and, in 2002, Head of Theatre. In these roles, he played a key part in shaping industry focused technical training programmes in lighting, sound, and stagecraft. Alongside his educational leadership, he has contributed to major international events such as the Edinburgh International Festival and the Olympic Games ceremonies, bringing expertise in large scale live productions. His sustained contribution to both professional practice and pedagogy has earned him wide recognition, and he continues to be a sought after collaborator within the performing arts.

Sasitharan Thirunalan



T Sasitharan is a distinguished Singaporean theatre director, actor, educator, and cultural advocate who has played a significant role in shaping contemporary theatre and arts education. Trained in philosophy at the National University of Singapore, he began his career as a journalist and arts critic with The Straits Times, gaining recognition for his perceptive engagement with cultural discourse. He later emerged as a leading practitioner at The Necessary Stage, where his work as director and actor reflected strong social and ethical concerns. In 2000, he co founded the Intercultural Theatre Institute with Kuo Pao Kun, establishing a globally respected training programme that integrates contemporary practice with traditional performance forms such as Japanese Noh, Balinese dance drama, and Indian classical theatre. As Director of ITI, Sasitharan has foregrounded intercultural dialogue, rigorous discipline, and social responsibility in arts training. His leadership has nurtured generations of thoughtful and versatile theatre practitioners. In recognition of his contribution to the arts, he received the Cultural Medallion in 2012, Singapore's highest cultural honour, affirming his lasting impact on both national and international theatre practice.

Grace Uchechukwu Adinku



Dr. Grace Uchechukwu Adinku is a Senior Lecturer in the Theatre Program of the College of Performance, Visualization & Fine Arts at Texas A&M University, where she teaches Introduction to World Theatre, Africana Cinema, and Dress in World Culture. She initiated the Waste Wearable Arts Runway Show project to raise awareness of the fashion industry's contribution to climate change and the need for reimagining waste. Grace holds multiple degrees, including MA in Theatre Arts from the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, MA in Performance Studies from Texas A&M University, USA and Ph.D. in African Arts and Culture from Kwame Nkrumah University, Ghana. Her research areas cover theatre/film costumes, African dress culture, black/race representations in film, and Indigenous dress culture. She has numerous scholarly writings and continues to research cultural issues, indigenous textile and the locations of found object (waste) in creative arts and promoting Theatre for Human Dignity.

Rayna Middleton Dexter



Rayna Middleton Dexter is an Instructional Associate Professor and Academic Program Director of Theatre in the College of Performance, Visualization & Fine Arts at Texas A&M University. Dexter received her M.F.A. in Design and Technology from Kent State University School of Theatre and Dance in Kent, Ohio, USA. Her creative work focuses on dress as cultural performance and her teaching areas include costume design, theater studies, world dress, and the aesthetics of activism. In 2023, Professor Dexter was awarded the Open Education Champion award by the Student Government Association for her efforts to utilize free academic resources to lessen the financial burden on students in her classes.

Marcin Bartnikowski



Marcin Bartnikowski is a distinguished theatre artist, educator, and Vice Rector of the Aleksander Zelwerowicz National Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw, Poland. With over two decades of professional experience, he has contributed significantly to acting, directing, and theatre pedagogy, playing an important role in shaping the academic and artistic direction of one of Poland's leading theatre institutions. A graduate of the Academy, Bartnikowski later returned as a faculty member after an active career as an actor, performing widely across Poland and earning recognition for his versatility and strong stage presence. His artistic practice gradually expanded into directing and education, reflecting a sustained commitment to theatre training. As a director, he has realised numerous productions, working with both established and emerging artists. His work is marked by a thoughtful engagement with classical texts and contemporary performance, combining traditional theatrical methods with experimental approaches. Through his leadership and teaching at the Academy, Bartnikowski has fostered a collaborative creative environment, mentoring young performers and theatre makers and supporting their professional development.

Lukasz Chotkowski



Lukasz Chorzowski is a Doctor of Arts (PhD), playwright, screenwriter, director, and author of theoretical texts. A graduate of the Theatre Academy in Warsaw, he currently serves as the Vice Dean of the Directing Department. He has worked as chief playwright in municipal theatres and has co authored stage scripts for more than thirty productions. His directing work includes productions based on texts by Elfriede Jelinek and Sarah Kane, as well as the Polish Indian co production No Fear. He has conducted dramaturgy and directing workshops in theatre schools, universities, and professional theatres in Delhi, Kolkata, the School of Drama, Thrissur in India, Lviv in Ukraine, and the University of New Mexico in the United States. He is also the author of theatre plays, film scripts, and interviews with Elfriede Jelinek. His books include Masculinity and Stack of Photos.

Suzanne Ozmond



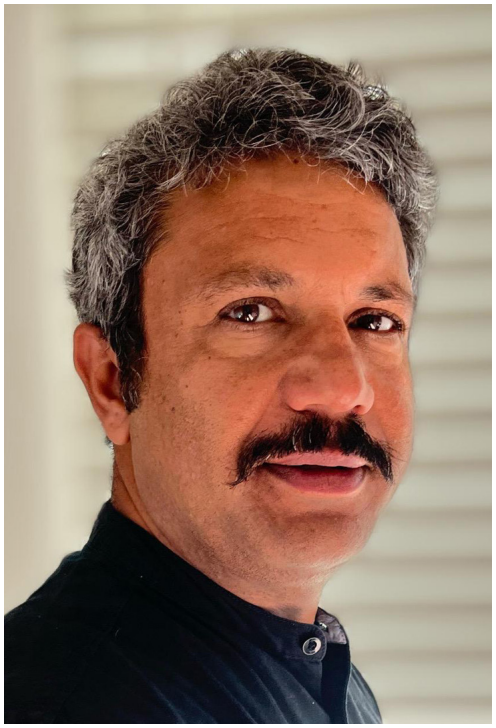
Suzanne Osmond is an experienced educator, arts practitioner, curriculum developer, and researcher with an extensive background in performance and screen industries. She has worked professionally as a costume supervisor on major international productions, including the Asian Games in Doha, the Sydney Olympics Opening Ceremony, The Lion King (Disney), Love Never Dies (Really Useful Company), and film projects such as The Matrix Reloaded, The Matrix Revolutions, and Disgrace. Dr. Osmond was awarded a PhD from the University of Technology, Sydney, for her research into the relationship between costume design and cultural identity. Her research has an international profile and focuses on the historical and socio-cultural dimensions of performance costume. She is a co-editor of the peer-reviewed journal Studies in Costume and Performance (Intellect) and has contributed a chapter on design communication to Performance Costume: New Perspectives and Methods (2021). She has also held a post-doctoral research fellowship within an Academy of Finland–funded research project at Aalto University and is currently engaged in research exploring pedagogical approaches in the performing arts.

Emmanuella Amichai



Emanuella Amichai is a director and choreographer whose work spans performance, dance, and video art. She is a graduate of the Academy of Dance and Music and has trained at the Stella Adler Acting Summer School in New York and the Nissan Nativ Acting Studio in Tel Aviv. She holds a Bachelor's degree in Multidisciplinary Arts from Tel Aviv University with a focus on theatre and film. Her work is strongly physical and visually driven, using the body as both material and metaphor to explore social and human conditions. Her performances have been presented in Israel and internationally, supported by institutions including the BI Arts Foundation, Rabinovitch Foundation, Jerusalem Culture Season, Israel Festival, and the Israel Lottery Council for the Arts. Her productions The Neighbor's Grief Is Greener and Lysistrata x received the European Move Award for outstanding visual performance. Amichai has served on the Fringe Committee and as Head Artistic Producer at the Maabada Theatre in Jerusalem. She currently teaches performance and stage creation at the Hebrew University and is the founder of Merchav, a multidisciplinary theatre group based in Jerusalem.

Dinesh Yadhav



Dinesh Yadav is an interdisciplinary researcher, educator, and performance artist specialising in theatrical design. His practice spans theatre and installation work, integrating art, technology, and health to explore complex human issues. His creative work has been presented in theatres, galleries, and public spaces across the world, and has featured prominently in international festivals, exhibitions, and cultural events. Dr. Yadav has created over twenty original performances and contributed design work to more than one hundred productions. He is an Associate Professor of Theatre at Texas A&M University and currently serves as Chair of the OISTAT Performance Design Commission.

Vidya Rao



Vidya Rao is an accomplished Thumri singer trained under eminent stalwarts of Hindustani classical music, including Naina Devi, Shanti Hiranand, and Girija Devi. Widely respected for her depth of understanding and nuanced interpretation of this expressive genre, she has performed extensively in India and internationally. Alongside her distinguished career as a vocalist, she has maintained a long and meaningful engagement with theatre as a singer, composer, and creative collaborator. She is a founding member of Vivadi, a Delhi based theatre collective known for its interdisciplinary and experimental performance practices. As an educator, Vidya Rao works across disciplines, teaching singers, dancers, actors, writers, and children, and exploring the relationship between music, embodiment, and expression. She has been closely associated with the National School of Drama, Delhi, where she conducted specialised classes on music and theatre. Vidya Rao is also a scholar and writer whose research engages with questions of gender, culture, and musical traditions, bringing critical insight to both her artistic and pedagogical work.

Jyothish M G



Jyothish M G is a director, designer, actor, and teacher with over two decades of experience in theatre practice and pedagogy. His work has received international recognition and has influenced contemporary theatre making and actor training in theatre and film. He is currently Associate Professor in the Acting Department at the K R Narayanan National Institute of Visual Science and Arts, Kerala. Jyothish holds a postgraduate degree in Theatre Arts with specialisation in Direction from the University of Pondicherry and is an alumnus of the School of Drama, University of Calicut. He has directed and designed more than forty major productions, including Shadow of the Glenn, Zoo Story, Death Watch, Macbeth, and Siddhartha. His productions have been presented at major international festivals such as the World Theatre Festival in Brisbane, Avignon Off Festival, Edinburgh International Festival, and Bharat Rang Mahotsav. His work has been commissioned by institutions including Brisbane Powerhouse, the Ibsen Foundation, and Alliance Française. As a pedagogue, he has contributed extensively to theatre training programmes across India. His awards include the Sanskriti Foundation National Award, Mahindra Excellence in Theatre Awards, and the Kerala Sangeetha Nataka Academy Special Jury Award.

CJ Kuttappan



C. J. Kuttappan is a renowned folk artist from Kerala with extensive national and international performance experience. He has performed across the United States, Thailand, Singapore, Germany, Hong Kong, Sri Lanka, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, and several Gulf countries, representing the richness and diversity of Kerala's folk traditions on global platforms. He currently serves as the Chairman of the Kerala Folklore Academy and is the Director of Thayillam Folk Arts Research Center, where he is actively involved in the preservation, research, and promotion of indigenous folk art forms. His work continues to play a significant role in sustaining and revitalising Kerala's folk performance traditions.

Sheethal Syam



Sheethal Shyam is a transgender rights activist, cine artist, columnist, and cultural practitioner who has been advocating for LGBTIQ rights for over two decades. She was a founding member of Queer Pride Keralam in 2009 and later served as Secretary of the Sexual Minorities Forum Kerala. She played a key role in India's first nationwide transgender survey and was instrumental in shaping Kerala's first transgender policy, helping bring community concerns into public governance. In 2016, she represented the Kerala government at the International Film Festival of Kerala and became the first person in the state to receive a transgender identity card. She currently serves on the Kerala State Transgender Justice Board. As a writer, she has contributed a regular queer column to Mathrubhumi Weekly. In 2017, she founded Thvaya to encourage artistic expression within the transgender community and later established Kerala's first transgender theatre troupe, Mazhavil Dwani. She has acted in Malayalam films including Ka Bodyscapes, Aabhaasam, and Otta, and is currently Vice President of Sangama, a national transgender rights organisation.

Srijith Sundaram



Srijith Sundaram is a theatre activist, director, and cultural practitioner known for his sustained work with marginalised communities, particularly queer, Dalit, and working-class groups. He is a founding member of Kattiyakkari, a Tamil Nadu–based theatre collective that brings together trans persons, sex workers, Dalits, and other socially excluded communities to create theatre as a space of solidarity, resistance, and shared expression. Srijith's practice is deeply rooted in socially engaged theatre and collective creation, using performance as a tool to question hierarchies of gender, caste, and class. Influenced by activist traditions and feminist theatre practices, his work foregrounds lived experience, community voices, and ethical collaboration. Through his theatre-making and pedagogy, he continues to explore how theatre can function as a political, inclusive, and transformative space

Alex Thalupadath Asan



Alex Thalupadath Asan is a senior Chavittu Natakam artist, actor, director, teacher, and cultural practitioner from Kerala with over four decades of experience in folk theatre. He began his training in 1980 under Anthony Charam Kulath Asan and later received advanced guidance from Raphael Acharu Parampil Anchelika, associated with Karalman Charitam. From 1980 to 2015, he performed extensively in productions such as David and Goliath, Death of the Birds, and Aa Manman Nee Shiba. He entered direction in 1989 and currently serves as Chief Conductor of St Rocky's Nrithakalabhavan Chavittunataka Samiti. As a playwright and director, he has created notable works including Daviitthi Oru Poovu, Velichamthinn Karma Sarathi, and Manikarnika, the latter staged internationally in Abu Dhabi. He has played a vital role in school youth festivals, training hundreds of students across Kerala. A committed pedagogue, he has trained over eight hundred learners and received the Kerala Folklore Academy Award in 2018 and Fellowship in 2022 for his contribution to folk theatre.

Kalki Subramaniam



Kalki Subramaniam is an Indian transgender activist, queer artist, entrepreneur, poet, actor, and inspirational speaker. She is a member of the National Council of Trans Persons constituted by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of India. Born in Pollachi, Tamil Nadu, Kalki is the founder of the Sahodari Foundation, an organisation dedicated to empowering the transgender community through social, cultural, and advocacy initiatives. A leading voice on diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging, she has addressed over a million students across universities and academic institutions in India. Kalki played a significant role in the advocacy that led to the landmark 2014 Supreme Court of India judgment recognising the civil rights of transgender persons. Her work bridges activism, art, entrepreneurship, and literature, earning her wide national and international recognition. In 2015, Facebook named her among twelve inspiring women globally for community empowerment. In 2016, she was nominated as a L'Oréal Paris India Woman of Worth in the arts category, acknowledging her sustained contribution to social justice and cultural transformation.

Young Theatre Practitioners

INDIVIDUAL DELEGATES

Nine young theatre practitioners participated as individual delegates in the third edition of IFTS. They attended workshops and various sessions alongside student delegates from various delegating institutions. These practitioners were carefully selected and invited to the festival based on their active engagement in theatre-making and training. Coming from diverse regional and professional backgrounds, their participation enabled meaningful knowledge exchange between contemporary theatre practitioners and those from academic circles.



Carmen S Mathew

Carmen S Mathew is passionate about theatre and has extensive experience in this field. Her journey began in childhood, performing in mime, drama, monoacts, and skits. A highlight was winning first place in mime at the national youth festival in Punjab, which motivated her to further explore this art. She worked on five productions at Sree Sankaracharya University of Sanskrit Kalady, honing her skills and deepening her appreciation for performance. Under Chandradasan Sir's guidance at Lokadharmi Vypin, she has learned about the Stanislavski system and Indian theatre traditions. Carmen also trains students in mime and drama, conducting workshops for children to help them express their creativity and build confidence.



Sreelesh Lal

Sreelesh Lal is a versatile 32-year-old actor with extensive experience in drama and performance. His acting journey began in 2001, participating in Vacation Bible School (VBS) plays, school-level competitions, and various theatrical productions. He has trained under esteemed mentors such as Jayapalrakash Kuloor and Dr. Chandradasan, refining his craft through workshops and performances. In addition to acting, Sreelesh is a skilled performer with talents in Kung Fu (Brown Belt), singing, dancing, and playing the bongos.



Vishnu Radhakrishnan

Vishnu Radhakrishnan is a dedicated theatre student currently pursuing his studies with Janabheri Theatre of Performance Studies in Shornur. He has acted in several plays, including Thaaram, Mad House, and Dreams, both within and outside Kerala. In addition to acting, he worked as the stage in-charge for the play Order Fuhrer, directed by renowned Ukrainian theatre director Ovlyakuli Khodjakuli. Passionate about theatre, Vishnu is eager to explore and expand his knowledge and experience in the field.



Rohith G

Rohith G is a dedicated theatre actor and film performer with a deep passion for the craft. Through extensive training and experience, he has explored various facets of acting, continuously honing his skills. He has attended workshops in theatre acting and clowning with Rasa Theatre Collective and Ajithlal Sivalal, further enriching his artistic journey. Rohith has also been involved in the Kochi-Muziris Biennale acting workshops and participated in the playreading Kathabheejam with Rasa Theatre. Believing that acting provides the freedom to grow and explore oneself every day, he remains committed to seeking new challenges and opportunities in both theatre and film.



Sreedeep PS

Sreedeep P.S. has been actively involved in theatre for the past 10 years, beginning his journey in 2014 with Lokadharmi, Kochi, under the guidance of Dr. Chandradasan. Over the years, he has trained with Dr. Chandradasan and other eminent theatre practitioners, gaining experience as a performer, director, and facilitator. He has performed in notable productions such as Karnabharam, Vishwa Vikyathamaya Mooku, and Shakuntalam, all directed by Dr. Chandradasan. Additionally, he has been part of devised theatre performances for the Mental Health Literacy Project India (MEHELP) in collaboration with Lokadharmi. As a theatre facilitator, Sreedeep has conducted numerous workshops, including corporate leadership programs for Tata Advanced Systems Limited, student workshops at Tattwa Centre for Learning, Kochi, and BVHSS, Nayarambalam, as well as Sunday Theatre Workshops at Lokadharmi, Kochi. His directorial works include Spotlight, a dance theatre performance inspired by Robert Frost's The Road Not Taken, choreographed by Theertha E.V. and premiered on December 28, 2023, at the Kerala Arts and Crafts Village, Kovalam.



Balasubrahmanian

Balasubramanian is a dedicated theatre practitioner with a background in both acting and stage management. He holds a Bachelor's degree in Literature of Arts and has been actively involved in theatre for the past six years. Throughout his career, he has worked on various community theatre productions, short films, and live performances, both on and off the stage. For the past five years, he has been practicing theatre with Lokadharmi and has been an integral part of its productions. Additionally, he has been involved in training children in acting under the guidance of Mr. Chandradasan as part of the 'Mazhavillu' children's theatre program.



Najeeb

Najeeb is a passionate theatre artist and trainer with seven years of experience in the field. He has had the privilege of working with renowned theatre groups such as Auroville Theatre Group, Ponditaa, Kaaka, and Lokadharmi. Currently, he is honing his craft under the guidance of Dr. Chandradasan, the director of Lokadharmi Theatre Group. Najeeb has been an integral part of major productions, including Brooklyn Quarter, Barabbas, Vaali Padukolai, and Maayachithram Chayathithram, among others. His expertise extends beyond performance, as he has facilitated workshops at esteemed institutions such as Kashmir University and Tata Advanced Systems. In addition to his work in theatre, Najeeb has directed plays and contributed to the film industry as an associate casting director and actor trainer, showcasing his deep dedication to the art of performance and storytelling.



Dr. Jacob Joju

Dr. Jacob Joju, an accomplished academician with a PhD and Postdoctoral Fellowship, has held prestigious positions in research and teaching at renowned institutions like Cochin University of Science & Technology and St. Berchmans College. With expertise spanning marketing, IT, and fintech, he has contributed significantly to academia through numerous research publications, and paper presentations, . His career, however, took a transformative turn as he pursued his deep-rooted passion for acting and Theatre, making an impactful debut in Thuramukham (Charatcter Peepli-Antagonist) and later securing roles in Oru Perum Kaliyattam and Anali. Leaving behind a thriving academic career, he stepped into the world of Acting, believing in passion beyond all circumstances.



Rajesh Komath

Dr. Rajesh Komath is an Associate Professor at the School of Social Sciences, Mahatma Gandhi University, Kerala, India. Trained as a social theorist, his research spans interdisciplinary areas, focusing on knowledge domains of history, and social anthropology. As an active performer of Theyyam, the ritual folk-dance drama unique to northern Kerala, Dr. Komath has been immersed in theatre since childhood. He draws upon his own experience as folk dancer, the lived realities of others, examine and articulate the social world around him. His PhD thesis, titled "Political Economy of 'the Theyyam': A Study of Time-Space Homology", combines ethnography and autoethnography to examine the interplay between economic realities and social identity. His areas of interests are: Development Studies, Histories of Subaltern Classes, Folkloristics, Sociology of Religion and Postcolonialism.

PROGRAMMES

The programmes of IFTS 2025 formed the vibrant core of the festival, making it intellectually rigorous, artistically dynamic, and culturally diverse. From the inaugural day to the closing ceremony, the festival unfolded as a continuous flow of performances, discussions, workshops, and scholarly engagements that brought together students, teachers, practitioners, researchers, and cultural activists from across regions and disciplines. The variety of programmes ensured a balance between theory and practice, tradition and contemporary inquiry, classroom learning and lived experience. Through dialogue, debate, performance, and participation, the programmes transformed the campus into an active space of learning, exchange, and celebration, giving the festival its distinctive colour, depth, and pedagogic significance. The major programmes conducted during IFTS 2025 are outlined below.

>> Parliament of Ideas
>> Panel Discussions
>> Teachers Meet
>> Students Meet
>> Cultural Tour
>> Workshops
>> Student Productions
>> Cultural Exhibition
>> Paper Presentations
>> IFTS Fellowships

PARLIAMENT OF IDEAS

The Parliament of Ideas was organised as a focused forum for dialogue and deliberation during the third edition of the International Festival of Theatre Schools, 2025. It created a space for critical engagement with questions at the intersection of theatre, ethics, ecology, and sustainable ways of thinking.Framed by the festival theme Carnival of Pedagogy: Theatre and Ethics, the Parliament examined pedagogy as an ethically grounded practice. The sessions reflected on theatre as a pedagogical process through which ethical questions were explored, experienced, and articulated.

The Parliament featured contributions from Sasidharan Thirunalan, Ruwanthie De Chikera, and P. N. Vijayakumar, Retired District Judge, Thrissur. Their participation brought perspectives from theatre, pedagogy, ethics, and law into meaningful conversation. The Parliament of Ideas formed a significant intellectual component of IFTS 2025. It reinforced the role of theatre pedagogy as a space for ethical reflection and critical inquiry, aligning closely with the vision and objectives of the festival.

Parliament of Ideas I

Looking Back, Re-Membering the Past & Imagining the New in Theatre

04 February 2025 | 12.15 pm – 1.15 pm

Venue: Prof. Ramanujam Theatre

The first session of the Parliament of Ideas at the International Festival of Theatre Schools 2025 featured a presentation by Sasidharan Thirunalan titled "Looking Back, Re-Membering the Past & Imagining the New in Theatre." Opening the Parliament of Ideas, the presentation reflected on the ethical, historical, and imaginative responsibilities of the contemporary theatre artist. Drawing upon theatre history, intercultural practice, and pedagogical experience, it emphasized the importance of engaging with tradition and embodied knowledge as a means of responding to present realities and imagining new possibilities for theatre.



T. SASITHARAN

Singaporean theatre
director, actor, educator, and cultural advocate

Sasidharan Thirunalan is a theatre practitioner, pedagogue, and cultural thinker with long-standing engagement in intercultural theatre practice and actor training. He is the founding Director of the Intercultural Theatre Institute (ITI), Singapore, where he has played a pivotal role in shaping a rigorous, practice-based pedagogy grounded in classical theatre traditions and contemporary performance methods. His work focuses on imagination, embodiment, ethics, and the historical consciousness of the actor, and he has taught, lectured, and collaborated extensively with artists and institutions across Asia, Europe, and beyond.

Looking Back, Re-membering the Past & Imagining the New in Theatre

T. Sasitharan

If we are being honest, we'll admit there is nothing new under passing the sun.

A truth universally acknowledged about art it is that originality, genuine novelty, creativity, "newness", if not impossible is extremely difficult to achieve. This is in fact a truism.

The grandest of visions, the boldest of ideas, the most radical points-of-view, have all been tried and tested and done before. In the Anthropocene, when we know so much more than has ever been known, and when the smart phones in our pockets and handbags give us access at our fingertips to all that is known, all that we have ever known.

Think about for a moment, the average hand phone of today is more powerful than the computers on board the Saturn V Rocket that took us to the moon. What is there left for art to do? What are the obligations of the artist?

What is the responsibility of the artist, in the age of Quantum Computers, Artificial Intelligence, and Climate Catastrophe? The planet is on the brink of environmental collapse, Gen Z kids don't want to have kids of their own and it's only a matter of time before the next global, zoonotic pandemic is upon us.

Not to put too fine a point on it, this is Gravity's Rainbow lighting up the Nine Circles of Hell in the midst of humankind's gravest Trial.

We live in times which are Dantesque and Kafkaesque - beyond the ken of common mortals and absurd to the extreme – at same time.

My modest proposal is that one responsibility of the artist today is to look back to the history of art practice, to recover tradition, the tried and tested means of making and building art and reclaim it for the present.

Now is the time, for artists to be both real and responsible; to be present and to be a beacon for the good. To look back, to "root deep" is not only a matter history, practice or pedagogy. As important as they are, there is also a matter of morality, ethics and agency.

The key is Imagination. And we will return to imagination later. Let us first linger a while on in this momentous present.

With apologies to Charles Dickens, "It [is] the best of times, it [is] the worst of times, it [is] the age of wisdom, it [is] the age of foolishness, it [is] the epoch of belief, it [is] the epoch of incredulity, it [is] the season of light, it [is] the season of darkness, it [is] the spring of hope, it [is] the winter of despair."

This is a time of a peculiar, collective vulnerability.

"With the telegraph […] man began a process of putting his nerves outside his body. Previous technologies had been extensions of physical organs: the wheel is a putting-outside-ourselves of the feet; the city wall is a collective outering of the skin. But electronic media are, instead, extensions of the central nervous system, an inclusive and simultaneous field. Since the telegraph we have extended the brains and nerves of man around the globe. As a result, the electronic age endures a total uneasiness, as of a man wearing his skull inside and his brain outside. We have become peculiarly vulnerable."

Source: Marshall McLuhan, The Agenbite of Outwit

Note: Agenbite of Outwit comes from the old English phrase, "agenbite of inwit" which means "remorse of conscience." The telegraph was introduced for general use in the United States in 1844.

Let us pause a moment to consider carefully meanings the of notions like "culture", and "personal and cultural identity".

"In a world with too many voices speaking all at once, a world where syncretism and parodic invention are becoming the rule, not the exception, an urban, multinational world of institutional transience where American clothes made in Korea are worn by young people in Russia, where everyone's "roots" are in some degree cut in such a world it becomes increasingly difficult to attach human identity and meaning to a coherent "culture" or "language".

Source: James Clifford, The Predicament of Culture

The meaning of "culture" being applied here is that of Clifford Geetz: Culture historically transmitted patterns of meaning; symbols and systems of

inherited beliefs and values by which we keep, speak and develop our lives and our worlds. In a word, we are animals suspended in webs of meaning, the collection of strands that constitute those webs is culture. Extrapolating from Geetz, Culture may be thought of as a function of our imagination, as fiction. Important and necessary but fiction, nonetheless.

Culture as Fiction

It is almost impossible to agree on a single definition of Culture. By and large, three large notional clusters of Culture are discernable: It is the Matrix of shared Tradition, Heritage, Customs, Cuisines, Practices, Rituals, Manners and Etiquette that a person Identifies with.

It is the Stuff Beneath our Skins that makes us who we are. It is also a Shared System of Signs and Symbols (Semiotics) we carry in us, which we use to Read, Unpack and Decode the world around us and Construct our Reality.

Finally, it is the Highest Expression of our Imagination: Culture = Art; Aesthetic Form that which is capable of being Meaningful or has Value for its own sake and not for its worth in terms of something else. The best that has been said and thought. Sweetness and Light.

Whatever you may take Culture to be, it is Fiction. It may be Necessary Fiction, Serious Fiction, even True Fiction. It is Fiction. And this is the best thing about Culture. Culture is all-pervasive and ever present from the cradle to the grave, so much so that we often are unaware of it; its presence and its power

to shape and define our world, our lived realities and experiences. As Franz

Fanon reminds us in Black Skin, White Masks, to merely speak "[…] means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilisation."

And thus, we must acknowledge the truth of Pubilus Terentius Afer (c. 195/185 – c. 159 bce) or Terrence, erstwhile slave of the Roman Empire and the much loved, freeman playwright of comedies and satires on his former masters.

"Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto." I am a human being; I consider nothing human alien to me.

Source: Pubilus Terentius Afer, Heautontimorumenos (The Tormentor of Himself) c. 169 bce.

Interculturality

Cultural policy is usually determined by the agendas and priorities emerging from the politics of nationalism or nation-building and the dictates of the market economy – the consumption, monetization and commodification of culture. The objective, always, is optimization of the production of cultural capital.

ITI's cultural DNA – its institutional and pedagogical nature – runs counter to prevailing cultural policy in that it is constantly written and over-written by the demands of contemporary theatre training, the needs of our students, the collaborations we have going with artist-teachers and the ultimate aim of enabling the cultivation of exceptional artistic talent for the stage. It is squarely determined by the needs of the art and not by state politics or the market economy.

Life is at the front and centre of ITI's vision. There can be no art if there is no life. Life is primary and art serves life. This means that theatre must always reflect, engage and most importantly emerge from the life around it. It

must not be this "airy thing", disconnected, isolated, abstracted in a space and time, outside the real, the quotidian and the material.

Theatre is the most collaborative of art forms. It is impossible for just the single person, the individual to do theatre. At its most fundamental, at its barest, theatre is the interaction and engagement of one person, the actor, in a space with another person, the audience. If this basic relationship is absent, there can be no theatre.

Given the constitution and composition of the world today, given the here and now, and the Historical moment we find ourselves in (and not just in Singapore), it is impossible for any kind of theatre work to be anything other than intercultural. All theatre is in some way shape or form, to some degree and extent, intercultural.

Interculturality is a brute fact of our globalized, mediatized, intertwined, interdependent lives, and nothing has demonstrated this fact more dramatically that the COVID19 pandemic. Interculturality normalizes and organizes our theatrical consciousness and identity.

Therefore, the question is not why an understanding of the intercultural is essential to actor and theatre training, but how can we conceive of teaching

theatre and acting or theatre unless it explicitly includes and embraces understanding of the intercultural.

Aspects of Interculturality

The terms "intercultural" and "interculturalism" have been associated with theatre and performance for at least five decades old, and have long since entered common parlance among practitioners, critics, and audiences alike. Performance theorist Richard Schechner used it as a contrast to the "international," organization and formations of global culture. "Intercultural" merely referred to work by and meetings of artists identifying with different geographies and cultures.

In subsequent nuancing of the concept, interculturalism came to refer to a creative way of working with (or working out) difference. It came to refer primarily to processes of working, of praxis principally and not the product. Over the 1980s and early 1990s, there was much debate about the ethics of these processes, implicating issues of cultural ownership, cultural rights, cultural appropriation and, crucially, artistic agency. Often "working with or working out difference" becomes a matter of politics, the play of brute power differentials. Manifested as a neo-colonial exercise; the ore of "third world"

cultural products and praxis, strip-mined, exported and used as raw material for manufacture of "first world" cultural capital. No one has brought this issue into sharper focus than Rustom Bharucha.

Implicit in "interculturalism" is the tension between identifying difference on the one hand and seeking commonality on the other. Difference

must be acknowledged in order to name the Other as a "culture," but some transcendence of that difference must be found to allow for "inter"-action. This identifying of difference while seeking commonality has led to a tendency for

broad-stroke depictions of culture, such as East and West, North and South, traditional and contemporary. It has also encouraged attention, on the one hand, to a group process in terms of "us" meets "them," and, on the other, to the visions of individuals, especially theatre directors, in creating a product out of that meeting. "Intercultural performance" is usually portrayed as something that happens among artists, and as something onstage that is shaped by directors and actors. Consider for instance the work of Brook, Mnouchkine, Baba, Wilson and Ong Keng Sen – what's being referred to now as "hegemonic interculturalism".

Source: Intercultural Expectations I La Galigo in Singapore Jennifer Lindsay; TDR: The Drama Review 51:2 (T194) Summer 2007. ©2007

Interculturalism vs Multiculturalism

"I would argue that we need the term "interculturalism" because it is politically

necessary for us as artists, as citizens, to find ways of countering the dominance of official state determined "multiculturalism". We know that even as "multiculturalism" is being discredited these days by conservative politicians in favour of "integration" it has played a huge role in mobilizing the lives and cultural futures of immigrants in countries like Canada, Britain, Australia, and, marginally, the US. Germany has never been entirely a part of this struggle to articulate a cultural policy for immigrants."

"Precisely because the State is the primary agent of multicultural policies, we need to strengthen "interculturalism" in the domain of civil society. I see "interculturalism" being propelled by individuals, groups, clubs, societies, subcultures, sometimes at very marginal levels. It is not something that is entirely controlled

by the power of the State and by official policies. And yet I am compelled to add that we cannot afford to be euphoric about these assumptions of autonomy. As I have often argued, the theatre of "interculturalism" invariably begins with

the trauma of having to attain a visa."

"The first performance is with your visa officer, then the immigration officer. So before you can cross the border – if you want the intercultural encounter to be

tangible, face to face and not virtual. But you can't avoid the State. The State will mediate in one way or the other."

Source: Rustom Bharucha; in Erika Fischer Lichte and Rustom Bharucha, August 6, 2011.

ITI's Interculturality

The 'interculturality' of ITI is not grounded in the variety or diversity of techniques taught. It is grounded in developing a capacity of Imagination. A capacity for accepting, negotiating and containing all their contradictory aspects of the programme, from not trying to smooth them out or make them consensual. This attitude towards the contradictions inherent in the training emerges both from the daily studio practice and

from the space for reflection,

in the Humanities module classes and from working through and working out the differences in the PML (Post Modular Lab) module.

Interculturality is brought into the centre of the students' consciousness. It is a cynosure of enquiry from the first day of school. This inspires the way students receive the work of different teachers and their techniques and modalities of action and representation.

ITI students receive the teachings as a gift. The idea of 'gift' is at the heart of the intercultural exchanges that happen ITI. Intercultural exchange happens at its purest when the two parties decide to make a gift of their art. The

person who offers doesn't expect anything else, only that the receiver receives the gift. This is the only way that intercultural exchange can preserves artistic integrity. That's the way we work with all the teachers. They don't come to teach a formula but to offer a gift. They don't come for the money, because we just don't pay them enough.

Source: Sasitharan Thirunalan, personal communication, 24 January 2012, in Giorgia Ciampi Tsolaki (2016) Actor training at the Intercultural Theatre Institute of Singapore, Theatre, Dance and Performance Training, 7:3, 340-361, DOI: 10.1080/19443927.2016.1217267.

Theatre, more than any other art form, is linked with the living forms of life, with lived experience. It feeds off life, and life feeds theatre. Like the great river systems of the world, which channel mountain waters down to the ground, transforming the land and sustaining life, theatre carries the seeds of ideas, ideals, values, customs and sapience of societies and scatters these on the life-soil that is people. The reception of theatre by the people, the various publics, loops life back into the art. It is a virtuous circle.

An ebb and flow as old as the seas. If the cycle is broken, then both life and theatre suffer and will start to wither. Both are diminished and reduced.

A fundamental premise of ITI is that any serious attempt at training contemporary actors in Singapore should draw from the historical resources of the various heritages and flows of cultures that is Singapore. The aim is to research all Singaporean cultures and heritages, to experiment with styles and themes that are coherent with a multiracial and multicultural, intercultural

society, and to allow for the natural growth of theatre that reflects a contemporary, transcultural, globalized society.

ITI is a highly specialized and selective program intended for small groups of serious, highly motivated professional actors interested in expanding their skills and expertise. At the heart of ITI is an article of faith. It is the belief that the established and inherited systems of performance-making which continue to serve as standards of excellence in world theatre, like Noh, Xiqu (Beijing or Kun Opera), Kutiyattam (or Bharatha Natyam) and Wayangwong, are relevant and invaluable resources in the training and the making of the contemporary actor.

The underlying belief that informs and animates ITI is that the programmatic disciplines and the intricate aesthetics of these "classical" traditional forms can still speak to actors today.

ITI immerses the actor-student in these four traditional theatre forms even as they are trained in a range of contemporary acting methods. It is so to

cultivate, engender and (sometimes) provoke, fire the awakening of a "historical sense"; T. S. Eliot's idea that the artist must possess a sense of the deep timelessness

that permeates all the mutable realities in history.

"Yet if the only form of tradition, of handing down, consisted in following the ways of the immediate generation before us in a blind or timid adherence to its successes, "tradition" should positively be discouraged. […] Tradition is a matter of much wider significance. It cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour. It involves, in the first place, the historical sense [my emphasis], which we may call nearly indispensable to anyone who would

continue to be [an artist] beyond his twenty-fifth year; and the historical sense [my emphasis] involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; […] This historical sense [my emphasis], which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes [an artist] traditional. And it is at the same time what makes [an artist] most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his contemporaneity."

Source: T. S. Eliot, Tradition and the Individual Talent.

The "historical sense" this sense of "timelessness within temporality", is an act of the imagination - of the possibility of eternity palpable in the present. It is a sense that is instantly apprehensible in all great works of art - poetry, painting, sculpture, music or theatre. The premise of the ITI curriculum is that training in contemporary theatre is no different. To produce great works of contemporary theatre, the actor too must be imbued with the "historical sense".

The student trains daily and learns, obtains by great labor, through multiple, sometimes conflicting techniques, concurrently. It is a practical,

immersive, experiential and intensive core studio work in traditional theatre juxtaposed with training in contemporary acting canons, coupled with disciplined, rigorous, systematic training in pure craft and technical skills: Voice and Speech, Movement, Mask Work, Corporeal Mime and para-theatrical body disciplines like Taiji, Yoga and kalarippayattu.

Translation, Retranslation, Hybridization

Cultivating the "historical sense" requires that we engage in multiple learning processes involving, first, a practical, immersive and intensive daily training. Training in the contemporary canons of acting and in four forms of theatre practice with established histories of exercise, teaching, presentation and representation; a significant and recognized repertoire of performances, vivid and dramatic characterizations and a well-formed, stable dramaturgy and aesthetics.

To what end though? To capture the world sub specie aeternitatis. The work of art is the objectification of human desire to capture the world; all that the world is in an instant and all that it is in all time. This is the heart of the impossibility of art. The difficulty has to do with the nature of art, what it must be. It must at once be transcendental and historical. Necessary and contingent.

Ihab Hassan cites an event, The Foreigner's Home, held at the Louvre in 2007, at which the American poet Toni Morrison uses the 1819 painting by Theodore Géricault, The Raft of The Medusa to make her point about humanity adrift, of displacement, the diasporas, the refugee and exile.

Hassan asks: "What kind of art can emerge from this wreck, what kind of criticism or aesthetic theory? Morrison's answer is: look to the individual human body, a choreography of blood and bones. In a sea of distress, she says, "[y]ou have the body in motion and you have the obligation of seeing the body as the real and final home." You have the obligation of seeing the body as the real and final home. The obligation



The Raft of The Medusa, by Theodore Géricault 1819.

of seeing, of truly seeing ... Remember this obligation.

The training in ITI is grounded in the performative, that is situated in both the doing and the being, it is thoroughly experiential and existential, that is both being in and bounded by a specific, definable space-and-time matrix.

In other words, there is a radical corporeality (in the Kantian sense) that all ITI training processes emphasises; recall Morrison's: "the body as the real and final home."

A significant other pedagogical consideration involves containing, shaping and directing the outcomes of the training and teaching of the "master teachers" of these Theatre Traditions that they are compatible and consistent

with the over-arching aims of the ITI as a whole; which have to do with the actor's sense and understanding of the "contemporaneity"; hic et nunc.

The here and the now of acting, theatre and performance as these categories are manifested in the diverse communities, locales and situations where the students come from — in most instances these are "emergent theatres" within Southeast Asia and Asia.

How do we contain, shape and direct the outcomes of the training and teaching of the master teachers? A raft of proposals was made over six months

in 2005 to realign the training, teaching objectives and outcomes, it drew

together the various strands of the work in ITI so that the amorphous, hydra-like energies released in the collision of the contemporary acting-student and the master teacher could be directed, channeled, determined and ultimately harnessed.

It was decided to shift the pedagogical initiative that drives ITI back into the hands of the students themselves, rather than relinquishing it to the "master teachers", and to reflect this shift in proper and specific briefs, debriefs, interventions and disruptions of the entire teaching faculty. It entailed a deep and radical overhaul; revised assessment processes and criteria for all Open Classes, Showings, Presentations and Public Performances.

To borrow the coinage of the philosopher Richard Roty we were attempting to create a technology [that] "helped break down the traditional distinction between the "high" wisdom of the priests and theorists and the "low"

cleverness of the artisan ... ." The artisan in question, in this instance, is the student.

The Post-modular Labs, the Individual Projects and the work of the Final Year Theatremaking Project, all of which are initiated and driven by the student

and not teachers, offer possibilities for recombining the "classical" with the contemporary, the past with the present and of transcending differences in

culture, form, language and technique. It offers, in short, the possibility of making art.

Each of the four theatre traditions being taught brings with it a paradigm of expression and representation that is anchored in the body of the actor in a precise and specific manner. These paradigms, seen in the contexts of the complex worlds they are situated in and their intricate aesthetics, are still relevant and speak volumes, by way of rigour and precision, system and discipline, commingling of rationality and emotion, technique and commitment and humility and grace, to actors working today.

The critical thing, though, is finding a key; a way to unlock and unpack these monolithic forms so that actors may plumb, select and draw on elements — perhaps gesture, voice, movement, rhythm, breath control, presentational modes and line — which may be recombined and situated within the specific demands of their own communities, locales and situations.

After 25 years of work in ITI and 15 culturally and linguistically diverse cohorts of international students, we glimpse what the key looks like and how we may use it. How we might unlock those monolithic systems of theatre knowledge which contain within them the hidden techniques of stage action and representation, of self-awareness and the availability and of owned voice and speech so that the actor be not too tame, "but let [his/her] own discretion be [their] tutor: suit the action to the word, the word to the action; with this special observance, that [they] o'erstep not the modesty of nature; …"

The key neither resides in a singular person or a single teacher or director, nor within some acting manual or a set of instructions, some precept, dictate, or formula.

It is something of a nous; a way being and seeing, something of a sensibility; perhaps a cast of mind, an aspect of spirit, a means of thinking and feeling. In short, the key is probably a personality; the artistic personality embeded in some specific, definable cultural context. It is Imagination.

We are many, many things and many things are within us. The matter however, is more complex and complicated than even that. For it is not merely the individuated imagination of the actor that is so interpellated with the historical; the collective that we refer to as "culture" is so too.

Theorising the Experiential

Consider Kutiyattam, the millennia-old, Sankrit theatre form, oldest living theatre in the world, that by some miracle continues to survive in the South Indian state of Kerala. Thanks to the tireless and dedicated efforts of a

handful artists-gurus like Veun G of Natakailrali in Irinjalakuda and teachers in the remarkable Kerela Kalamandalam in Thrissur.

Kutiyattam training usually takes years; therefore a three-month module like the one in ITI can never offer a transference of skills. Instead it makes a student aware of shifting substances in her own body. In the strict economy of the form, breath instigates emotion, which is then inscribed on the topography of the face; precisely delineated mudras form a physical language for the hands. Through the twitch of muscle and dilation of eyes, the face records the experience of being part of a universe of flowers, trees, animals and humans that are unitedly affected by atmosphere and event.

In a performance of Kalidasa's early Sanskrit drama, Sakuntala, when she finds that

her husband has forgotten her-- at this precise moment of rejection-- flowers wilt and the deer stands stock still. A densely populated world rematerializes via acute observation, in the eyes and on the face. Experientially the student learns to register an entire world on the face: equally, she also learns.

that her particular physiognomy defines the landscape she manifests. The nose and the eyes, the muscle and bone of the performer determine the height, weight and scale of mountains – the rapidity of the flow of a river, the flight of a swarm of bees. The intricate connection between habitat and body refigures the way interiors and exteriors are conceptualized in performance vocabularies today.

"Just as a tangent touches a circle lightly and at but one point-establishing, with this touch rather than with the point, the law according to which it is to continue on its straight path to infinity-a translation touches the original lightly and only at the infinitely small point of the sense, thereupon pursuing its own course according to the laws of fidelity in the freedom of linguistic flux."

Source: Walter Benjamin, The Task of The Translator

ITI students embark on a journey among traditional forms of theatre; historical forms, "in-formed" theatre practices with defined provenance(s). Their journey is not teleological, in that the end is not predetermined by design. There is nothing like an already composed or built up conclusion to be found. In that case, the meaning of destination, in terms of training, and in terms of practice, needs to be spun around and reorientated. There is no escalation of skills but contradictions, resistances, tractions, confusion and chaos. Cognitive dissonance mixed in with sheer will impels the student to cover the distance among the forms; in and through her own body and in her own exceptional way.

There is no model journey nor is there a predestined endpoint. The binaries between knowledge and ignorance, emptiness and fullness, lack and plenitude, may not, in such an imagination, describe the relation of teacher and student or guru and shishya or master and disciple. Perhaps their relationship can be better imagined as something more cooperative in that the journey may not be a means to an end. Training and transmission then may be envisaged as being about "wayfaring" as Tim Ingold would have it, an urging out of disciplinary boundaries, into an expanded field, where they affect, (defined as bearing upon, or having a bearing on) life; and effect, (understood as having consequences on) life choices.

In this journey kindling the fires of Imagination, in this quest for making art, beginnings can never know their endings. There is no possibility of pragmatism, no possibility of a means to an end.

The transmissions of knowledge, the technologies of tradition, or historicised "in-formed" practices of performance are inscribed, re-written on the student's cultural body, enabling a new praxis of embodied learning(s).

There is synthesis, analysis and dialectics at work (not necessarily in that order) which re-inscribes an in-formed practice onto an alien body. The result is a new translation of performance vocabularies, at the disposal of the learner/student.

These are the uncharted waters of artistic practice, seas of uncertainty with no navigable maps and no sight of the shore ahead. All that abides is the fire of the imagination and the will of artist's heart fueled by the embodied

knowledge of what has been tried and tested over the ages, what has already gone before.

CODA

It takes a supreme moral imagination and an unshakable faith in the goodness of fellow human beings to transform of the experience of imprisonment, often in solitary confinement, without trial and without due process, as a time of solitude, succour and consolation.

This is the transformative fire of the imagination that underpins art. Kuo Pao Kun was imprisoned without trial under the Internal Security Act in 1976 and would spend four years and 7 months of his incarcerated for being artist.

One year after imprisonment, Pao Kun wrote this on a Lunar New Card for his wife Goh Lay Kuan:

"The world does not treat us unkindly or forget us in the midst of solitude .."

Kuo Pao Kun wrote this in Chinese on a Lunar New card he made while under detention for Goh Lay Kuan in 1977. It was translated to English by Teo Han Wue and Kwok Kian Woon in 2001. [The link is not working (4 Jan 2017). This is the full text:

"The world does not treat us unkindly or forget us
in the midst of solitude
even the maize teaches me generously each day: let the shoots rise up high
take in all the sunlight
and embrace the love of the wind and rain
let the roots reach down deep
suck in all the nutrients
and keep the body firm
only wishing that in the rich harvest transforming all that it has
into a few fruits and offers them to mankind"
— 1977 Lunar New Year
in mutual encouragement
by Kuo Pao Kun

Source: T. Sasitharan, "The world does not treat us unkindly or forget us in the midst of solitude ..."
10 April 2015.

Only in the forge of the artist's imagination, inside the womb of a transcendent, platonic soul, which has already forsaken judgement seeking retribution, that needless suffering brought on by injustice, extra-legal imprisonment, and pain inflicted in the name of an unjust law, pain brought on by brutal exercise of power, may be sublimated into the "love of the wind and rain … ."

Thank you.

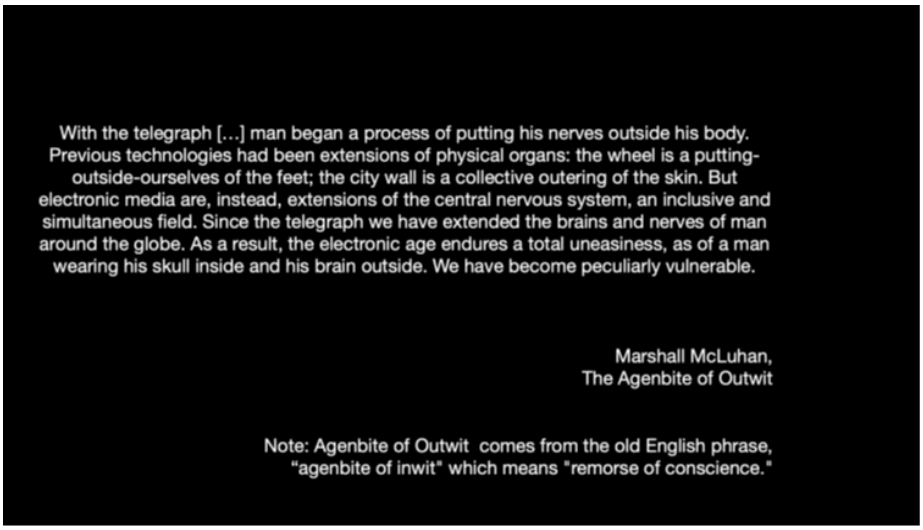
Acknowledgement

This lecture was partially presented in a seminars for faculty and post graduate student at the Department of Drama Exeter University, UK on 8 May 2024. Then summarised for a panel discussion at the ADPRex 2024 Conference (Panel 7: Performative Precarity) at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, Singapore, on 2 Aug 2024. I am grateful for the audience discussions and comments following both these events.

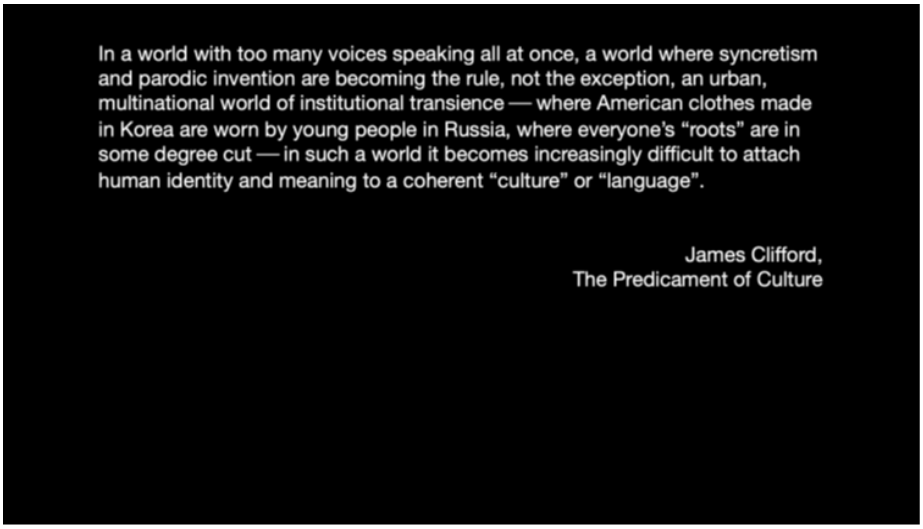
[END OF NOTES TO KEYNOTE LECTURE]

Slides & Media

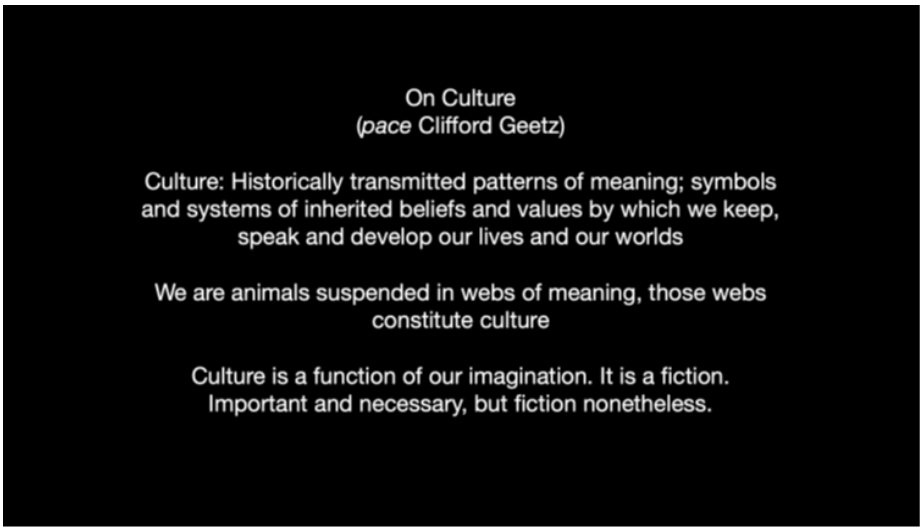
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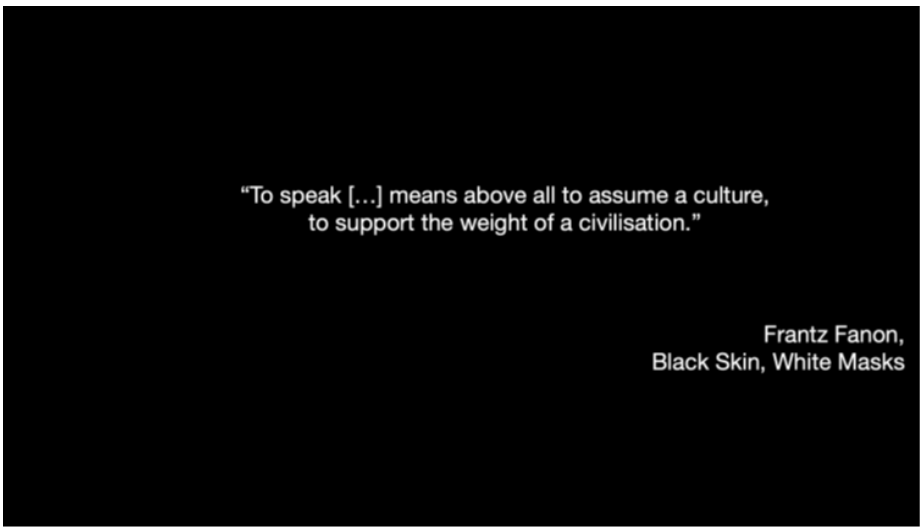
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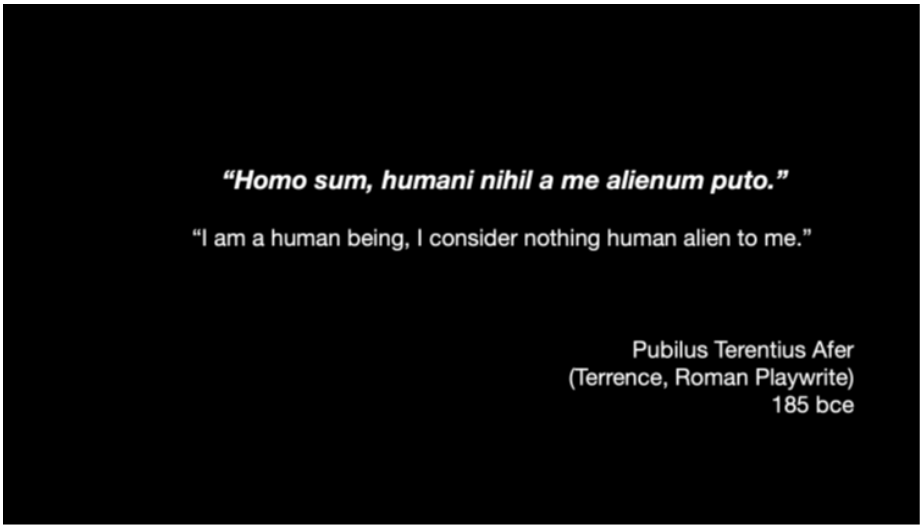
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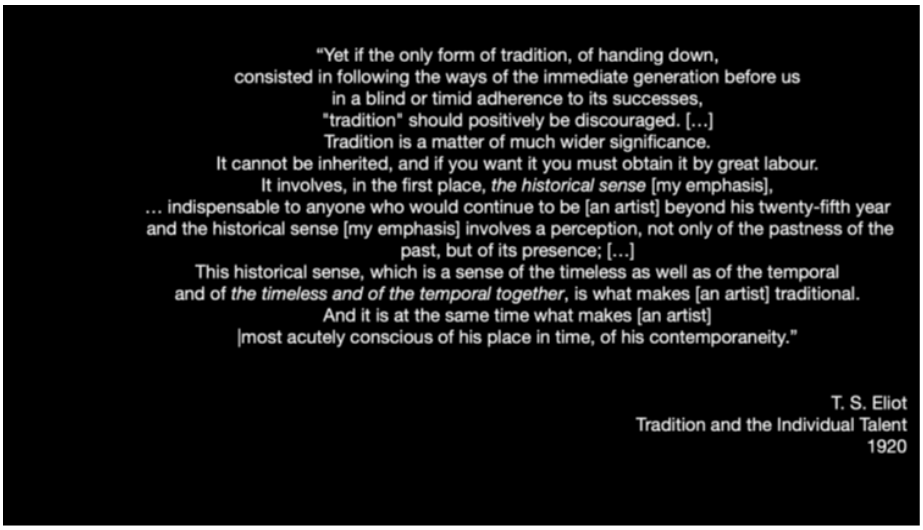
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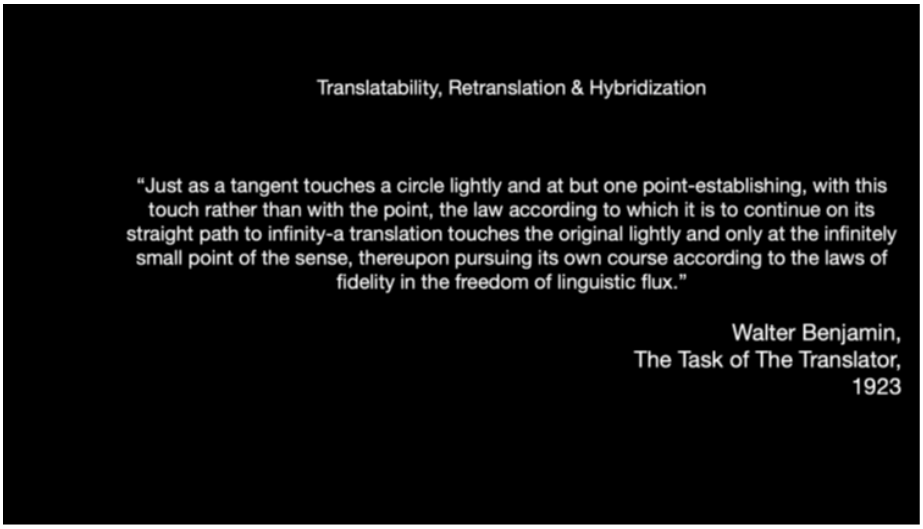
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Slide 8



SHOWREELS:
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Intercultural Theatre Institute: Dialogue of Forms; Traditional and Contemporary
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Parliament of Ideas II

Funding Your Path: Finding Your Path – Reflections on an Artist's Relationship with Money

06 February 2025 | 12.15 pm – 1.15 pm
Venue: Prof. S. Ramanujam Studio

The second day of the Parliament of Ideas at the International Festival of Theatre Schools 2025 featured a presentation titled "Funding Your Path: Finding Your Path – Reflections on an Artist's Relationship with Money" by Ruwanthie De Chickera.

The presentation examined the complex and often uneasy relationship between artistic practice and money. Drawing from personal experience and long-term engagement with theatre-making in South Asia, the session reflected on sustainability, precarity, ethics, and agency in an artist's professional life. It addressed questions of funding, survival, compromise, and autonomy, encouraging artists to critically reflect on how economic realities shape creative choices and artistic pathways.

The session contributed an important practical and reflective dimension to the Parliament of Ideas, foregrounding financial awareness as an essential part of artistic responsibility and self-determination.



Ruwanthie De Chickera
Srilankan Playwright, screenwriter, theatre director, actor trainer and cultural activist

Ruwanthie De Chickera is a Sri Lankan playwright, screenwriter, theatre director, actor trainer, and cultural activist. Her work spans theatre, film, and pedagogy, with a strong focus on social justice, gender, political memory, and independent artistic practice. She is widely recognised for her commitment to creating critically engaged theatre and for mentoring emerging artists in navigating both creative and structural challenges within contemporary performance landscapes.



Writeup of Presentation

Funding Your Path: Finding Your Path – Reflections on an Artist's Relationship with Money

Firstly, I want to thank Abhilash Pillai and IFTS for crafting this festival around the topic of Ethics and for encouraging me to speak about something artists rarely talk about – money. I appreciate the push and the opportunity to reflect on this nexus where the artist, the artistic journey, ethics and money intersect. How do these elements sit together and shift each other as we move through life following our artistic pursuits?

The artist and integrity

If we examine the place where the artist, their artistic journey, ethics and money intersect, we understand this to be where integrity rests. Integrity is a composite, but for the purposes of easing into this reflection, let's break it down into personal integrity, political integrity, artistic integrity and financial integrity.

Personal integrity is how we treat others, how we look after ourselves, how much we invest in our spiritual growth, and how we evolve as people even as we progress as artists. Political integrity encompasses the nature of our relationship with the outside world, current events and history; it is defined by what and who we are willing to stand up for, and stand up to.

Artistic integrity covers our continuing trajectories as artists: are we constantly pushing boundaries and taking risks? What of our artistic vision will we or will we not compromise on? Financial integrity is the relationship between us, our artwork and money. How do we attach value to what we do? How integrated are our financial decisions with our personal and artistic integrity?

The cultivation of integrity

Having a dynamic relationship with our integrity is vital for an artist. Integrity needs to be constantly cultivated, routinely evaluated and rigorously redefined, both

privately and publicly.

On the one hand, cultivating one's integrity is a deeply personal and private affair. It requires us to be aware of ourselves and to sit with ourselves. An artist's integrity forms the foundation for the strength of their vision, their capacity to respond to the world and their ability to keep responding from a place of strength and shifting truth.

This artistic integrity, cultivated privately, becomes our public ethic, because it forms the platforms from which we negotiate with the world. Over time, an artists' ethics become clear, and people understand what they will compromise on and what they will never compromise on.

So how does one start to consciously develop this relationship with one's integrity? I like to share with you experience I had which helped me greatly. I hope it helps you too.

Several years ago, I visited the Krishnamurti school in Bangalore and had a short conversation with the principal which has helped define my life as an artist. It is something I always pass on to my students and actors.

Walking around the school, I noticed that there was no usual 'policing' of children by prefects or staff; however that there was a high level of responsibility among the students. When I asked the principal about this, she said: "In standard schools, children are taught about the outside world – politics, geography, economics, literature, science. But here, the outside world is only half of what we teach. We place equal importance on making children aware of the universe within them. Teaching them to access this helps them connect with their own unique journey on this earth. What have they been put here to do?"

This very simple idea of understanding and then actively cultivating a balance between the world outside and the world within has become the spine of my artistic journey. It is in the shifting equilibrium between these two states that I situate my own moral compass and the justification for my artistic decisions.

Understanding the relationship between the outside world and the world within allows artists to grow continuously. It is the interplay between these two changing universes that generates new insights, discoveries and depths of learning. It is here that we understand what we are compelled to do.

Because of course, there are always many things that we can do – many things that are important, and some that are even urgent. But working out what we are compelled to do means accessing that place where the impetus of the outside world and the reality of the inner world meet. Here, the ethics of practice become a deeply personal negotiation. Only you know how strong the impulse is, why it exists, and what you are willing to risk in order to bring it into life through your art.

An imbalance in the outside and the inside

If you observe the many artists around you, you will be able to identify those who are either oblivious to, or struggling to maintain, this balance between the outside and the inside universes.

We all know artists who are obsessed with, driven by what is happening in the outside world. They constantly critique it, hold strong opinions, are actively engaged with it.

However, if they are disconnected to themselves, this leads to a lack of self-awareness and self-reflection. All their energy goes into fixing the outside world, while very little is invested inward. These artists though they might have a lot of energy, often either become exhausted, bitter and fed up; or their work begins to lack reflection, self-awareness, begins to ring untrue.

At the other extreme are artists who are interested only with that inner universe - what is happening inside themselves. Preoccupied solely or predominately with

their personal journeys, challenges and tragedies, these artists often disengage from the outside world. These artists are often deeply introspective but they run the risk becoming increasingly insular and irrelevant.

A lifelong artistic journey must hold both of these spheres in balance: an awareness of the outside world – politics, community, society – and an awareness of what is happening within oneself. Both universes require investment, nourishment and time. When this does not happen, the lifelong journey of an artist is compromised, relevance is lost, elasticity and vitality diminish, and the risk of redundancy or superficiality increases. Maintaining a connection with both the inner self and the outside world is therefore vital for the development of integrity within an artist.

My strongest advice to young artists is to develop a personal practice of listening both to the outside world and to the silence within. When something in the world troubles or interests us, intuition helps us understand what needs to be done. When something compelling emerges within, we need to be connected enough to the outside world to understand how best it can be timed, placed, presented in order that it might be given its best chance to thrive. Maintaining this equilibrium, this connection builds consistency, courage and intuition and grows the reserves and wisdom needed to face changing adversity.

The trappings of artistic integrity…

The thing about integrity is that it will always trap you, no matter what situation you are in. Challenges of integrity do not go away when you become famous or successful. Neither do they disappear if you suddenly lose everything. They are a constant, and they need to be constantly re-evaluated.

Ethics and Integrity challenges of a young artist

We have all been here. You are young, filled with impossible dreams and a desire to change the world, but you are unknown, underfunded and unseasoned. Life is a struggle: to make art, to find work, to survive, to establish a voice.

At this stage, you do not yet know the value of your work. You have not built an audience or a reputation. Your future is an open canvas.

The temptation, in order to survive and stay connected to the arts, is to take whatever work comes your way. Your path is shaped largely by external stimuli: and so you crew here, take a voice job there, do a television advertisement, teach kindergarten children, write copy for an advertising agency, help friends set up a production house, learn video editing. These are often heady years, full of learning, contacts and mechanisms and (if you are lucky) some level of income.

Because we are young, we have a lot of energy. Because we are young we are driven by passion. It becomes easy to get trapped in a cycle of chaotic work: running constantly, working long hours, feeling exhausted and believing that constant busy-ness equals value. This is a very natural and dangerous confusion – mistaking busy-ness for value or passion for creativity. This situation is compounded by the fact that as artists we possess a few skills that have unusual currency in the world (we often can sing, write, draw, tell stories) and these skills, because they are rare, can sometimes generate quick, easy money.

Now, if we are not careful, we adapt to a haphazard cycle of inconsistent work, where we work hard, passionately, chaotically, (and increasingly last minute), supplanting care with brilliance, thoughtfulness with passion and energy, and never really setting aside what we need to set aside that will feed our artistic vision.

One day, we wake up older, having developed a piecemeal skillset that is rapidly becoming redundant as younger artists or new technologies replace us.

What has damaged us most is not ageing itself, but the neglect of time, discernment and care required for a strong artistic vision, principles and a philosophy of life.

Ethics and Integrity challenges of an established artist

It is not only young artists who face ethical and integrity challenges.

Each field has its own trajectory of success. Young artists are driven by the desire to change the world; young businesspeople by the desire to accumulate wealth and status; young athletes by the desire to break records. As artists become established, as they become successful, it becomes difficult for us to remain connected to the original impulse that set us on our journey. Because success (the way society recognizes it and offers it) pulls artists away from our fundamental role – to challenge, to question, to take risks.

The contradictions start to emerge when artists begin to prioritise financial security over risk, to secure funding before venturing into art, to promise 'success' before the work has even begun. What we have to understand is that while risk, change and exploration remain fundamental to artistic practice, the natural human trajectory pushes us all towards stability, power, conformity and wealth.

Too often, artists who once broke boundaries settle into becoming establishment figures. They trade uncertainty for security, unpopularity for compromise.

While this is a natural response to ageing and responsibility, it must be entered into consciously, with an awareness of what is being lost alongside what is gained.

We must protect artists as they grow older. Wisdom comes with age, but so does complacency. As older artists are pushed into administrative roles and institutional positions, society loses access to the depth of insight that comes from their lived experience. Risk-taking is not only for the young; with age and mortality comes a particular freedom that can generate profound artistic insight, abandonment and courage.

Especially within the Global South, industries lack mechanisms to support artists as they mature. The absence of insurance, pensions, healthcare and childcare forces many artists to abandon their practice, or adopt a compromised practice, just as they reach their most fertile period.

As established artists receive increasing public support, the weight of reputation, ego and expectation makes risk-taking more difficult. Younger artists grow dependent on senior figures, and authority accumulates. Unless established artists actively work to undermine the comfort of respect and adoration, and remain devoted to craft rather than career and ideas rather than institutions, they risk undermining themselves.

I would like to end this reflection on Ethics by focusing on Financial Integrity.

Artists must push boundaries, take risks and redefine human experience. This is what distinguishes artists from entertainers. Entertainers give audiences more of what they already know and enjoy; artists redraw the playing field with every new work. If artists risk nothing, they risk becoming redundant. But risk-taking is something that does not sit easily with financial stability. So how do we navigate these challenges and choices?

Below are some points I have picked up along my life as an artist.

Guaranteeing success

Artists dependent on donor or corporate funding are often asked to guarantee outcomes in advance. Success and impact must be promised before the work has begun. This raises fundamental ethical questions. How can an artist know where a journey will end? What compromises are made to fit into this framework?

This is a complex dilemma. The money could be substantial, the compromise can appear minor. We can easily justify it by

pointing to reach and impact.

But guaranteeing stability and success is not the mandate of the artist. Art can fail spectacularly and still be art. We must therefore be deeply wary of funding that seeks to control outcomes and manufacture results.

Instrumentalisation

Interference in artistic vision often leads to instrumentalisation: money is given on the condition that the artist delivers a predetermined message or outcome. This erodes artistic agency and creates a slippery slope of compromise.

Once artists accept such conditions, they signal a willingness to become a vehicle for someone else's agenda. Even when the agenda appears aligned with one's values, it is crucial to maintain a clear boundary. Donors must understand that artistic vision is not negotiable.

Artistic Vision is not shared

Funders often stay within the limits of what is tested and safe, not out of malice but because they cannot see what the artist sees. The vision belongs to the artist alone.

By holding ground and keeping dialogue open, artists can invite funders into a journey of discovery rather than submission.

Negotiate from a place of dignity

Always negotiate from a place of dignity. This dignity is felt when you are genuinely prepared to walk away rather than compromise your artistic vision. Even if the funding does not materialise, you will be remembered as an artist with integrity, clarity and purpose.

Bad money damages integrity

The notion of "getting far enough ahead to do whatever I want" is a fallacy. The argument that all money is in circulation so that it does not matter where your funding is coming from, is a convenient lie. Every decision, creative or financial, shapes an artist's identity and journey. Every oportunity invested in or walked away from, shapes artistic integrity. And there IS something called blood money – it is not stagnant, but it exists.

About a year back our theatre company was faced with a challenge. We had all but secured support from a long-standing partner for a very important project when the 2023 genocide in Gaza started. The funding we had been promised was from a Govt from the West which was actively producing arms for the genocide. When we pulled out, we had no back up plan, we simply lost everything. However, we retained our freedom to keep critiquing the genocide of the Palestinian people, to stand in solidarity with our fellow artists in Palestine and to lend our efforts to massive people led movements from around the world. It remains one of the best decisions we took as a theatre company.

And finally…

As an artist, every choice – personal, artistic, political, financial - shapes, reflects, informs our personal artistic integrity and the ethics we are evaluated publicly by. Integrity is not something we arrive at once and for all, but something we keep negotiating — privately, publicly, and painfully — across time. If we listen carefully to both the world outside and the silence within, stay willing to risk failure and remain prepared to walk away rather than hollow out our work, then money can become a tool rather than a master. The work may be harder, slower, and far less secure, but it is the only way I know to stay alive, awake and honest in a lifelong artistic journey.

Ruwanthie de Chickera IFTS 2024

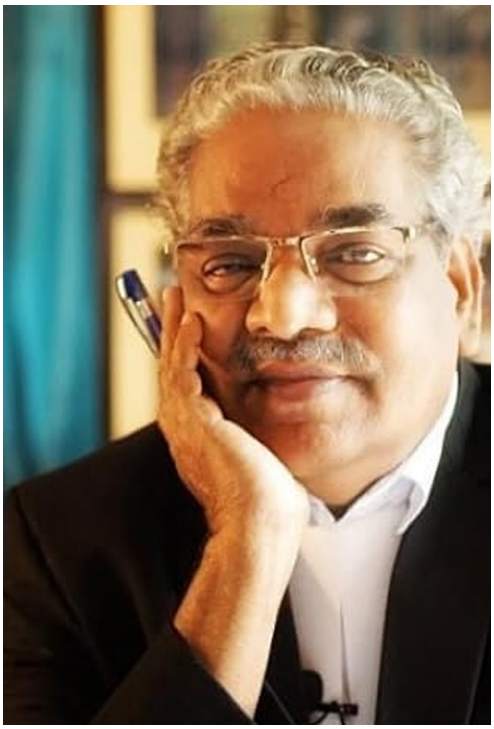
Parliament of Ideas III

Social Ehics and Law

07 February 2025 | 12.15 pm – 1.15 pm
Venue: Prof. S. Ramanujam Studio Theatre

The third day of the Parliament of Ideas at the International Festival of Theatre Schools 2025 featured a presentation by P. N. Vijayakumar titled "Social Ethics and Law."

In this session, P. N. Vijayakumar, Retired District Judge, Thrissur, reflected on the relationship between social justice, ethics, and the law within the Indian context. Drawing from his long experience in the judiciary, the presentation examined law not merely as a formal system of rules but as an instrument shaped by social values, cultural histories, and moral responsibility. The session invited participants to critically consider how legal frameworks intersect with lived realities, ethical consciousness, and collective responsibility, offering an important perspective for artists and educators engaged with questions of society, justice, and public life. As part of the Parliament of Ideas, the presentation expanded the discourse beyond theatre practice, situating artistic inquiry within broader social and ethical debates.



Dr. P. N. Vijayakumar
MA, LLB Phd, Retd Justice &
Former State Information Commissioner
Presently Chairman Human Ethics Committee
Calicut University Kerala

Dr. P. N. Vijayakumar is a distinguished retired justice and former State Information Commissioner of Kerala. Holding an MA, LLB, and PhD, he has made significant contributions to the legal and public service sectors. With a career dedicated to justice and transparency, he played an important role in promoting the right to information in the state. Currently, Dr. Vijayakumar serves as the Chairman of the Human Ethics Committee at Calicut University, Kerala, where he continues to contribute to academic and ethical standards. His expertise and leadership continue to inspire and guide various legal and educational initiatives.



Translation of Presentation

Social Ehics and Law

Social justice, law, and their moral foundation—this is the subject we are discussing today. To put it very briefly, social justice emerges from society itself. Law is only one instrument of social justice, merely an expression of it. We must interpret law within the Indian context.

We know that we are bearers of a very ancient civilisation, one that has also accepted other cultural streams, borrowed from them, and contributed to them. While it may not always seem timely to make new generations debate only the merits and shortcomings of that long civilisational past, when we look for the source of all laws today, we find it in the Constitution, after 15 August 1947. The Constitution is the source of all laws. Every law derives its legal validity and legitimacy from the Constitution. In other words, the fundamental elements of all laws originate from it.

If any law is made contrary to the Constitution, if a legislature enacts a law, the touchstone to examine whether it is binding in Kerala or India, or in any country where the Constitution prevails, is the judiciary. Every law is tested on this basis. If a law is created in violation of any provision of the Constitution, it is said to be ultra vires the Constitution, and it will be struck down by either the High Court or the Supreme Court.

All of you are familiar with the Preamble of the Indian Constitution. It begins with "We, the People of India." Some other constitutions begin by referring to states or nations. When the Constituent Assembly was formed, there had been no prior preparations for such an assembly. Representatives were selected from existing

provincial committees. When questions arose about how such an Assembly should function and from where it derived its sanction, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar drafted the Preamble in his inimitable style.

There are many interpretations of the Preamble. In 1941, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru presented the Objective Resolution at an AICC session. Many of the phrases in the Preamble are drawn from that resolution. Dr. Ambedkar, one of the greatest scholars and jurists the world has known and the Chairman of the Drafting Committee, adopted words and ideas from the best sources. The Objective Resolution reflects Nehruvian principles. Nehru was not only a statesman but also a poetical figure of global recognition. His works, The Discovery of India and Glimpses of World History, written in prison without references, are remarkable intellectual achievements. One of the core ideas drawn from The Discovery of India is Unity in Diversity.

Thus the words "We, the people of India solemnly resolve" express the resolve to constitute India into a sovereign, socialist, secular, democratic republic. At the time the Constitution came into force, the words "socialist" and "secular" were not present. They were added later through a constitutional amendment. This shows that the Constitution reflects the will of the people and can evolve with time.

The Indian Constitution, with its 395 Articles and 12 Schedules, is world renowned. Dr. Ambedkar, the Chairman of the Drafting Committee, is regarded as one of the greatest intellectuals in the world. His doctoral thesis, The Problem of the Rupee, presented at Oxford University even before India attained independence, remains relevant to this day. It is a profound study not only of the Indian rupee but of evolving economic philosophies.

From the very beginning, the Constitution emphasised justice—social, economic, and political. Among these, social justice was given the highest priority, followed by economic justice, and then political justice. Why was social justice given such prominence? India has passed through centuries of diverse cultures, religions, and social formations. In recognising the unity within this diversity, the framers of the Constitution realised that ensuring social justice for every citizen was essential.

India was a country where social justice had long been denied. From the Vedic period onwards, discrimination existed in various forms—educational, social, and cultural. This historical reality made social justice indispensable. In the Constitution drafted under Dr. Ambedkar's leadership, the Drafting Committee included many eminent figures such as Alladi Krishnaswamy Iyer and N. Gopalaswami, though one member passed away before the Constitution came into force.

When parliamentary debates on the Constitution began, something unprecedented occurred. In November, a condolence resolution was moved in memory of Mahatma Gandhi, who had led the freedom struggle with unparalleled moral force. While other revolutions and constitutions across the world commemorated leaders, none began with such a tribute. Every word and spirit of the Indian Constitution reflects Gandhian philosophy.

The Constitution declares justice—social, economic, and political. Political justice was not considered the foremost concern then; it came third. Social justice was the first priority, followed by economic justice. Practices such as discrimination, humiliation, and social segregation had to be addressed. Hence, Article 17 categorically abolished untouchability and declared its practice punishable. Unlike many constitutions, the Indian Constitution explicitly mentions punishment for this offence.

Despite this, further laws were enacted. In 1955, the Protection of Civil Rights Act was passed. Later, the Prevention of Atrocities against Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Act was enacted to prevent brutal and inhuman acts. Even the Indian Penal Code included several provisions. Though the IPC itself has since been replaced by a new criminal code, the essence of these provisions remains.

Social inequalities are always punishable, but can punishment alone eradicate them? This is a delicate question. You, as practitioners and advocates of theatre—an art form that deeply influences humanity—play a crucial role. Art has the power to transform human beings. Yet today we see horrifying acts of violence in society. In 2007, a law was enacted to protect senior citizens and parents. In a land where children once sought blessings from elders, is it not tragic that such a law had to be enacted?

Can social justice be achieved through law? That was the question. The answer is that it can, and it must, because history offers examples. From the 1857 uprising, which was not merely a sepoy mutiny but a struggle for independence, to the leaders who lived ascetic and principled lives—Vivekananda, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, and reform movements like the Brahmo Samaj and Arya Samaj—the Indian renaissance was a collective effort towards social reform. This movement culminated in Mahatma Gandhi.

Gandhi, returning from South Africa in the 1920s, entered the national movement like a half-naked fakir, striving for equality, fraternity, and social harmony. He called his journey experiments with truth. Truth has only one face, and seeking it is essential for social equality. His journals, The Indian Opinion and Harijan, were instruments of this struggle. Similarly, Dr. Ambedkar published Mooknayak and Bahishkrit Bharat.

Social justice cannot be achieved through violence or armed struggle alone. Society itself must awaken and prepare for it. The most important prerequisite is the right to know. Article 19 guarantees freedom of speech and expression. Whether through writing, speaking, theatre, cinema, or documentaries, all forms of artistic expression fall within this freedom. However, this freedom is not absolute; reasonable restrictions exist.

Freedom of speech is recognised internationally, including in the UN Charter, to whose drafting India contributed. In the Indian Constitution, Article 19(1) guarantees freedom of speech and expression, but restrictions were introduced through censorship laws to protect public order, culture, and social harmony.

Human rights legislation came into force in 1993. This is where ethics become central. Ethics are a code that embodies cultural heritage. They cannot be fully enforced by law alone. Values such as respecting parents, loving siblings, or sharing food with the hungry cannot be legislated. Hence, cultures and religions across the world evolved moral codes. India, as a land of many religions, embraced these values, emphasising equality and moral responsibility.

Ethics permeate domestic, social, political, and artistic spheres. Even in Shakespearean tragedies, a moral lesson emerges. Lady Macbeth's guilt, Othello's tragic realisation—these are expressions of ethical conflict and moral reckoning. What we ultimately need is the light of culture, the light of humanity.

For us, social good and ethics are not confined to texts or theories. They must arise from society itself. To make them arise, society must be educated—socially, morally, and ethically.

PANEL DISCUSION

As part of IFTS 2025, the panel discussions were conceived as spaces for critical dialogue and reflective exchange on themes central to the festival. Designed to engage students, scholars, academicians, and theatre practitioners, these sessions encouraged conversations that bridged pedagogy, performance, research, and social practice. The panels were led by invited theatre pedagogues and practitioners from different parts of the world, whose work and experience have made significant contributions to contemporary theatre discourse. Three panel discussions were organised over the course of the festival.

The first panel discussion, held on 04-02-2025, featured Ana Mirtha and Sebastian Rad, who shared perspectives rooted in research led performance practice and pedagogy

The second panel discussion, conducted on 06-02-2025, brought together Sanjay Maharishi and Jim Niesan, offering reflections that connected ensemble theatre practice, historical research, and social inquiry.

The third panel discussion, held on 07-02-2025, featured T S Syam Kumar, Kalki Subrahmaniam, and Baiju Chandran, focusing on theatre's engagement with politics, ideology, gender, and cultural activism.

Together, the panel discussions at IFTS 2025 created a vibrant forum for exchange, reaffirming theatre's role as a critical and responsive practice within changing social and cultural contexts.

Panel Discussion I

Date: 04-02-2025 | LA SALA 02.30PM - 03.30PM

Panelists:

On the first day of the panel discussion, the session featured Ana Mirtha and Sebastian Rad as invited panelists. They shared their perspectives and pedagogical insights in alignment with the festival's theme. The session was moderated by Dr. Sandeep Kumar, Faculty, School of Drama and Fine Arts.



Ana Mirtha is an international actress, director, theatremaker and pedagogue, specialized in movement and devising. She graduated LECOQ-Physical Theatre and Devising at LISPA (London International School of Performing Arts). She completed her training in movement in the U.K, Spain and Argentina, studying various Circus techniques, Contemporary Dance, Butoh dance, Suzuki, Laban, Grotowski, View Points, Object manipulation and Puppetry with artists such as: Norman Taylor, Lorna Marshall, John Nobbs, Jacqui Carroll, Vanessa Ewan, Richard Emmert , France Barbe and Christopher Sivertsen among others. She has worked as an actress-deviser, director and pedagogue in Spain, United Kingdom, Czech Republic, Argentina, Mexico, Peru, Brazil, Colombia, Guatemala, United States, Sri Lanka and India.



Sebastian, an accomplished artist from Argentina, is the first certified Spanish-speaking Meisner Technique Practitioner. With international training in Meisner (London), Lecoq pedagogy (Buenos Aires), and LISPA (Berlin), he also holds a Masters in Audiovisual Performance from TAI, Madrid. Sebastian has worked across Argentina, England, Germany, Spain, Ecuador, Bolivia, and Chile, excelling in acting, directing, and teaching, shaping a remarkable global career in the performing arts.



Dr. Sandeep Kumar
Assistant Professor
School of Drama and Fine Arts





The first panel discussion of IFTS 2025, titled The Poetic Truth, presented a research project by Sariego Theatre that examined the combined use of the Neutral Mask, developed within the pedagogical tradition of Jacques Lecoq, and the Repetition exercise formulated by Sanford Meisner. Although these two training tools may appear contradictory at first glance, the research explored how their integration can help performers move beyond habitual social behaviour and arrive at greater honesty and naturalness in performance.

The discussion reflected on how everyday human behaviour is shaped by culturally conditioned patterns of action, emotion, and movement. While these patterns enable social functioning, they often restrict expressive freedom. The research proposed that actors are capable of accessing deeper and more authentic modes of expression when these conditioning factors are consciously addressed. Through distinct yet complementary approaches, the Neutral Mask and Meisner's Repetition were examined as methods for expanding embodied awareness and performance potential.

Ana Mirtha Sariego and Diego Sebastián Akselrad shared insights from their ongoing research journey, discussing its conceptual foundations, methodology, and observed outcomes. They articulated how this integrated approach has proven transformative for performers, not only in their artistic practice but also in their personal development, and reflected on its potential to bring meaningful shifts in contemporary theatre training and practice.

Panel Discussion II

Date: 06-02-2025 | LA SALA Time: 02.30 PM – 03.30 PM

Panelists

The panel discussion featured Jim Niesan, an invited pedagogue for IFTS 2025, and Sanjay Maharishi as panelists, who shared their experiences and perspectives on contemporary theatre pedagogy and practice. The session was moderated by Vipin Manayath, Assistant Professor, School of Drama and Fine Arts, who guided the discussion and facilitated an engaging academic exchange.



Sanjay Maharishi is a theatre practitioner, director, and educator with extensive experience in performance, training, and dramaturgy. His work engages closely with contemporary theatre practices, pedagogy, and interdisciplinary approaches, with a strong focus on process-driven creation and collaborative learning.



Vipin Manayath
Assistant Professor
School of Drama and Fine Arts





Jim Niesan presented a reflective account titled 40 Years On: The Care and Nurturing of an Ensemble in New York City. His presentation focused on the experience of creating and sustaining a permanent theatre ensemble over more than four decades at Irondale in New York City. He discussed the process of building a collective of actors, directors, designers, and musicians who have worked together over long periods to develop a shared performance style and aesthetic rooted in common values and artistic taste. Drawing from the company's body of work, which includes over one hundred productions ranging from classical theatre to improvised low comedy farces, he reflected on the challenges of continuity, adaptation, and survival in a rapidly changing social and cultural landscape. He also shared practical strategies that enabled the ensemble to grow during favourable times, endure periods of difficulty, and learn from mistakes along the way. His presentation emphasised care, trust, and long term commitment as essential principles in ensemble based theatre practice.

Panel Discussion III

Date: 07-02-2025 | LA SALA Time: 02.30 PM – 03.30 PM

Panelists:
T S Syam Kumar and Baiju Chandran participated in the panel discussion as invited panelists, And Kalki Subrahmaniam, who was invited as a pedagogue for IFTS 2025, also took part in the discussion.



T S Syam Kumar hails from Viyapuram, an Upper Kuttanad village near Haripad in Alappuzha district. He holds a bachelor's degree, master's degree, MPhil, and PhD in Sanskrit literature from Sree Sankaracharya University of Sanskrit, Kalady. His academic and research work has been recognised with several honours, including the Panditar E V Raman Namboothiri, V K Narayana Bhattathiri, and K V Sharma Endowments, along with the Ambedkar Seva Shree National Award, Bahrain Pratibha Award, and the UGC Rajiv Gandhi National Fellowship. He has published extensively in national and international journals and is the author of books engaging with Sanskrit studies, tantra, society, and contemporary politics. He has served as a Research Fellow at the French Institute of Pondicherry and as a Sanskrit lecturer at Sacred Heart College, Thevara, and is currently working as a Sanskrit teacher in the education department, Kottayam.



Baiju Chandran is a veteran media professional, writer, and audiovisual journalist with decades of experience in Indian television and media. He has served in senior roles, including Program Director at Doordarshan, and is widely recognised for his contributions to television news, programmes, documentary filmmaking, and media studies. His work spans production, direction, and critical writing on media history, culture, and aesthetics. In recognition of his long-standing impact on television and visual media, he was honoured with the 2022 Television Lifetime Achievement Award by the Government of Kerala.



Dr. Shibu S Kottaram
Professor
School of Drama and Fine Arts

The third panel discussion at IFTS 2025 examined the relationship between theatre, politics, and social transformation, focusing on historical movements, contemporary ideological debates, and marginalized voices.

Baiju Chandran discussed Theatre and Its Contribution to the Communist Movement in Kerala, outlining how progressive theatre between the late 1920s and the 1950s played a decisive role in shaping Kerala's socio political consciousness. Beginning with Adukkaalayil Ninnum Arangaththekku by V T Bhattathiripad, the discussion traced the emergence of politically committed theatre through works by K Damodaran,

Cherukad, and Thoppil Bhasi, culminating in the influence of the Kerala People's Arts Club. Despite censorship and bans, these performances mobilized public opinion and contributed to lasting cultural and political change.

Kalki Subrahmaniam focused on Gender Minority Voices Through Theatre Performances and Social Media, highlighting how theatre has evolved from marginalizing gender minorities to becoming a space for resistance, visibility, and self representation. She emphasized how social media extended the reach of these performances, enabling wider dialogue, solidarity, and advocacy beyond traditional theatre spaces.

T S Syam Kumar presented Politics of Epics and Contemporary India, analysing how epics such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata are reinterpreted within modern political discourse. He examined their use in shaping national identity, legitimizing ideological positions, and influencing debates on caste, gender, and morality, while also addressing the tensions between cultural unity and political exclusion.

The session reaffirmed theatre's role as a powerful medium for political critique, social engagement, and cultural reflection in both historical and contemporary contexts.





TEACHERS MEET

Teachers Meet

Report

Faculties and Educators attending the IFTS-2025 met at the very first day in the second half of the conference at the Smart Room of School of Drama & Fine Arts building for have a get-together and pondering upon the issues the faculties & educators of the world are going through. As, the conference is a thematic one and IFTS-2025 theme is 'Theatre & Ethics' the roundtable discussion started with the issue of 'Ethics' only and discussion got centered around the same till end because everybody either wanted to share their bit but also responded to the questions put forward by other faculty members before the forum. It that sense the whole discussion was very lively and warm.

The discussion started with the question of 'Ethical Concerns & Dilemmas We Faculty Members, Trainers and Theatre Practitioners Face While Working and how we deal with that?' The question was put forward by the moderator Dr. Mrityunjay Prabhakar of Visva-Bharati University and faculty members were asked to respond one by one in the circle. The faculty members of Jafna University raised the question of Colonial hangover over the textbooks and syllabus they have to follow and how they feel challenged and ethically concerned about the issue as the focus of most of the syllabus is on west and their own cultural artefacts got no mention in the textbook. They also put forward this question to other faculty members. In response Dr. Grace Adinku of Texas A & M University said that she can relate to this question as she comes from African Background and situation was the same in her country but later academicians responded to the problem and built their own textbooks to cover the issue. In her practice too she tries to incorporate Black experiences while teaching White people of her university. This discussion seconded by Dr. Barabara MacKenzie-Wood of Carnegie Melon University and she also said that we need to be aware and search for our own path. Peter Cooke added in this discussion over the issue of 'Ethics' that people are safeguarding themselves in the responses but the kind of world we are living needs us to open up to the challenges we are facing.

Discussing over the other 'Ethical' and 'General' challenges in Teaching, Training & Practicing Theatre the discussion pondered over the issue of 'Black' & 'White' and how it is important to be inclusive and welcoming in our approach. The discussion also ventured into the area of challenges before the female actors and students and how we need to be extra careful in handling them so that they could feel safe in the working space. People also reminded that in West to tackle this issue concept of 'Intimacy Coach' has come who deals with the challenges and work like a medium between the female actor and the director to handle the situation for the benefit of the both. Though, this exercise sometimes creates hurdle but this is a better way of handling such issues if actors need to do intimate scenes during play & performances. The discussion ended at the note that we should meet again & again and ponder upon the pestering issues which concerns us to get light from other's experiences.









STUDENTS MEET

The Student Meet at IFTS 2025 unfolded in two sessions held on the opening and closing days of the festival, bringing together student participants to share papers and presentations on creative practice.

The first session, held on 03 February 2025 at LA SALA Seminar Hall, SDFA, featured paper presentations by student participants. The papers explored ethical questions in performance and music, engaging with themes of embodiment, self discipline, cultural practices, authorship, and the ethical frameworks that shape performance traditions across different regions

The second session of the Student Meet took place on 08 February 2025, the final day of the festival, at LA SALA Seminar Hall, SDFA. In this session, graduating students from NIDA, Australia, presented their graduation productions and discussed the ideas, processes, and ethical considerations involved in their works. The presentations addressed concerns of cross cultural devising, representation, identity, community, and contemporary performance making. The two sessions reflected the range of student engagement at IFTS 2025, situating papers and graduation production presentations at key moments within the overall flow of the festival.

Student Meet I

03 February 2025 | LA SALA Seminar Hall, SDFA

The Student Meet on the first day of IFTS 2025 was held on 03 February 2025 from 03.00 pm to 05.00 pm at the LA SALA Seminar Hall, SDFA. The session brought together student participants who presented papers engaging critically with questions of ethics, performance, music, embodiment, and cultural traditions



Suraj B R,
Research Scholar, JNU

The session began with a paper presentation by Suraj B R, Research Scholar, Jawaharlal Nehru University, titled Between Art and Obligation: Examining Ethical Self Formation in Performative Actions. Drawing from Michel Foucault's concept of ethics as a relation of the self to itself, the presentation examined the movement practice of digina in Yakshagana. The paper reflected on how performers subject their bodies to extreme physical discipline and questioned whether such self imposed conduct emerges from individual agency or from internalised social and ethical obligations. The presentation opened up a discussion on voluntary discipline, bodily submission, and the blurred boundaries between self determination and social conformity.



Muhammed Sareef C M,
Research Scholar, JNU

The second presentation was by Muhammed Sareef C M, Research Scholar, Jawaharlal Nehru University, titled Knowledge, Embodiment and Performance: Analysing Ethics in Mappila Performance of Malabar. The paper explored Mappila performance traditions as cultural practices embedded within ethical frameworks shaped by Islam as well as indigenous traditions of the Malabar region. By examining debates within different Muslim sects in Kerala regarding music, singing, and performance practices, the presentation addressed how ethical perspectives influence the acceptance or rejection of these traditions. The paper also reflected on performance as a mode of knowledge transfer and the challenges of representation and appropriation within dominant cultural narratives. The final presentation of the session was by Rupak Midya, Research Scholar, JNU SDFA, titled Ethical Dimensions of Writing about Music and Musical Traditions: Devotional Music from Bengal and Bangladesh. Focusing on Baul Fakir traditions, the paper examined ethical concerns involved in writing about devotional music, particularly issues of authorship, individuality, and historical change. Challenging earlier folkloristic approaches that treated such traditions as anonymous and unchanging, the presentation highlighted the role of individual practitioners and the fluid nature of musical practices across genres. The paper raised important questions about music's intrinsic qualities and the ethics involved in scholarly representation.



Rupak Midya,
Research Scholar, JNU


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La Sala





Student Meet II

08 February 2025 | LA SALA Seminar Hall, SDFA

The second session of the Student Meet at IFTS 2025 was held on 08 February 2025 from 12.15 pm to 01.15 pm at the LA SALA Seminar Hall, SDFA. This session featured presentations by graduating students from NIDA, Australia, who spoke about their graduation productions and reflected on the ethical concerns shaping their creative processes and performance practices.The session began with Pratha Nagpal, who presented her graduation production Kali. The presentation discussed the work as a contemporary cultural dance piece that engages with BIPOC anger, rage, and healing. Drawing from the figure of Kali, the presentation reflected on questions of representation, community, and existential freedom, while addressing the ethical responsibility involved in centring marginalised voices and experiences within contemporary performance making.

This was followed by Chinmaya Madan, who presented Prem Patr (Love Letter), a multi sensory live performance weaving together stories of love, loss, and personal choice against societal expectations. The presentation focused on the ethics of storytelling, emotional engagement, and audience experience, while reflecting on theatre's capacity to evoke empathy, provoke thought, and engage with lived social realities.

The final presentation was by Temuulan Jargalsaikhan, who spoke about Amadeus, a multidisciplinary performance inspired by Pushkin's Mozart and Salieri. Reimagining the composers as modern day DJs, the work explored themes of talent, jealousy, and artistic identity through a German expressionist approach. The presentation highlighted ethical questions related to interpretation, adaptation, and the use of multiple emotional and aesthetic registers within contemporary performance.

The second session of the Student Meet concluded with interactions and reflections that underscored the ethical dimensions of cross cultural devising, representation, and creative responsibility. Bringing the Student Meet to a close on the final day of the festival, the session highlighted the voices of emerging practitioners and reaffirmed the role of student led creative inquiry within the broader pedagogic framework of IFTS 2025.



Temuulan Jargalsaikhan,
NIDA, Australia



Pratha Nagpal,
NIDA, Australia



Chinmaya Madan,
NIDA, Australia


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CULTURE TOUR

On the third day of the International Festival of Theatre Schools 2025, delegates and invited guests took part in a Cultural Tour designed as an experiential learning initiative. Participants chose between two destinations, the Kerala Forest Research Institute and a Cultural Heritage Walk at Kerala Kalamandalam, exploring Kerala's ecological and cultural landscapes and their connection to performance practices. The tour drew attention to eco-fragile regions vulnerable to natural disasters, highlighting the link between environmental distress and indigenous traditions. Extending the festival beyond the campus, the initiative offered participants first hand cultural exchange and ecological learning, later reflected in creative responses inspired by the experience.

Destination I

Kerala Forest Research Institute

Established in 1975, the Kerala Forest Research Institute in Peechi is a multidisciplinary research institution recognised for its contributions to tropical forestry. Its work spans biodiversity conservation, forest ecology, and sustainable natural resource management. The institute houses a Wildlife Museum, Soil Museum, Butterfly Garden, and Palmatum, alongside forest trails and proximity to the Peechi Dam. Together, these facilities reflect the ecological significance of the region and the role scientific research plays in safeguarding fragile ecosystems.











Visit to Kerala Forest Research Institute (KFRI)

Day 3 of IFTS 2025 was dedicated to cultural visits, with delegates and guests divided into two groups, one of the two groups visited KFRI, Peechi.

The Kerala Forest Research Institute (KFRI) is a multidisciplinary institute that has been conducting research on tropical forests and forestry for over three decades. Established in 1975, KFRI is recognized as a Centre of Excellence in Tropical Forestry. Its work is focused on providing scientific support for decision-making on forestry-related matters, with an emphasis on conservation, sustainable utilization, and scientific management of natural resources. Located near the scenic Peechi Dam in a rich deciduous forest area, KFRI offers an ideal setting for both research and conservation efforts.

The visit to KFRI provided an opportunity to explore various exhibits and engage with the local flora and fauna. The visit was divided into six key components, each offering unique insights into the region's biodiversity and conservation efforts.

1. Wildlife Museum

Our visit began at the Wildlife Museum, a fascinating exhibit showcasing the rich biodiversity of Kerala's forests. The museum featured a wide range of preserved specimens, including mammals, reptiles, amphibians, and invertebrates. Detailed information was provided about the ecological significance and conservation status of each species, giving us a comprehensive understanding of the wildlife that thrives in Kerala's forests.

2. Soil Museum

Next, we visited the Soil Museum, where we learned about the soil profiles found in various forested areas of Kerala. The museum displayed detailed models and samples illustrating the different soil textures, from topsoil to subsoil. This exhibit highlighted the crucial role soil plays in supporting plant growth and maintaining the ecological balance of forest ecosystems.

3. Butterfly Garden

The Butterfly Garden was another highlight of the visit. This open-air garden is specifically designed to support a thriving butterfly population. It features a variety of plants that cater to both the larvae and adult stages of butterflies. During our visit, we observed numerous butterfly species fluttering around, feeding on nectar from the plants. The garden plays an important role in butterfly conservation, providing a natural habitat that supports their life cycle.

4. Palmatum

We then explored the Palmatum, an area showcasing a diverse collection of palm species from across India. This serene part of the institute offered an impressive display of palm species in various shapes and sizes, emphasizing their importance in different ecosystems. The Palmatum also provided a peaceful space for reflection amidst the lush greenery.

5. Trek Through the Forest

An immersive experience followed with a trek through the surrounding deciduous forest. The trek allowed us to explore a variety of tree species, from towering giants to smaller, bushy shrubs. The rich canopy of the forest offered shade and shelter to nu-

merous species, creating an ideal environment for diverse wildlife. The trek provided a firsthand experience of the biodiversity that KFRI works to protect.

6. Visit to Peechi Dam

The day concluded with a visit to the Peechi Dam, located nearby. The dam offers a tranquil and scenic environment, surrounded by lush greenery. The view of the water, set against the backdrop of the forested hills, was breathtaking and provided a moment of relaxation after an enriching visit to KFRI.

The visit to the Kerala Forest Research Institute was curated by Dr. T.V. Sanjeev, Chief Scientist & Registrar (Incharge), and supported by fellow researchers who provided valuable insights into the region's rich biodiversity, ecological balance, and conservation efforts. From the informative exhibits in the Wildlife and Soil Museums to the beauty of the Butterfly Garden and Palmatum, the experience was both educational and visually stimulating. The trek through the forest and the serene visit to the Peechi Dam rounded off a truly memorable day.





Destination II

Cultural Heritage Walk at Kerala Kalamandalam

The second group participated in a Cultural Heritage Walk at Kerala Kalamandalam, one of India's foremost institutions dedicated to the preservation of classical performing arts.

Founded in 1930, Kerala Kalamandalam plays a pivotal role in nurturing traditional art forms such as Kathakali, Mohiniyattam, Koodiyattam, Carnatic music, percussion traditions, and Kalari practices. The institution offers structured training through rigorous pedagogy, combining classroom instruction with practical, guru-led sessions. Its campus reflects a living tradition of learning, with regular lecture demonstrations, training sessions, and performances that showcase the discipline behind these classical forms.






KERALA KALAMANDALAM
DEEMED TO BE UNIVERSITY



Cultural Heritage Walk at Kerala Kalamandalam

(IFTS 2025)

The International Festival of Theatre Schools (IFTS) 2024 was held from February 03 to 08 at the School of Drama and Fine Arts, University of Calicut, Thrissur, Kerala. Themed "Carnival of Pedagogy: Theatre and Ecology," the festival explored the intersection of theatre education and ecological themes. The six-day festival offered multiple events to ensure participation from diverse backgrounds and regions, transcending borders. These events aimed to comprehensively explore pedagogy connecting theatre and ecology, foster cultural exchange, and establish connections between nature, life, and art. On the 3rd day of the festival, we all visited Kerala Kalamandalam as a cultural visit.

Kerala Kalamandalam is located in the heart of Kerala, one of the foremost centres for classical arts in India. Originally founded in 1930 by the poet Vallathol Narayana Menon, it has grown into an important cultural centre that focuses on teaching traditional Kerala art forms including Kathakali, Mohiniyattam, Koodiyattam, and classical South Indian music and percussion. This institution has contributed to preserving and promoting Kerala's rich artistic heritage. The Cultural Heritage visit at Kerala Kalamandalam provides an immersive experience and its deep-rooted cultural traditions. The main objective is to showcase the diversity and richness of Kerala's classical arts. Through guided tours and performances, we got a glimpse into the life of the artists, the history of the art forms, and the institution's efforts to preserve these traditions for future generations. Participants witnessed various art forms, interacted with students and teachers, and observed the rigorous training involved in preserving these classical traditions.

Tour Experience

The walk begins with a video screening detailing the history and legacy of Kalamandalam, followed by an extensive tour of the campus. We divided into four groups, the first stop on the walk is the Kathakali Centre, where students learn about the history, intricate makeup, and elaborate costume design of Kathakali, one of Kerala's most famous dance dramas. A live demonstration of Kathakali performance, showcasing its vibrant expressions, elaborate hand gestures (mudras), and dramatic storytelling, is often part of the experience. Next was the Carnatic Music Department, where students were engaged in vocal exercises and raga. We were introduced to the nuances of Carnatic music, the significance of different ragas, and the discipline required to master this intricate art form then we visited the Mohiniyattam, where we observed dancers in action, practicing the graceful, traditional dance form. The slow, fluid movements and graceful expressions of Mohiniyattam, typically performed by women, capture the aesthetic beauty of Kerala's classical dance tradition. The Koodiyattam space is another significant stop, where we are introduced to this ancient Sanskrit theatre tradition, recognized by UNESCO as a masterpiece of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity. Koodiyattam, with its unique blend of acting, dance, and music, often performed in temples, has been preserved at Kalamandalam with great care. One of the highlights of the walk is the interaction with the artists and students of Kalamandalam. We have the opportunity to watch rehearsals, engage in conversations with masters of the art forms, and gain insight into their personal experiences of training and performing. This interaction offers a deeper understanding of the dedication, discipline, and passion required to master these forms. Throughout the walk, visitors are provided with educational insights into the history, symbolism, and significance of the various art forms. The kalamandalam volunters often highlight the connection between these traditional arts and the culture, religion, and society

of Kerala. The rhythmic training of students on the mridangam was an enthralling experience. Under the guidance of their gurus, students practiced complex tala (rhythmic cycles) that form the backbone of Carnatic and traditional dance music. Then explored various Kalari (traditional martial arts) styles practiced. The demonstration included swift movements, combat sequences, and weapon training, showcasing the agility and discipline of Kalari practitioners. Our group proceeded to observe Kudiyattam, one of the oldest Sanskrit theatre traditions. An gurus explained the intricate gestures (mudras) and facial expressions used to narrate stories. The meticulous training and dedication required for this performance were evident through the students' expressive portrayals. A vibrant moment of the walk was the chenda drum played by young students. The powerful beats of the chenda drum resonated through the campus, illustrating the importance of percussion in Kerala's traditional performing arts.

Visit to Old Kalamandalam (Nila Campus)

A nostalgic visit to the old Kalamandalam, situated along the Nila River, evoked the rich history and legacy of this institution. We were briefed on how the institution evolved while maintaining its deep-rooted traditions. Then we have a detailed lecture demonstration on Kathaali, Kudiyattam, and Mohniattam. Kathakali by Prof. Kalamandalam Tulsi – Prof. Tulsi explained the intricate techniques of Kathakali, including makeup (chutti), character types, and movement styles. A student performed excerpts to demonstrate various emotions and expressions. Kudiyattam by Prof. Kalamandalam Jisnu Prasad – Prof. Jisnu Prasad delved into the nuances of Kudiyattam, emphasizing its slow-paced, elaborate storytelling techniques. Then we watched Performance at Kuthambalam at evening six pm. The cultural visit culminated in a mesmerizing evening performance at the Kuthambalam. Students of Kerala Kalamandalam showcased a full Kudiyattam performance, illustrating the grandeur and detailed expressions of this ancient art and a Kathakali play, featuring mythological narratives, elaborate costumes, and breathtaking enactments.

Conclusion

The Cultural Heritage Walk at Kerala Kalamandalam was an enriching experience that provided profound insights into Kerala's performing arts. From witnessing rigorous training sessions to experiencing live performances, the walk emphasized the dedication required to preserve these age-old traditions. This journey through music, dance, and theater left participants with a deep appreciation for Kerala's cultural heritage and the efforts of Kalamandalam in nurturing these art forms for future generations.



WORKSHOPS

Thumri

Vidya Roa

The Thumri workshop conducted by Vidya Rao introduced participants to the expressive and nuanced world of Thumri, a semi classical vocal tradition rooted in emotion, storytelling, and poetic interpretation. Drawing from her extensive experience as a Hindustani classical singer and theatre practitioner, Vidya Rao explored Thumri not merely as a musical form but as a performative language closely connected to theatre, gesture, and embodied expression. The workshop focused on Understanding the emotional grammar of Thumri The relationship between voice, text, and feeling Listening as a performative and ethical practice Exploring gender, bhava, and narrative through song.

Through demonstrations, listening sessions, and interactive exercises, participants engaged deeply with how Thumri can inform theatrical training, presence, and sensitivity on stage. The workshop offered a rare interdisciplinary experience where music, theatre, and pedagogy intersected in a shared space of learning and reflection.







Theatre in Times of War and Conflict

Emanuella Amichai and Ahmad Mukbel

The Power of Theatre as a Dialogical Tool in the Arab, Palestinian, and Jewish Conflict was conducted as part of the International Festival of Theatre Schools 2025. The session explored how theatre can function as a space for dialogue, ethical engagement, and shared reflection in contexts shaped by prolonged conflict.

The workshop was led by Emanuella Amichai, a teacher, director, and choreographer from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and Ahmad Mukbel, a dialogue groups facilitator specializing in the Israeli Palestinian conflict. Bringing together performance practice and conflict facilitation, the workshop offered participants a rare opportunity to engage with theatre beyond representation, positioning it as an active dialogical process. Emanuella Amichai drew from her experience in performance, dance theatre, and visual art, as well as her work with Anachnu, a multicultural theatre ensemble involving Jewish, Christian, and Palestinian students. Through embodied exercises and performance based tasks, participants explored presence, listening, and shared responsibility within a collective space. Ahmad Mukbel complemented this approach by guiding structured dialogue sessions, encouraging participants to articulate lived experiences rather than ideological standpoints.

The workshop addressed key questions around theatre's role during times of war, emphasizing listening as an ethical act and the body as a site of memory, trauma, and resilience. Rather than seeking resolution or consensus, the session focused on holding complexity, difference, and discomfort as essential elements of artistic and social engagement.

Participants from diverse backgrounds actively engaged in both performative and dialogical processes, creating an atmosphere of trust and openness. The workshop underscored theatre's potential to sustain spaces of encounter and coexistence, reaffirming its relevance as a powerful tool for dialogue, especially in divided and conflict ridden contexts.















Folk Songs Celebrating Living Traditions

CJ Kuttappan

A vibrant session on Folk Songs was presented at the International Festival of Theatre Schools 2025, led by renowned folk artist C. J. Kuttappan. The programme foregrounded the richness of Kerala's folk music traditions and their continuing relevance in contemporary cultural discourse.

C. J. Kuttappan, a distinguished practitioner of folk arts, brought to the session decades of performance experience from across India and abroad, including the United States, Thailand, Singapore, Germany, Hong Kong, Sri Lanka, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, and several Gulf countries. His presentation emphasized folk songs not merely as performance forms, but as living archives of collective memory, social history, and community wisdom.

Through songs, narratives, and contextual explanations, the session highlighted how folk music reflects everyday life, labour, rituals, and ethical values embedded within local cultures. Kuttappan also spoke about the need to preserve these traditions while allowing them to evolve organically, stressing the role of artists, institutions, and young practitioners in sustaining folk heritage.As the Chairman of the Kerala Folklore Academy and Director of Thayillam – Folk Arts Research Center, Kuttappan shared insights into documentation, research, and transmission of folk forms. The session resonated strongly with students and delegates, offering an immersive experience into the musical traditions of Kerala and reaffirming folk songs as a vital cultural force within theatre and performance education.















3D Scenic painting or Trompe L'Oeil

Daniel Collins

Trompe L'oeil is an artistic technique that creates the illusion of three dimensional objects on a two dimensional surface. The term comes from French and translates as deceive the eye. This technique is widely used in scenic art to add visual depth to stage sets where physical space or construction is limited. It is especially effective in creating architectural details that would otherwise be expensive or difficult to build in a workshop setting.

The workshop offered a practical introduction to Trompe L'oeil techniques, beginning with the use of charcoal and chalk as quick and effective tools to demonstrate perspective, light, shadow, and volume. These materials allowed participants to understand the core principles of illusion making with immediacy and flexibility. Depending on time availability, the session also extended to the use of paint.

A key demonstration involved the use of a pounce technique to reproduce repeated images accurately. Participants worked on A1 sized grey paper, using a curved panel image as a reference. Each student created a two dimensional rendering that convincingly appeared three dimensional.

















Psychology of Acting for Camera

Jyothish MG

The workshop on The Psychology of Acting focused on understanding the internal processes that shape an actor's performance. The session explored how psychological awareness, emotional intelligence, and cognitive processes influence character creation, motivation, and truthful stage presence. Emphasis was placed on recognising the actor's mind as an essential tool in performance, alongside physical and vocal training. Through discussions and guided exercises, participants examined the relationship between emotion, memory, imagination, and behaviour in acting. The workshop addressed how actors perceive situations, respond to stimuli, and build inner logic for characters, enabling performances that are psychologically grounded and emotionally authentic. Attention was also given to managing performance anxiety, concentration, and mental preparedness during rehearsals and live performance. The session provided participants with valuable insights into the psychological dimensions of acting, strengthening their ability to create nuanced characters and sustain emotional truth within contemporary theatre practice.





Interculturality in rehearsal

T. Sasitharan

The workshop on Interculturality and Theatre Praxis explored the concepts of interculturality and interculturalism and their relevance to contemporary theatre making and pedagogy. The session aimed to equip actors, directors, dramaturgs, and drama teachers with practical and ethical tools to engage meaningfully with intercultural practices during rehearsals, production processes, and teaching contexts.

The workshop followed an integrated methodology combining conceptual discussion with experiential learning. Through a series of tasks, games, and structured activities, participants examined key theories of interculturalism alongside practical scene work. Table readings of selected texts, script analysis, and floor based exercises enabled participants to translate theoretical insights into embodied performance practice. Prior reading of provided scripts and information sheets helped deepen engagement with the workshop material. A significant emphasis was placed on understanding intercultural theatre as an inherent aspect of most contemporary performance practices. The workshop examined the roles and responsibilities of theatre artists working across cultural boundaries, highlighting the importance of working with difference, respecting creative agency, and attending to marginalised and decentered perspectives. Participants were encouraged to remain critically aware of ideological and homogenising forces while recognising the body mind as a layered and interconnected site of knowledge.

The workshop concluded with reflections on the traditional contemporary theatre nexus, approaches to learning from traditional theatre forms, and strategies to promote diversity and inclusivity within theatre practice.









Embodied Expression and Creative presence

Noushad Kunju Mohamed

The workshop titled Embodied Expression and Creative Presence focused on ensemble based learning as a means to cultivate authentic presence and embodied creativity in performance. The session aimed to shift participants attention away from external performance driven outcomes towards deeper bodily awareness and lived expression in the present moment.

The workshop created a supportive environment where participants could explore their physical and sensory awareness within an ensemble. Through guided exercises and collective practices, individuals were encouraged to identify and move beyond habitual patterns and inhibitions, opening pathways for spontaneous and responsive creation. Emphasis was placed on developing aesthetic awareness through the body rather than relying solely on predetermined forms or techniques.

A significant component of the workshop involved exploring the relationship between body and breath, highlighting how breath supports presence, grounding, and vocal expression. Participants also examined the interaction between the body and its surrounding environment, as well as the dynamics of bodies in relation to one another within shared space. These explorations enabled participants to observe how the body responds, resonates, and reacts to internal impulses and external stimuli, both through sound and silence.

Overall, the workshop offered participants practical tools to enhance ensemble sensitivity, creative presence, and embodied expression, reinforcing the importance of the body as a primary site of knowledge, communication, and creative inquiry in contemporary theatre practice.









Interaction of Colour and Light

Dinesh Yadav

The workshop Interaction of Color and Light offered participants a hands on exploration of how color and light function as expressive and structural elements within theatrical design. Designed as an interactive learning experience, the workshop examined how colors are perceived, manipulated, and communicated across cultural contexts and design practices, with specific attention to performance environments.

Conducted over three days with three hours of instruction each day, the workshop was structured to focus on distinct yet interconnected aspects of color in theatre. Sessions explored the role of color in light, costume, and spatial design, allowing participants to understand how these elements interact to shape visual meaning and audience perception. Through practical experiments and guided exercises, participants engaged directly with color relationships, light behavior, and material responses.

The workshop emphasized experiential learning, encouraging participants to observe how light alters color, how costume choices influence spatial dynamics, and how color contributes to mood, narrative, and cultural symbolism on stage. By integrating theory with practice, the sessions deepened participants understanding of color as a dynamic design tool. Overall, the workshop strengthened participants visual sensitivity and design awareness, offering valuable insights into the creative possibilities generated through the interaction of color, light, and theatrical space.











Reimagining Waste (Costume Design)

Grace Uchechukwu Adinku and Rayna Middleton Dexter

The workshop titled Reimagining Waste examined an innovative pedagogical approach to teaching wearable art using recyclable waste materials, as practiced at Texas A and M University. The session brought together creative practice, sustainability, human rights discourse, and performance to explore how art education can respond to urgent global challenges while affirming human dignity.

The workshop demonstrated how discarded and everyday materials can be transformed into wearable art pieces that function both as aesthetic objects and as performative statements. Participants engaged with processes of material selection, design thinking, and conceptual development, reflecting on how waste can be reimagined as a resource for artistic and ethical inquiry. The approach encouraged students to critically consider environmental responsibility alongside social justice concerns.

A key emphasis of the workshop was the role of performance and wearable art as tools for dialogue and advocacy. By integrating theatre practices with environmental and human rights education, the workshop highlighted how embodied art forms can raise awareness, provoke reflection, and inspire action. Participants examined the interconnectedness of human and environmental welfare, recognizing sustainability as inseparable from issues of dignity and equity. Overall, the workshop presented a transformative educational model that merges academic inquiry with creative practice. It demonstrated how wearable art and performance can empower students to become socially conscious artists and active agents of change committed to ecological responsibility and human rights.








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Lighting Design

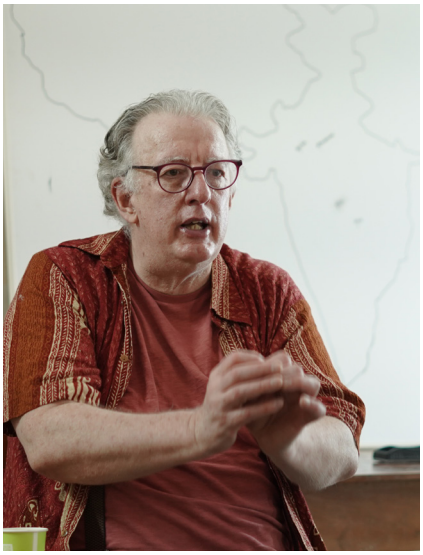
Neil Fraser

The lighting design workshop conducted by Neirl Freizer focused on introducing participants to the creative and technical foundations of lighting for theatre and performance. The session explored how light functions not only as an illuminative tool but also as a vital element in shaping atmosphere, narrative, and spatial perception on stage.

Through practical demonstrations and discussions, the workshop familiarised participants with the basic principles of lighting design, including intensity, colour, direction, and movement. Emphasis was placed on understanding the relationship between light, performer, set, and audience, and how lighting choices influence mood, focus, and dramatic meaning. Participants were encouraged to think of lighting as an active collaborator in performance making rather than a purely technical requirement.

The workshop also addressed the role of lighting in supporting scenography and enhancing the visual language of a production. By combining conceptual thinking with hands on engagement, the session enabled participants to develop a clearer awareness of lighting design as an integral part of contemporary theatre practice. The workshop provided valuable insights into the artistic possibilities of lighting and strengthened participants foundational understanding of lighting design within theatrical contexts.











Stanislavski's Active Analysis

Barbara Mac Kenzie-Wood & Jim Niesen

The workshop on Active Analysis introduced participants to an alternative rehearsal methodology developed by Konstantin Stanislavsky during the later phase of his practice. Led by Barbara MacKenzie-Wood, the session focused on early stage rehearsal exploration that prioritises action, embodiment, and collaboration over conventional table based analysis. Acting students participated actively, with a limited number of observers also permitted to attend.

The workshop began with a structured warm up session that prepared participants physically and mentally for exploratory rehearsal work. The core segment of the workshop concentrated on Active Analysis, a process that places actors on their feet from the outset, encouraging discovery through improvisation, physical action, and interaction rather than prolonged textual discussion. This approach empowers actors to engage creatively and collaboratively in shaping character and dramatic intention. Scenes for the workshop were drawn from Anton Chekhov's The Seagull, with two handed scenes serving as the primary material for exploration. Where time permitted, selected etudes were also introduced and examined over the course of the sessions. The workshop provided participants with valuable insight into an actor centred rehearsal methodology, highlighting the importance of embodied investigation, collective creativity, and experiential learning in contemporary actor training.









Acting in Dialogue with Visual Metaphor

Marcin Bartinkowski

The workshop explored methods of building a dystopian performance world through the interaction of bodies, objects, and visual metaphor. Using selected stories from They as the primary inspiration, the session examined the actor's dialogue with physical materials and non human partners to generate meaning and theatrical imagery.

The workshop combined basic acting exercises with explorations of physical substance and material presence. Participants began with body and mind relaxation practices, establishing awareness and readiness for action through contact with oneself, fellow performers, space, objects, and the audience. This preparatory work formed the foundation for developing dialogue and interaction, both with human partners and with material objects as active performative elements.

Improvisation served as the core working method, allowing participants to experiment with different approaches to constructing visual metaphors using bodies, objects, and textures. Practical exercises were supported by group discussions reflecting on process, perception, and dramaturgical choices. The workshop drew inspiration from the pedagogical approaches of Viola Spolin, Stephen Book, and Eugenio Barba, emphasising play, presence, and physical awareness. The workshop offered participants practical tools to investigate dystopian themes through embodied performance, encouraging imaginative engagement with materiality and visual storytelling in contemporary theatre practice.









Acting - Unlocking Creativity and Expression through Theatre

Sachiko Tange

The workshop Unlocking Creativity and Expression Through Theatre focused on developing participants creativity, sensitivity, and communication skills through structured theatrical practice. The sessions combined actor training, scene work, and cultural exposure to offer a holistic learning experience grounded in both practice and reflection.

The workshop began with actor training based on the Stanislavsky system, integrating theatre games and improvisation to enhance focus, spontaneity, and expressive clarity. Particular emphasis was placed on movement based, non verbal exercises that encouraged participants to explore physical awareness and embodied expression as foundational tools for performance.Scene work formed a core component of the workshop. Participants engaged with selected dramatic texts including The Seagull, The Cherry Orchard, and A Midsummer Night's Dream. These texts were used as flexible working material, allowing adaptations based on the needs and experience levels of participants.

The workshop also introduced participants to Japanese traditional performing arts through a brief contextual overview of Kabuki, Noh, and Kyogen, supported by visual references where possible. The sessions concluded with a short presentation or demonstration, enabling participants to reflect on and share their learning outcomes. The workshop offered an integrated approach to actor training, combining classical methods, cross cultural perspectives, and creative exploration to strengthen expressive confidence and theatrical awareness.








PRATHA

Noh Theatre

Tsumara Rejiro

The workshop Understanding Noh Theatre introduced participants to the historical, aesthetic, and performative foundations of Noh theatre, one of the classical theatre forms of Japan. The session aimed to provide both contextual knowledge and embodied experience, enabling participants to understand Noh not only as a performance tradition but also as a disciplined artistic practice.

The workshop began with an overview of the history of Noh theatre, tracing its development and cultural significance. This was followed by an explanation of the key elements that structure Noh performance, including the Noh stage or Noh butai, the poetic text known as yokyoku, and the integrated use of acting and dance, referred to as mai. Attention was also given to the importance of masks, known as men or omote, and costumes, or shozoku, in shaping character, mood, and symbolic meaning.

The facilitator shared and demonstrated selected Noh masks and costumes, allowing participants to closely observe their form, craftsmanship, and performative function. The practical component of the workshop involved guided exercises in singing and dance, introducing participants to the vocal and movement principles central to Noh performance. The workshop offered a balanced combination of theory, demonstration, and practice, deepening participants appreciation of Noh theatre as a refined, codified, and deeply expressive performance tradition.








Hustle.
Hit.
NEVER QUIT

Physical Theatre

Steina Ohman

The workshop Physical Theatre and Personal Expression focused on expanding individual and collective expression through movement based theatre practices. The sessions aimed at enabling participants to create short devised performance pieces, either individually or in groups, by exploring the relationship between the body, imagination, and personal experience.

Each day of the workshop was structured around a progressive process that included physical warm ups, exploratory research, development of ideas, and reflective feedback sessions. This structure supported a gradual deepening of physical awareness and creative confidence, allowing participants to discover new expressive possibilities through embodied practice. The workshop drew inspiration from movement based theatre techniques, including exercises from Techniques and Exercises for Movement based Theatre developed by MTG, alongside elements of Kalaripayattu, the traditional martial art form from India. These practices served as creative springboards, encouraging participants to engage with strength, rhythm, balance, and spatial awareness while remaining open to improvisation and personal interpretation.

Emphasis was placed on listening to the body, working intuitively, and responding to the dynamics of the group. The workshop fostered a collaborative environment where participants could experiment freely and refine their ideas through shared observation and dialogue. The workshop provided participants with practical tools to deepen physical presence, personal expression, and ensemble sensitivity within contemporary physical theatre practice.









Chavittunadakam

Alex Asan

The workshop on Chavittu Nadakam movements introduced participants to the physical vocabulary and performative discipline of this traditional theatre form from Kerala. The session focused on understanding movement as the core expressive element of Chavittu Nadakam, emphasising rhythm, posture, footwork, and coordinated bodily control.

Through guided demonstrations and practice sessions, participants were familiarised with the characteristic stamping movements, linear formations, and stylised gestures that define the form. Attention was given to balance, strength, timing, and spatial awareness, highlighting how movement in Chavittu Nadakam functions as both narrative and visual expression. The workshop also addressed the relationship between movement, music, and collective synchronisation within performance.

Participants engaged in repeated drills and ensemble exercises to internalise the physical patterns and discipline required by the form. The workshop created an experiential understanding of how traditional movement systems carry cultural memory, performance ethics, and theatrical structure. The workshop offered valuable exposure to an indigenous performance practice, enabling participants to appreciate the rigor, aesthetic clarity, and embodied knowledge embedded in Chavittu Nadakam movement training within contemporary theatre education.









Gender Politics in Theatre

Sheethal Shyam and Srijith sundaram

The workshop on Gender Politics in Theatre examined the ways in which gender is constructed, represented, and contested within theatrical practice and performance. The session encouraged participants to critically reflect on theatre as a social and cultural space where power relations, identities, and ideologies are produced and negotiated. Through discussions, case studies, and performative examples, the workshop explored how gender roles are embedded in dramatic texts, performance traditions, rehearsal processes, and institutional structures. Attention was given to the politics of representation, including questions of visibility, marginalisation, and agency within both traditional and contemporary theatre practices. Participants were encouraged to interrogate normative assumptions surrounding gender and to consider alternative modes of storytelling and embodiment.

The workshop also addressed the responsibilities of theatre practitioners in creating inclusive and ethically aware performance environments. By engaging with lived experiences and critical perspectives, the facilitators highlighted how theatre can function as a site of resistance, dialogue, and transformation in relation to gender based inequalities. The workshop enabled participants to develop a deeper understanding of gender politics in theatre, equipping them with critical tools to approach performance making, pedagogy, and collaboration with greater sensitivity, awareness, and inclusivity.











SAVE
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STUDENT PRODUCTIONS

Student Productions

IFTS 2025 | 03–06 February 2025

Venues: Prof. S. Ramanujam Theatre and Studio Theatre, SDFA and Campus

The student performances presented during IFTS 2025 offered a focused view of contemporary theatre practices, foregrounding devised work, reinterpretations of classical texts, site-specific explorations, and practice-based research. Spread across four days, the programme reflected strong pedagogic engagement, ensemble discipline, and thematic urgency.

On 03 February 2025, from 09.30 PM to 10.30 PM, The Passage of the Bird was staged at SDFA Sankramanam, in the open space of the School of Drama campus. The immersive, site-based production used movement, choral voice, and multilingual expression to explore themes of exile, migration, and identity. The promenade format actively engaged the audience, transforming the campus into a living performance landscape.

On 04 February 2025, between 05.00 PM and 08.00 PM, performances were held at Prof. S. Ramanujam Theatre and its premises. The Secretion of Posthumous Customs presented a metaphysical reading of poetic drama, engaging ideas of love, death, and desire through stylised performance and irony. This was followed by Blind Opera, a devised ensemble work that employed music, movement, and symbolic imagery to reflect on prejudice, social blindness, and institutional dynamics.

On 05 February 2025, at the Prof. S. Ramanujam Studio Theatre, Rasik Sampādak (The Playful Editor) was presented from 05.00 PM to 06.00 PM, using parody and ensemble performance to interrogate rejection, appearance-based judgment, and patriarchal norms. From 06.45 PM to 07.45 PM, Manimekalai offered a minimalist yet emotionally layered adaptation of the Tamil epic, focusing on grief, injustice, and spiritual awakening. The evening concluded from 08.00 PM to 09.00 PM with Echoes in the Fractured Landscape: A Performance Walk, a site-responsive journey that critically examined media saturation, ethics, and empathy through interconnected performance encounters.

On 06 February 2025, from 05.00 PM to 08.00 PM, the final set of student performances took place at the Prof. S. Ramanujam Studio Theatre. Mitra Ki Kahani explored love, friendship, and identity within rigid social frameworks, followed by Kalki's Performance, which presented experimental performance expressions. Performance Actions showcased short, research-driven works addressing ethics, trauma, solidarity, and resistance. The programme concluded with Helena, an intimate autobiographical performance centred on memory, love, endurance, and survival.

The student productions demonstrated rigorous training, creative courage, and thoughtful engagement with social, political, and personal realities, reaffirming student theatre as a vital space for dialogue, experimentation, and artistic inquiry.

Sankramanam: The Passage of the Bird

The Passage of a Bird is a devised, site-specific theatrical production that transforms a mythic poem into an immersive performance journey. Developed at the School of Drama in Thrissur through a teaching residency facilitated by Dr. Sara Matchett, the production explores themes of migration, exile, identity, and resilience through a poetic and embodied theatrical language.





At the heart of the narrative is a bird born to a human King and Queen, compelled to suppress its true nature and live as a human, only to be cast out and forced into exile. The bird's journey becomes a powerful metaphor for displacement and the longing for belonging. As the narrative unfolds across different spaces of the campus, the audience physically follows the story, encountering moments of loss, transformation, and hope. The performance integrates devised theatre practices, physical theatre, multilingual text, and choral vocal work. Movement and gesture carry much of the storytelling, while layered voices and soundscapes deepen the emotional resonance. Multiple Indian languages and dialects reinforce the universality of the themes, allowing the myth to speak across cultural boundaries. Ultimately, The Passage of a Bird stands as a collective exploration of freedom and identity, demonstrating how collaborative, process-driven theatre can engage urgent contemporary concerns while fostering empathy, imagination, and artistic innovation.





The Secrement of Posthumous Customs

The Secretion of Posthumous Customs is a contemporary staging of a poetic drama by Bolesław Leśmian, presented by students of the Aleksander Zelwerowicz National Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw. The production explores a metaphysical world where love, desire, and human longing persist beyond death, refusing to dissolve into silence.



Set in a cemetery, the play introduces three shadows Marcjanna, Krzemina, and Sobstyl ghosts of the dead who return to reenact the fate of a tragic love triangle. Through their posthumous encounters, the drama reveals how emotions remain charged with vitality even after life has ended. In Leśmian's universe, death is not an absence but a continuation, where love intertwines with loss, and creation exists alongside destruction. The afterlife becomes a space of reckoning, irony, and raw emotional truth.



The production is directed by Kamil Białaszek, a director and musician and a fourth-year student of directing at the Academy. His approach emphasizes rhythm, musicality, and physical presence, allowing the poetic text to resonate through contemporary theatrical form. Under his direction, The Secretion of Posthumous Customs emerges as a haunting meditation on love's endurance, suggesting that even in death, human passion retains its force, energy, and transformative power.





The Blind Opera

The Blind Opera is a devised theatrical adaptation inspired by The Blind (1890) by Maurice Maeterlinck, reimagined within the social and cultural realities of contemporary India. Performed with students of Drama and Theatre Arts at Visva-Bharati University, the production transforms Maeterlinck's symbolist text into a vibrant operatic and physical theatre experience.



The play follows nine blind individuals from diverse backgrounds differing in caste, religion, language, culture, and ideology who are taken to the woods by their master for what they believe is a picnic. When they realize they have been abandoned, the journey becomes one of self-discovery, conflict, and survival. Though united by physical blindness, their deeper prejudices, egos, and inherited identities begin to surface, fracturing their initial harmony.



Through music, movement, dance, and heightened dramatic moments, The Blind Opera explores how social conditioning and cultural rootedness can blind individuals more deeply than the absence of sight. Laughter, tension, pathos, and chaos coexist on stage, mirroring the complexities of classrooms, institutions, and society at large. The production reflects on the responsibilities of educators and individuals alike, urging vigilance, empathy, and self-awareness. The Blind Opera ultimately becomes a powerful metaphor for contemporary social blindness, questioning how unity can emerge only after confronting difference, conflict, and deeply ingrained prejudice.





Rasik Sampādak

Rasik Sampādak (The Playful Editor) is a devised theatrical work inspired by Rasik Sampādak by Munshi Premchand, reimagined through a contemporary performance lens. The production uses parody and ensemble-based storytelling to examine the social and emotional condition of rejection, particularly within artistic and patriarchal structures.



Positioned as a playful yet piercing critique, the performance foregrounds actors who encounter rejection not only as a personal experience but as a shared social reality. Through exaggeration, irony, and humour, the work interrogates how bodies, appearances, and gendered expectations become tools of judgment. Premchand's text serves as a provocation rather than a fixed script, enabling performers to respond to its themes through lived experience and collective improvisation.



Theatrically, the production emphasizes process over product. Movement, voice, and comic distortion are employed to expose uncomfortable truths beneath laughter. Rejection becomes both subject and method, allowing performers to transform vulnerability into resistance and self-expression.Teatre Rasik Sampādak ultimately reframes failure as creative possibility. By embracing parody as a critical language, the production questions entrenched power structures while asserting theatre's ability to reclaim marginalised voices and turn social exclusion into an act of performative agency.





Manimekalai

Manimekalai is a powerful theatrical adaptation presented by the Department of Drama and Theatre Arts, University of Jaffna, rooted in the Tamil epic tradition while speaking directly to contemporary concerns. Originally written in English by Ernest MacIntyre, the play is adapted into Tamil by Navadharshani Karunaharan, with songs and language editing by Sellathurai Sutharsan. It draws from the epic Manimekalai, continuing the narrative thread of Silappathikaram.



The play follows Manimekalai, daughter of Madhavi and Kovalan, as she confronts grief, injustice, and loss after the destruction of Madurai. Through deeply intimate conversations with her confidante Suthamathy, Manimekalai reflects on her past and her gradual spiritual awakening under the guidance of the Buddhist monk Aravana Adikal. Her journey culminates in a conscious choice of compassion and service, symbolized by her departure to Manipallavam with the Akshaya Pathiram.



The production employs minimalist staging, using five boxes and an ensemble of eight performers who shift roles fluidly. Tamil music, movement, and dance are integral to the storytelling, while lighting transitions from darkness to light mirror Manimekalai's emotional and spiritual transformation. This adaptation presents Manimekalai not merely as myth, but as a timeless meditation on resilience, injustice, and the power of compassion.





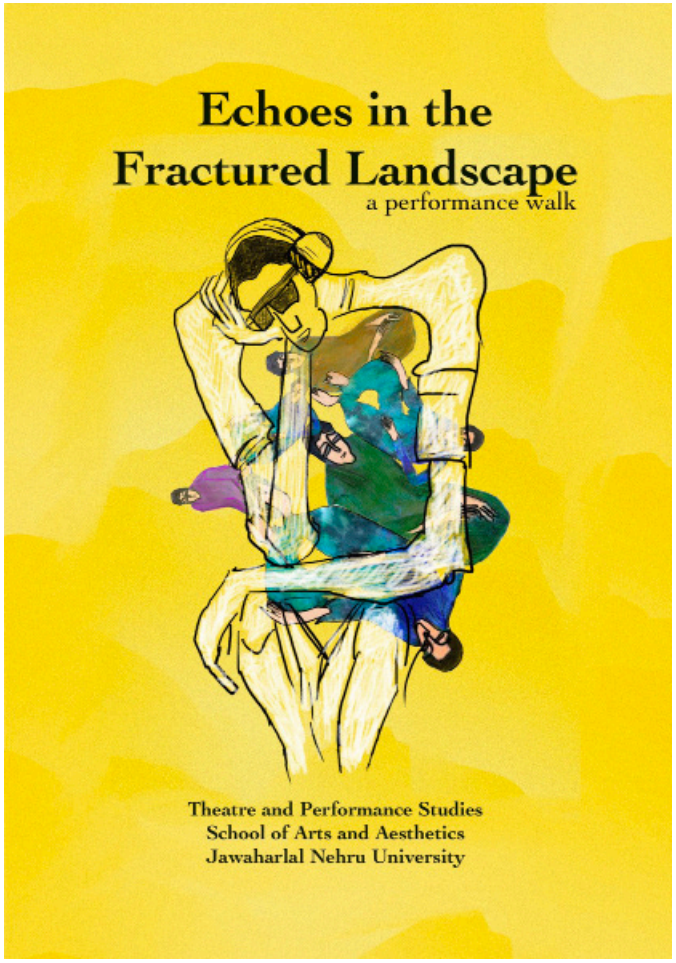
Echoes in the Fractured Landscape

Echoes in the Fractured Landscape: A Performance Walk is a site-specific theatrical intervention created by the Theatre and Performance Studies programme, School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University. Conceived as a performance walk, the work responds to the growing fragmentation of contemporary life and the ethical challenges posed by a media-saturated society.

The production questions whether constant exposure to mediated images of violence, suffering, and catastrophe has numbed our collective capacity for empathy. In a world where daily tragedies are endlessly circulated and consumed, the performance asks how theatre can still engage with the "real" without collapsing into spectacle. Rather than offering clear distinctions between fiction and reality, the work deliberately inhabits a space of uncertainty, prompting audiences to reflect on their own position as witnesses and participants.

Structured as a journey through three interconnected site-specific performances, the walk transforms movement itself into a dramaturgical device. Each location opens up narratives of yearning, erasure, and resilience, inviting spectators to slow down and attend carefully to stories that are often publicly visible yet ethically unattended.

By walking together, performers and audiences share a temporary community of attention and reflection. Echoes in the Fractured Landscape thus reclaims theatre as a space for critical encounter, urging a renewed sense of responsibility, empathy, and ethical engagement within a fractured contemporary landscape.



Mitra Ki Kahani

Mitra Ki Kahani (A Friend's Story), presented by the Department of Theatre and Music, Lovely Professional University, is a sensitive and incisive staging of Vijay Tendulkar's landmark play Vijay Tendulkar. Set within a college campus, the production explores love, friendship, identity, and the weight of social conformity through an emotionally charged narrative that remains strikingly relevant.



At the centre of the play is Sumitra, known as Mitra, a fiercely independent young woman whose inner life defies the norms of her time. Her deep friendship with Bapu, a gentle and hesitant confidant, frames the story, allowing the audience intimate access to Mitra's struggles. Mitra's love for Nama, another woman at the college, becomes the emotional core of the play, exposing the pain of unreciprocated affection and the social invisibility surrounding queer desire. Nama's relationship with Dalvi, whose performative masculinity reflects patriarchal entitlement, intensifies Mitra's sense of isolation and rejection.



Under the direction of Shivam Rai, the production foregrounds the layered psychology of Tendulkar's characters. Symbolic elements such as Mitra's bicycle and cigarettes underscore her yearning for freedom and resistance to imposed identities. The ensemble including Pande's humour, Nama's ambivalence, and Dalvi's aggression collectively mirrors societal prejudice and moral contradiction. Mitra Ki Kahani emerges as a poignant reflection on vulnerability, courage, and the human need for acceptance, inviting audiences to question their own assumptions and respond with empathy to lives lived at the margins.



Vila (Price)

A Malayalam solo performance directed by Kalki Subramaniyam and performed by Prema Natarajan unfolded with emotional clarity and political resonance. Through minimal staging and powerful embodiment, the work explored identity, resilience, and lived experience, engaging the audience in an intimate theatrical encounter that bridged personal narrative and collective memory effectively.







Performance Actions

Performance Actions is a curated presentation of short-form performative works developed by students of the School of Culture and Creative Expressions, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar University Delhi, as part of the M.A. Performance Studies programme. Emerging from the course Performance Practice as Research, the work foregrounds the idea that performance can function as a rigorous mode of academic inquiry, where embodied practice and critical thinking intersect. Each performance action, ranging between three to five minutes, is conceived as a research-driven intervention responding to urgent socio-political and ethical concerns of the contemporary world. Collectively devised by a diverse cohort of students, the actions engage with themes of solidarity, oppression, justice, perseverance, memory, nostalgia, and collective silence. The works navigate both public and intimate terrains, articulating experiences of loneliness, suppressed trauma, harassment, and exploitation alongside gestures of resistance and hope.







A key focus of Performance Actions lies in ethical engagement. The performances critically examine the body, materiality, spatiality, and uniformity, questioning how power operates through everyday structures and practices. By blending performativity with academic research, the students create a charged space where personal experience becomes political reflection. Overall, Performance Actions stands as a compelling demonstration of practice-based research, reaffirming performance as a vital tool for ethical questioning, social critique, and collective imagination.





Helena

Helena is an intimate, autobiographical performance developed at The Aleksander Zelwerowicz National Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw, directed by Magdalena Dąbrowska. Rooted in lived memory, the play unfolds through the recorded voice of the director's ninety-three-year-old grandmother, Helena Olimpia Dąbrowska (1926–2022), whose testimony becomes both narrative spine and emotional compass.



The performance traces Helena's life from childhood and youth to marriage with Władz, moving through moments of tenderness and joy alongside the weight of war, illness, and loss. Told with disarming humour and distance, her voice transforms private remembrance into a shared theatrical experience. The geography of Białystok expands into a universal landscape, where "once" and "now" coexist in a fragile, continuous present.



What gives Helena its quiet power is the way love is framed not as sentimentality, but as endurance. Affection here is labor, memory is responsibility, and survival is an act of care. For the director granddaughter, the work carries a deeply personal ache, yet it resists nostalgia by honoring Helena as she wished to be remembered, clear-eyed, witty, and resilient. Helena stands as a tender act of memorial theatre, where storytelling fulfills a final wish: to keep a life present through voice, love, and shared listening.





CULTURAL EXHIBITION

Cultural Exhibitions

The Cultural Exhibition at IFTS 2025 was envisioned as a vital space for showcasing the traditional and folk art forms of the region. It was deemed imperative to create ample opportunities to present these living cultural expressions so as to effectively communicate the depth and diversity of our cultural heritage to esteemed participants and visitors from different parts of the world.

Rooted in community traditions and performative rituals, the exhibition brought together music, dance, movement, and spectacle, transforming the festival spaces into sites of cultural exchange and shared celebration. By foregrounding indigenous and folk practices alongside international theatre pedagogy, the Cultural Exhibition reinforced the spirit of IFTS as a meeting ground of local traditions and global artistic dialogue.

The Cultural Exhibition at IFTS 2025 was envisioned as a vital platform to showcase the traditional and folk art forms of the region, offering international participants and visitors an opportunity to encounter the depth and diversity of local cultural heritage. As part of this initiative, the exhibition featured four major programmes that reflected the richness and variety of indigenous performance traditions: Pulikkali, BASURI, Phag and Ghumar, and Kolkali and Dhuff Mutt. Together, these performances created a vibrant cultural landscape within the festival, foregrounding community-based art practices and reinforcing the spirit of IFTS as a meeting point of local traditions and global theatre pedagogy.

Together, these performances offered a vibrant cultural landscape, allowing participants to encounter diverse regional traditions while experiencing the collective spirit and performative energy that define the cultural ethos of IFTS 2025.



Pulikkali
A Dynamic Expression of Regional Folk Tradition

Pulikkali was presented as one of the key cultural programmes of the Cultural Exhibition at IFTS 2025. The performance took place on 03 February 2025, from 10.00 AM to 11.00 AM, in front of the Main Gate, where the open public space allowed for maximum visibility and interaction with the festival participants and visitors.

Characterised by vivid body painting, energetic movements, and pulsating rhythms, Pulikkali brought a strong sense of celebration and collective spirit to the festival atmosphere. The performers, embodying the iconic tiger imagery central to the form, transformed the entrance area into a lively performance arena, drawing in audiences and creating an immediate sense of festivity.

As part of the Cultural Exhibition, the Pulikkali performance effectively introduced international and national participants to a living folk tradition rooted in community celebration. The programme successfully conveyed the visual power, performative energy, and cultural significance of the form, reinforcing the objectives of IFTS 2025 to foreground indigenous cultural expressions within a global theatre context.











Basuri: A Collective Presentation of Traditional and Folk Performance Forms

BASURI was presented as a major cultural programme under the Cultural Exhibition of IFTS 2025, with the objective of showcasing the diversity and richness of traditional and folk art forms of the region. The programme was held on 03 February 2025 from 06.45 PM to 07.45 PM in front of the Department of Music, where the open campus space was effectively transformed into a vibrant performance arena that encouraged active audience engagement.

The programme featured a wide array of traditional performances, including Karagam, Kaaliyattam, Dummy Horse Dance, Silambattam, Manattam, Peacock Dance, Pinnal Kolattam, Oyilattam, Kavadiyattam, Sattaikuchiattam, Paraiyattam, and Kaliyattam. Together, these forms represented ritual practices, martial traditions, and celebratory dances rooted in community life, offering participants and visitors a comprehensive view of the region's cultural landscape.

BASURI was presented with the support of the South Zone Cultural Centre, whose sponsorship played a significant role in bringing together this diverse ensemble of performances. The programme stood out as a key component of the Cultural Exhibition, successfully fulfilling its purpose of communicating the depth, vitality, and continuity of folk traditions within the broader framework of IFTS 2025.
















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An overview of Origins, Regions, and Occasions of Selected Folk and Traditional Performance Forms

Karagam originated in Tamil folk ritual traditions and is primarily practised in Tamil Nadu during temple festivals and religious ceremonies; Kaaliyattam has its roots in ritual worship practices of South India and is performed during local shrine festivals and seasonal rites; the Dummy Horse Dance emerged from folk celebratory traditions across parts of South India and is commonly presented during village festivals and processions; Silambattam originated in ancient Tamil martial culture and is practised during cultural festivals and demonstrations of traditional warfare skills; Manattam belongs to rural folk traditions of Tamil Nadu and is performed during community celebrations and harvest-related occasions; the Peacock Dance draws inspiration from nature and is found across South India, often performed during cultural festivals and ceremonial events; Pinnal Kolattam originated in Tamil Nadu and is performed mainly during temple festivals and community celebrations; Oyilattam has its origins in agrarian regions of Tamil Nadu and is associated with harvest festivals and seasonal celebrations; Kavadiyattam originates from Tamil devotional practices and is performed across South India, particularly during pilgrimage festivals as an act of penance and offering; Sattaikuchiattam belongs to folk performance traditions of South India and is performed during local festivals and public celebrations; Paraiyattam originated among drumming communities of Tamil Nadu and is traditionally performed during social, ritual, and protest occasions; and Kaliyattam has its roots in ritual performance traditions of Kerala and adjoining regions, presented during temple festivals and community worship ceremonies.





Phag and Ghumar: Expressions of Rhythm, Grace, and Community

Phag and Ghumar were presented as part of the Cultural Exhibition at IFTS 2025, offering audiences an evocative glimpse into the vibrant dance traditions of North India. The programme was staged on 04 February 2025, from 08.00 PM to 09.00 PM, at the Prof. S. Ramanujam Theatre, creating a focused performance setting that highlighted the aesthetic and rhythmic qualities of the dances.

Phag, associated with seasonal celebration and collective joy, was marked by lively movements, rhythmic patterns, and a strong sense of communal participation. Ghumar, known for its graceful circular movements and expressive use of costume and rhythm, contrasted this energy with elegance and fluidity. Together, the two forms presented a balanced portrayal of celebratory and lyrical traditions rooted in community life and cultural memory.

The programme was presented with the support of the South Zone Cultural Centre, whose involvement ensured the authenticity and quality of the performances. As part of the Cultural Exhibition, Phag and Ghumar contributed significantly to the festival's objective of showcasing diverse regional traditions, allowing participants and visitors to experience the cultural plurality that underpins the ethos of IFTS 2025.





























Kolkali and Dhuff Mutt: Collective Rhythm and Folk Performance

Kolkali and Dhuff Mutt were presented as a significant cultural programme within the Cultural Exhibition of IFTS 2025, highlighting rhythmic and community-based performance traditions rooted in the Malabar region. The programme was staged on 07 February 2025, from 08.00 PM to 09.00 PM, and was presented by Ishal Academy, Thalassery.

Kolkali, characterised by its circular formations, synchronised movements, and the rhythmic striking of sticks, demonstrated a strong sense of collective discipline and communal harmony. Dhuff Mutt, performed with frame drums, complemented this energy through powerful rhythms, choral singing, and coordinated bodily movement, creating an immersive sonic and visual experience. Together, the two forms foregrounded rhythm as a central expressive element and reflected the close relationship between music, movement, and social life.

As part of the Cultural Exhibition, Kolkali and Dhuff Mutt offered participants and visitors an opportunity to engage with living traditions that continue to thrive within community contexts. The programme reinforced the objectives of IFTS 2025 by showcasing indigenous performance practices and emphasising the role of collective participation and rhythm in folk theatre and dance traditions.










IFTS

Music Jamming

The fourth day evening also witnessed an out-of-schedule programme titled Music Jamming, where delegates and participants came together in an informal and spontaneous gathering to share their musical talents. The session created a relaxed and inclusive space for collective expression, with participants performing, improvising, and engaging in musical dialogue across diverse styles and traditions. This unscheduled event fostered camaraderie and cultural exchange, reinforcing the spirit of collaboration and shared creativity that characterised IFTS 2025.













PAPER PRESENTATION

The paper presentation sessions of the International Festival of Theatre Schools 2025 were conducted across three days as part of the academic programme of the festival. These sessions were scheduled on 04 February, 06 February, and 07 February 2025, and brought together scholars, educators, and theatre practitioners for focused academic exchange.

On 04 February 2025, the paper presentation session was held from 03.45 PM to 04.45 PM at La Sala. The session featured presentations by Prof. Dr Marcin Bartnikowski, Ameet Parameswaran, and Łukasz Chotkowski, representing institutions from Poland and India.

The second paper presentation session took place on 06 February 2025 from 03.45 PM to 04.45 PM, with presentations by Ms R Thavachchelvi and Dr Dinesh Yadav, offering perspectives from Sri Lanka and the United States.

On 07 February 2025, the paper presentation session was conducted from 03.45 PM to 04.45 PM. The session featured presentations by Dr Mrityunjay Kumar Prabhakar from Visva Bharati University, Kolkata, and Dr Suzanne Osmond from NIDA, Australia.

These sessions formed an integral part of the festival report, documenting the structured academic engagements of IFTS 2025 and reflecting the festival's commitment to scholarly dialogue within theatre and performance studies.

Paper Presentation Session I

04 February 2025 | 03.45 PM – 04.45 PM | La Sala

The first paper presentation session of IFTS 2025 was held on 04 February 2025 at La Sala and marked the formal beginning of the festival's academic deliberations. The session was chaired by Vinod Narayanan from the School of Drama and Fine Arts, whose moderation ensured a focused and engaging scholarly exchange. Bringing together presenters from Poland and India, the session addressed critical questions of ethics, violence, colonial modernity, and responsibility in contemporary theatre and theatre education.

The session opened with Prof. Dr Marcin Bartnikowski of The Aleksander Zelwerowicz National Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw, who presented the paper Violence – Changes in Modern Theatre and Education. The presentation examined changing perceptions of violence in contemporary theatre practice and pedagogy, challenging historically accepted aggressive methods of actor training and questioning whether theatre can confront violence without reproducing it. This was followed by Ameet Parameswaran from the School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi, who presented Theatricality, Antinomies of Colonial Modernity and the Ethical. The paper critically engaged with post independence Indian theatre and the discourse of theatre of the roots, focusing on Malayalam plays to explore the complex relationship between ethical responsibility and political engagement.

The session concluded with a presentation by Łukasz Chotkowski, also from The Aleksander Zelwerowicz National Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw, titled Ethics in Documentary Theatre: On the Example of Working on a Polish Indian Performance about Widows in Vrindavan. The paper reflected on ethical concerns in documentary theatre, particularly in relation to cross cultural collaboration, representation, and the responsibilities of theatre makers.

Overall, the first day's paper presentation session established a strong intellectual foundation for IFTS 2025, foregrounding ethics as a central concern in contemporary theatre discourse and practice.



Paper Presentation Session II

06 February 2025 | 03.45 PM – 04.45 PM

The second paper presentation session of IFTS 2025 was held on 06 February 2025 from 03.45 PM to 04.45 PM. The session was chaired by Dr Sreejith Remanan, whose moderation facilitated focused academic discussion and engagement. The session brought together scholars from Sri Lanka and the United States, reflecting the international scope of the festival's academic programme.

The session began with Ms R Thavachchelvi from the Department of Drama and Theatre Arts, University of Jaffna, Sri Lanka, who presented the paper Examining the Integration of Community Engaged Learning and Ethical Practices in Applied Theatre Projects for Social Change: A Study Based on Tamil Theatre in Sri Lanka. The paper explored the evolution of Tamil theatre from traditional Koothhu performances to contemporary applied theatre practices, emphasising community participation, ethical engagement, and culturally grounded pedagogies aimed at social change.

This was followed by Dr Dinesh Yadav from A&M Texas University, USA, whose presentation examined theatre practice and pedagogy through an ethical lens, situating contemporary performance within broader questions of responsibility, engagement, and social impact.

The second day's paper presentation session contributed significantly to the academic discourse of IFTS 2025 by foregrounding ethical considerations in applied theatre and community based practices, reinforcing the festival's commitment to socially responsive and pedagogically grounded theatre making.



Paper Presentation Session III

07 February 2025 | 03.45 PM – 04.45 PM

The third paper presentation session of IFTS 2025 was held on 07 February 2025 from 03.45 PM to 04.45 PM. The session was chaired by Ameet Parameswaran, who guided the discussions and ensured a sustained engagement with the academic themes of the festival. The session brought together scholars from India and Australia, offering perspectives that connected performance, society, and global theatre practices.

The session opened with Dr Mrityunjay Kumar Prabhakar from the Department of Drama and Theatre Arts, Sangit Bhavana, Visva Bharati University, Kolkata, who presented the paper The Ethical Dilemmas: Performance as Representation of Society. The paper examined the inseparable relationship between performance and society, focusing on ethical challenges arising from representation, censorship, public objection, and the responsibility of artists when engaging with sensitive social, religious, and political subjects.

The session concluded with a presentation by Dr Suzanne Osmond, Head of Academic Development and Research at NIDA, Australia, titled Artisanal Crafts on the Global Stage: Local and Global Connections in Commercial Musical Theatre. The paper explored ethical collaboration between South Asian artisans and global theatre industries, highlighting issues of labour, cultural exchange, authorship, and the pedagogical value of teaching traditional crafts within theatre education.

The third day's paper presentation session further strengthened the academic framework of IFTS 2025 by situating ethical inquiry within both societal representation and global performance economies, thereby reinforcing the festival's thematic focus on ethics and theatre.



IFTS FELLOWSHIPS


KSFE
(ഒരു കേരള സർക്കാർ സ്ഥാപനം)


RAKESH
BHARADWAJ
FOUNDATION

IFTS Fellowship Programme

The IFTS 2025 Fellowship Programme is designed to extend the pedagogical and social vision of the In-ternational Festival of Theatre Schools beyond the festival space and into community engagement.

Fellowship Award

Each selected fellow will receive a fellowship amount of INR 10,000 per month.

The duration of the fellowship is one year.

Selection is based on the applicant's participation in IFTS workshops or camps.

Fellows will undertake part time collaborative work with identified communities during the fellowship period.

Aim of the Fellowship

The fellowship programme aims to establish meaningful and productive relationships between IFTS and diverse communities through sustained artistic and pedagogical engagement.

Fellowship Titles and Sponsors

There are four fellowships awarded under two titled categories:

KSFE – IFTS Fellowship

Supported by Kerala State Financial Enterprises Ltd (KSFE)

The Vinay and Rakesh Bharadwaj – IFTS Fellowship

Supported by the Rakesh Bharadwaj Foundation

Eligibility and Selection

These fellowships are awarded to final semester postgraduate students.

Selection is based on the merit and feasibility of the proposal submitted by the applicant.

Proposals must demonstrate a clear plan for community level engagement using theatre, arts, or allied practices.

Objectives of the Fellowship

To provide young practitioners with a platform to contribute to community development through artis-tic, pedagogical, and research based practices.

To disseminate the knowledge and learning gained through IFTS beyond institutional boundaries.

To promote sustainable and community driven initiatives that address local challenges and encourage long term social development.

To equip fellows with leadership and project management skills through real world engagement.

IFTS 2025 fellowship Awardees

KSFE – IFTS Fellowship

Amass S. Sekhar
Project Title: Theatre and Ethics – A Community Engagement & Travelling Theatre Initiative

Revathy Mol A T
Project Title: Embodied Resistance: A Socio-Political Discourse on Paniya Dance through Physical Theatre.


Amass S. Sekhar


Revathy Mol A T

Vinay and Rakesh Bharadwaj – IFTS Fellowship

Amal Babu
Project Title: Where the Sight fades Stories Begin.....crafting the Theatre for the Inner Eye

Gadha. R. Krishnan
Project Title: Whispers of Power: Kudumbashree Women, Ethical Leadership and Unseen Architectures of Society.


Amal Babu


Gadha. R. Krishnan

INTERVIEWS

Stomping Tradition into the Future: Alex Ashan's Life with Chavittunadakam

Alex Ashan / *Interviewer*

Rooted in rhythm and discipline, this in depth conversation traces Alex Ashan's journey from a curious schoolboy to a transformative Chavittunadakam Ashan, offering a rare insider view of a powerful yet underrecognized Kerala theatre tradition shaped by commitment, social engagement, and cultural responsibility.

Interviewer: I have heard that since the 1980s, Ashan has been learning Chavittunadakam. Could you share your experience in Chavittunadakam from then?

Alex Ashan: Chavittunadakam is a traditional art form. I hail from a place called Pallipuram in Ernakulam district. When I was in the 10th grade, one day, my father mentioned a Chavittunadakam Kalari and took me and my sister to see it. At that time, I had no idea what it was. But once I stepped in, we took off our slippers, left them outside the Kalari, bowed, and entered the stage. There were around 22 people of my age, along with others younger than 10th grade. That was the first time I heard about this art form, though I still didn't understand its depth. To me, it was just a fun event.

My first class began with Chuvadu. The renowned Antony Charankulath Ashan and writer Raphael Acharuparambil taught us Chavittunadakam. The first play they introduced us to was Anjelikha. Within six months, we learned 14 Chuvadu, and we would practice every Sunday. We were very excited to learn each week. After six months of practice, it was time for casting, and my Ashan gave me the hero's role. The performance lasted around four hours, and I was part of Scenes 10 to 28. Despite my young age, I performed with great enthusiasm, even singing and acting at times.

After each scene, the audience would present garlands—some made of money and others of flowers—to the best performers. Money garlands were offered to Ashan. This tradition of appreciation was common in my hometown. My early experiences with Chavittunadakam were deeply positive, and I went on to perform this play (Anjelikha) in more than 115 stage events in different places. These performances still bring back a host of fond memories.

Interviewer: After performing the same play more than 115 times, did you bring improvisations to each performance, or did all of them feel the same to you?

Alex Ashan: While performing, I always followed the method my Ashan had taught me. I never consciously tried to make changes, but over time, I noticed natural improvements with each performance. I simply focused on doing what my Ashan had instructed. Perhaps he saw something in me, as by 1987, I had become an Ashan myself.

At that time, females were rarely seen in Chavittunadakam Kalaris. But in my Ashan's Kalari, there were eight female students, including my sister. Back then, women were expected to stay in the kitchen and not be on stage. Sebeena Rafi worked hard to bring women into Chavittunadakam, and these eight women, including my sister, grew up to become active performers.

With changing times, I introduced several modifications made to Chavittunadakam without compromising its traditional essence. One issue with the four-hour performance was that after every scene, the curtain would fall, and a detailed explanation of the next scene would follow. In today's world, audiences lack the patience for that. So, we reduced the curtain intervals, introduced blackouts like in modern theatre, and gave short explanations during the blackout. This change helped reduce the duration to around three hours. Chavittunadakam has never brought me much financial benefit, but more than money, I continue with it for the happiness and satisfaction it gives me.

Interviewer: Chavittunadakam, as the name suggests, involves Chavittu (stomping). Is there a story or reason behind this?

Alex Ashan: According to what I've heard from my forebears, Chavittunadakam was initially called Thattupolipan Nadakam. In earlier times, it was performed on raised platforms made of wooden planks (Palaka Thattu). Every time the actors stomped (Chavittu), it produced a deep, resonant sound from the wood that captivated the audience. The stronger the stomp, the louder the sound—sometimes even causing the plank to break (hence, Thattupolipan).

This energetic interaction between performer and stage filled the atmosphere with power, mesmerizing both the artists and the spectators. That's why it's called Chavittunadakam—it combines Chavittu (stomping) and Nadakam (drama). The art form beautifully blends elements from five other traditions: Opera, Kathakali, Yakshagana, Kalaripayattu, and Koodiyattam.

Interviewer: Every art form is connected to its place of origin. I've heard that there are multiple versions of Chavittunadakam performed by different groups. What are the differences between them?

Alex Ashan: Yes, exactly. Different regions in Kerala have their own styles. Alappuzha has its unique version, Kochi follows a different style under the guidance of Brito Ashan, and we in Ernakulam have our distinct approach. These days, audiences particularly enjoy the Ernakulam style because of its distinctive stomping patterns and expressive performance techniques.

However, such differences are natural and unavoidable. People across Kerala and even outside the state have their preferences—some prefer Alappuzha's style, others Kochi's, and many favour Ernakulam's. Each regional version has its own dedicated audiences, who admire its specific charm and traditions.

Interviewer: In 1989, you transitioned from a student to an Ashan, director, and one of the main founders of St. Rocky's Nrutha Kalabhavan. With your vast experience, have you brought any changes or followed any specific principles?

Alex Ashan: I've always been deeply interested in drama and acting. In 1989, St. Rocky's Kalabhavan was managed by another group, and I got an opportunity to act in Anjelikha, this time as the villain. During that experience, I met a director named Sandhyav, who was well-versed in both Chavittunadakam and traditional theatre (Nadakam).

Usually, Chavittunadakam doesn't give much importance to acting, and casting wasn't always skill-based. But Sandhyav emphasized acting depth, and I learned from that. In 1989, both of us decided to merge two plays and make creative changes. The first major change was giving equal importance to acting. We worked on developing each character carefully and casting appropriately. With our combined experience, I directed the play, introducing blackouts and enhancing the dramatic flow.

We preserved the Chuvadu and Thallam sequences while integrating more expressive acting. One issue we faced was the rising cost of production, so we decided to record the performances. Unfortunately, Chavittunadakam still hasn't received the recognition it deserves. Performances are limited in number, and government support remains minimal. More recognition is essential, and the Chavittunadakam workshop at IFTS was an important step forward, initiated by the School of Drama and Fine Arts.

Interviewer: You mentioned earlier that you were once unable to play a role due to your height. Now, when you teach children, how do you approach casting?

Alex Ashan: When I do casting, my focus is on whether the actor suits the character. For example, I once asked a boy to clean-shave for a role as Napoleon. He hesitated at first but eventually agreed, and the transformation was remarkable—he truly looked the part. That experience reinforced my belief that casting should prioritize the authenticity of the character. Even if it's my own son, if he doesn't fit a role, I'll cast someone else. For me, the success of the Natakam (play) always comes first.

Interviewer: We've heard that you directed a play featuring differently-abled children after studying their experiences. Could you tell us more about that?

Alex Ashan: There's a special school called Karuna in Nayarambalam that invited me to teach a few Chuvadu to their children. Initially, I laughed, thinking it would be too difficult. But they insisted that the children could dance and even perform fight sequences. I decided to give it a try.

When I arrived, I saw children who struggled to walk and stand. I bent down to their level and spoke to them, asking about their lives and how others treated them. Their answers deeply moved me, and I decided to write a story about them and let them perform their own story on stage. Watching those children perform was one of the most fulfilling experiences of my life.

The joy and energy I received from that performance were beyond words. Later, I directed a Chavittunadakam in Abu Dhabi with an all-women's team. I was the first to form such a team, and now, many women's teams perform Chavittunadakam. Today, the distinction between male and female performers has disappeared—both perform with equal passion and vigor.

Interviewer: How was Chavittunadakam received in Abu Dhabi?

Alex Ashan: The response was phenomenal. The audience there showed immense enthusiasm, and the performance was warmly received. Everyone thoroughly enjoyed it, which made the experience truly memorable.

Interviewer: You received the Kerala Folklore Academy Award in 2018 and the Academy Fellowship in 2022. How do you feel about these recognitions?

Alex Ashan: I never performed for awards, but as I mentioned, my greatest recognition was teaching differently-abled children and performing in Abu Dhabi. I believe these official awards came as a result of my continuous efforts—experimenting with Chavittunadakam, teaching women and special children, and conducting workshops at IFTS. I'm sincerely grateful for these honours, as they make me feel that my dedication and hard work have been acknowledged.

Interviewer: Can Chavittunadakam be used as a medium to bring about positive social change?

Alex Ashan: Absolutely. I once directed a play based on the Vypinkara incident, and I believe there are many other social issues that can be addressed through Chavittunadakam. If we have the determination, this art form can be a powerful medium to raise awareness and inspire change. However, for that to happen, we need strong writing and talented playwrights.

Interviewer: What are the major difficulties that Chavittunadakam faces today?

Alex Ashan: The biggest problem is the lack of performance opportunities and venues, and financial support. The government's involvement is limited, and as a result, artists find it difficult to sustain themselves through this art alone.

Interviewer: How can academic institutions like the School of Drama and Fine Arts help overcome these challenges?

Alex Ashan: One major challenge is the scarcity of people who can properly evaluate Chavittunadakam performances. Academic institutions like the School of Drama can help by introducing Chavittunadakam as a formal subject. This would create opportunities for trained artists to pass on their knowledge to the next generation and develop skilled evaluators and judges. It would also bring academic recognition to the art form.

Interviewer: Can you share your experience at IFTS?

Alex Ashan: When I was invited to the festival, I was thrilled that Chavittunadakam was included among 18 workshops. I was delighted to see the enthusiasm and curiosity of participants from all over the world. If even one or two of them take this knowledge back and perform Chavittunadakam in their own countries, I will feel immensely proud. I'm deeply grateful to the School of Drama and Fine Arts for giving me this opportunity.

Interviewer: Thank you so much for participating in this festival and teaching Chavittunadakam.

Alex Ashan: Thank you.

Embodied Journeys and Shared Pedagogies

A Conversation of Vinod Narayanan with Ana Mirtha and Sebastian Rad

The International Festival of Theatre Schools provides a space where artists from different cultures and training traditions come together to exchange ideas, methods, and experiences. This interview features Ana Mirtha and Sebastian Rad, two internationally recognised practitioners whose work engages deeply with physical theatre, acting pedagogy, and contemporary performance. Hosted by Vinod Narayanan at the School of Drama, the conversation forms part of IFTS's ongoing effort to create dialogue between global practices and local learning contexts. Drawing from extensive international training and professional practice, both artists approach theatre as a process of inquiry rooted in the body, imagination, and collective creation. Their presence at IFTS offered students and faculty an opportunity to engage with diverse pedagogical perspectives shaped by movement, acting technique, and intercultural exchange.

Vinod Narayanan: Today at IFTS, School of Drama, we are honoured to have two distinguished international guests, Ana Mirtha and Sebastian Rad Both are internationally recognised and respected artists who travel extensively across many countries, conducting workshops, delivering lectures, and performing. It is indeed a great pleasure to welcome them to the School of Drama and to this interactive interview session. My name is Vinod Narayanan, and I am your host today. Allow me to introduce our two esteemed pedagogues.

Ana Mirtha is an internationally recognized actress, director, theatre maker, and pedagogue, specializing in movement and devising. She graduated in Lecoq Physical Theatre and Devising from LISPA, a school directed by Thomas Prattki and Amy Russell. She completed her extensive training in movement across the United States, Spain, and Argentina, studying a variety of disciplines such as circus techniques, contemporary dance, Butoh dance, the Suzuki method, Laban movement analysis, Grotowski techniques, Viewpoints, object manipulation, and puppetry under eminent artists. Her professional journey has taken her across numerous countries, including Spain, the United Kingdom, the Czech Republic, Argentina, Mexico, Peru, Brazil, Colombia, Guatemala, the United States, Sri Lanka, and India, where she has worked as an actress, deviser, director, and pedagogue.

Our second guest today is Sebastian Rad He hails from Argentina and has built a remarkable artistic career with comprehensive international training in the Meisner technique, Lecoq pedagogy, and the Cabuia School, along with studies at LISPA under notable mentors. He holds an official master's degree in audio-visual performance from TAI in Madrid. His professional experience spans several countries, including Argentina, England, Germany, Spain, Ecuador, Bolivia, and Chile, where he has been active in acting, directing plays, and teaching. Notably, he is one of the firsts officially certified Spanish-speaking teacher specializing in the Meisner technique.

We look forward to an engaging discussion about your artistic journeys, the various techniques you have explored, and how you have developed your distinctive approaches. Let us begin with you, Ana. You have visited India several times and have been here for the past few months. Could you please share a brief account of your journey to India and the nature of your work here, particularly your engagement with the School of Drama and the workshops conducted for our students?

Ana Mirtha: Thank you so much for the kind invitation. My connection with India began through Abhishek Majumdar, who studied with me in London at Lecoq. He immediately told me that if I ever came to India, there were certain institutions I must visit, and one of them was the School of Drama. He spoke very highly of Abhilash and Sreejith, which encouraged me to visit. I came here a few months ago, in September, to teach a Lecoq neutral mask workshop—specifically, "The Journey of the Neutral Mask"—to the students. It was a wonderful experience, though relatively brief due to time constraints at that moment. Nevertheless, I was deeply impressed by the commitment and openness of the students, and I had a truly enriching time at the school.

What struck me most about this institution was its profound commitment to ethics in the arts. Both teachers and students here possess a deep understanding of the artist's social responsibility—the recognition that it is our duty to provoke thought, to engage, and to contribute meaningfully to society. That awareness, I believe, is one of the most beautiful and essential aspects of being an artist. I felt that very strongly during my stay here, and I am truly grateful for that experience.

Vinod Narayanan: Thank you, Ana. And now, Sebastian—what about your journey to India?

Sebastian Rad: Well, this is my first visit to India. I have been here for about two months, and I must say that I am absolutely loving it. I came here after Ana invited me to join this Indian tour, and it has been a profoundly enriching experience. The people here are incredibly warm-hearted and generous. There is a genuine openness and kindness that has deeply touched me. Our time in India has been filled with meaningful encounters and reflections, and I am truly enjoying every moment.

Vinod Narayanan: That is wonderful to hear. Let us now move towards the academic aspect of your work. Could you elaborate on your main focus in theatre, particularly on the idea of devising theatre and how you approach it in your practice?

Ana Mirtha: Both of us studied the pedagogy of Jacques Lecoq at the London International School of Performing Arts. The Lecoq approach emphasizes the body as the central instrument of communication for the performer. While the voice remains an integral part of performance, this pedagogy challenges the tendency of actors to rely solely on speech, neglecting the expressive potential of the body. Here, the physical body becomes the primary medium of artistic communication.

This focus is what led me to study a range of movement-based disciplines—dance, circus arts, and other physical techniques—all connected to the expressive possibilities of the body. The devising aspect of our work is closely linked to this philosophy. We create collectively, often from scratch, where each collaborator contributes ideas and impulses without a rigid hierarchy. There may be defined roles, but creative ownership is shared. Over the past fifteen years, all my professional projects have been devised works developed through collective creation.

Vinod Narayanan: That is fascinating. Sebastian, you are also known for your expertise in audio-visual performance. Could you tell us more about that journey?

Sebastian Rad: Certainly. My career began in the audio-visual industry. My undergraduate degree was in Audio-Visual Directing, which was my initial field of study. However, as I worked within that medium, I realized that my true fascination lay with the actors and their work. I felt that while cinematography and lighting were important, the emotional core of any film or performance resided in the acting.

This curiosity led me to explore acting more deeply. Interestingly, it happened quite by chance—I initially wanted to enroll in a theatre directing course, but it was full, so I joined an acting class instead. On my very first day, when I performed a short scene, I discovered that I was experiencing emotions far more deeply than I allowed myself in real life. That realization was transformative. I immediately fell in love with acting and began to pursue it passionately.

I transitioned from film to theatre, studying Lecoq and Meisner in depth. Over time, I became fascinated with the idea of merging these two seemingly distinct pedagogies.

Though they differ in approach, I have found them to be beautifully complementary. After several years immersed in theatre, I decided to return to the screen. I then completed my master's degree in Acting for the Screen at TAI in Madrid. Now, I am exploring the audio-visual world again—but from a different perspective, bringing my theatrical understanding to cinematic performance.

Vinod Narayanan: That is quite an impressive blend of on-camera and off-camera experience!

Sebastian Rad: Exactly. It allows me to understand both sides of the process, which is invaluable in creative collaboration.

Vinod Narayanan: How do you view the Meisner technique in today's context? Is it still relevant and widely practiced?

Sebastian Rad: Absolutely. The Meisner technique continues to thrive because it addresses a fundamental truth in acting: authenticity. There is no form of art that can genuinely reach an audience without truth at its core. Meisner developed a technique that systematically guides actors toward discovering this truth within themselves and applying it to imaginary circumstances.

The beauty of Meisner's work lies in its structure. It is not an abstract or purely theoretical pursuit. He designed a step-by-step methodology—a series of concrete exercises that gradually lead the actor deeper into emotional truth and spontaneity. It is like climbing a ladder, where each rung takes you closer to genuine expression. This clarity and practicality are what keep the Meisner technique very much alive today.

Vinod Narayanan: Reading through your biography, Ana, I found it impressive that you have studied a wide range of techniques such as Butoh, Suzuki, Grotowski, and, of course, Viewpoints, which we also practice here.

Ana Mirtha: Yes, they are all deeply interconnected.

Vinod Narayanan: Could you explain how you transitioned from one technique to another and how that progression has influenced your own creative method?

Ana Mirtha: Certainly. When I completed my training at LISPA in London, I felt that my body still had more to explore—it wanted to continue evolving and refining its expressive capacity. Butoh, which was part of our training, fascinated me because it emphasizes the imagination of the actor. It is not simply a form of contemporary or stylized dance; rather, it is a way of translating inner imagery and emotion into physical movement. I found that very powerful and complementary to Lecoq's principles, which is why I continued studying Butoh for several years.

Circus arts, too, became an essential part of my exploration. I have always been drawn to a form of poetic theatre rather than strictly text-based realism. My question has always been: how can we tell stories and evoke emotions that transcend the realistic? If one wishes to depict pure realism, one can easily do so on film. But on stage, I believe the challenge is to transform reality into something more symbolic and evocative.

For that, the use of the body, visual imagery, and movement becomes central. Circus provided me with tools to expand my expressive vocabulary, adding new colours and dimensions to my performances. Similarly, puppetry opened up even more possibilities—puppets can do things that humans physically cannot. A puppet can fly, float, or dive beneath the sea. These imaginative freedoms enrich the poetic language of performance.

Vinod Narayanan: That is beautifully explained! One fundamental question: how do you identify yourself professionally—as an actor, a director, or a deviser?

Ana Mirtha: I would describe myself as an actor-deviser. I find it impossible to separate the two. I have never seen myself merely as an interpreter—someone who receives a text, memorizes lines, and follows a director's guidance to construct a character. That approach, though valid, is not where my passion lies. I am far more interested in creation.

In devising, one can take on the roles of both director and performer, but what truly matters is the process of discovery and authorship. For me, the joy of theatre lies in uncovering the truth of one's creative voice through performance. My journey began as an actor,

then expanded into directing, and ultimately evolved into a holistic process of devising.

Vinod Narayanan: Have you also explored clowning?

Ana Mirtha: Yes, indeed. Clowning forms an integral part of our training. During the first year, we focus entirely on physical expression, working through neutral masks and exploring dramatic territories that do not rely on words. In the second year, we move into melodrama, tragedy, and Commedia dell'arte, culminating in clowning.

Clowning is deeply connected to vulnerability and truth. It requires a full journey of exploration before one is ready to reveal such honesty on stage. I truly love clowning—it brings the performer closer to the purest form of authenticity.

Sebastian Rad: If I may add, there is a poetic symbolism in the Lecoq progression. You begin with the largest mask—the complete mask—and as you advance through the training, the mask gradually becomes smaller, until it reaches its simplest and most intimate form: the clown's red nose.

Vinod Narayanan: That is truly poetic. What about performance art?

Ana Mirtha: Yes, I have explored performance art, particularly during my time with a company in London that focused on site-specific and outdoor performances. These projects often dealt less with narrative and more with evoking ideas or emotions in abstract, symbolic ways.

While I have enjoyed working within performance art, I would still identify myself primarily as a storyteller. I am deeply interested in exploring universal themes through specific, human stories. People and their experiences fascinate me endlessly.

Vinod Narayanan: Perhaps that is why your work has such an intercultural focus.

Ana Mirtha: Yes, absolutely. Intercultural dialogue is at the heart of my artistic vision.

Vinod Narayanan: Before we conclude, I would like to ask both of you about your impressions of IFTS and your brief time working here.

Ana Mirtha: It has been a wonderful experience. As Abhilash mentioned today, IFTS serves as a meeting point—a space for collaboration and exchange. I believe this is something the world needs now more than ever: a platform where artists can meet, share, learn, and challenge one another. You are nurturing an environment that encourages intellectual and emotional exchange, and that is incredibly valuable.

By creating such spaces, you are shaping future artists who will continue to build these bridges—traveling, connecting, and bringing diverse voices together. Art, after all, has the potential to become a bridge for communication and even transformation. Everything here has been so thoughtfully prepared, and one can truly feel the love and dedication that went into every detail.

Vinod Narayanan: Sebastian, what are your impressions?

Sebastian Rad: I am deeply impressed. The campus is stunning—surrounded by nature, full of life and tranquility. I can see how this connection with nature must nourish creativity and imagination. Everyone here has been exceptionally kind and welcoming. It has been a truly inspiring and heart-warming experience.

Ana Mirtha: Yes, indeed. There is something profoundly generous about Indian culture. The warmth and openness of the people touch the heart in a very special way.

Vinod Narayanan: Thank you, Ana and Sebastian.

Ana Mirtha: Thank you.

Vinod Narayanan: It has been wonderful speaking with both of you, learning about your experiences, your creative journeys, and your distinctive approaches to devising theatre and acting. We have had a truly insightful and inspiring conversation.

Ana Mirtha and Sebastian Rad: Thank you very much. Thank you.

Listening to the Rhythm of Life

A Conversation with C.J. Kuttapan

Rooted deeply in folk traditions and the lived rhythms of nature, C.J. Kuttapan is an artist whose life and music emerge from the soil, seasons, and sounds of everyday existence. A singer, thinker, and custodian of folk wisdom, Kuttapan's understanding of music goes far beyond performance. For him, rhythm is not something learned from books or institutions, but something absorbed from the womb, from labour, from rain, trees, and human breath. In this conversation, he reflects on ancestral songs learned from his grandfather, the distinction between song and music, and the dangers of detaching folk forms from the lives that created them. He speaks movingly about nature as the first teacher, the impossibility of truly reviving vanished traditions, and the need for an education that reconnects art with life itself. What unfolds is not merely an interview, but a meditation on listening, memory, and the forgotten language that once bound humans, music, and nature into a single rhythm.

Interviewer: Welcome dear C.J. Kuttapan. When I heard some of your speeches, I remembered you saying how your life is connected with folk forms and nature. Can you share it again with us?

C.J. Kuttapan: The primier prayer songs (traditional chants) I learned were the ones sung by my grandfather during his time as a singer (starts singing). As said in this song, "enne petta mannu" which means the nature that gave birth to me, "njan irangi ponna mannu" which means my mother, and "njan vannu ninna mannu" which means the mother earth. That was when I understood that there is a huge difference between each of these places. The need to visit these places in life was what led the early phases of my journey and inspired the direction of my art. (Sings a song: nee evidunnadippadichedi paluvampenne)

Interviewer: What do you think about other songs apart from your own contributions?

C.J. Kuttapan: I believe the lessons we learn in life form the true foundation of songs. I remember a proverb that goes, "nee pattachante aduthu poyi, nee pattu padikkaruthu, pattachante pattukolu kondu avan thachu, ninte sangeetham kedutthikkalayum," which means you should not go and learn under a singer because he will destroy the natural music within you. That was when I realised that song and music are two different things. Then a question arose in my mind, what exactly is music? This question became the beginning of my exploration and lifelong research of the essence of music. I believe that I got my music when I was in my mother's womb itself. Wherever I look, I see rhythm. It exists in the movement of people, in the swaying of trees, in the flowing of rivers, and in the rustle of leaves. The whole world moves in rhythm, and when I realised that, I started to see music everywhere.

Interviewer: Why do you think folk songs still have influence, and why are their elements still used in contemporary theatre?

C.J. Kuttapan: People often say that Nadan Paatu or folk songs were created to ease the difficulties of physical labour, but I strongly disagree with that idea. I feel that we should enjoy our work. Work itself is creative, and anything that is not creative is lifeless. If we do not create, then we are not truly living. When we talk about theatre, beats, rhythm and expression, none of these are newly created by anyone. They have always existed within the rhythm of life. We cannot make anything that matches the simplicity and depth of a mother's lullaby. We cannot define the form or structure of a mother's lullaby. We usually say that a lullaby is sung to put a baby to sleep. This is absolutely wrong. If it is only for sleep, then the child should never wake up and sleep forever. Yet, the child wakes up again. So can we call it a wake up song instead? It shows that

these songs contain deep layers of meaning and emotion that cannot be confined to a single purpose. (Sings)

Interviewer: Paul Zacharia once wrote in an article that when he travelled to Britain, he saw a journal called The Art of Kerala, which presented a very misinterpreted view of the art forms of Kerala. This happened because obsolete forms were revived just to perform in front of foreign audiences. What do you think about this?

C.J. Kuttapan: Art forms that are rooted in real life possess a natural and organic quality, especially folk art forms that emerge directly from people's lives and experiences. When we transform these forms into stage performances only to entertain or impress audiences, that is where the danger begins. These forms lose their original spirit and spontaneity. They were not meant to be performed under artificial circumstances as they were born out of life and its rhythm. How did generations who did not know how to read or write, and who did not even understand the theoretical meaning of music, manage to create art forms that we are still struggling to interpret today? How did they compose songs, form rhythms, and create stories that continue to inspire us? It is because they understood the language of nature. They were connected to the world around them in a way that we are not. Their expressions were not taught through formal education; they came directly from living in harmony with the earth, water, wind, and sound.

Interviewer: Many folk forms and the people who performed them have now completely vanished from the world. Is there any way we can revive them?

C.J. Kuttapan: Reviving them is not truly possible. It is not easy to rebuild the natural world that we have already destroyed. We can only learn to adapt to this new version of nature and our changed environment. We can preserve the memories, the stories, and the essence, but recreating the same natural and emotional setting that gave birth to those forms is impossible. We can only try to hold onto what remains and allow it to inspire new expressions of creativity that belong to the present time.

Interviewer: We have still not recorded such folk forms. We know it is crucial to document them so that their knowledge can be passed on to future generations. What steps have been taken to make sure they are recorded?

C.J. Kuttapan: I remember hearing my father sing a song just once in his life (starts singing a song on rain). It was during a harvest season. One evening, my father came home and told us all to get ready to go somewhere. We walked for around two kilometres and reached a hilly area. There, my father had prepared a small hut under a cotton tree. It was the day before Thiruvonam. When we were about to eat our dinner, a huge storm formed near Churulimala. That was when my father began to sing that song. It was a song pleading with the rain not to come. Through singing, he was actually speaking. But to whom was he speaking? He was not talking to the Chief Minister, the Prime Minister, or any gods. No, he was speaking directly to nature. And what I saw next was truly magical. The huge storm passed nearby but did not harm us. That day, I understood that the language he used to communicate with nature was what I call the "Language of Life". It is the language that holds us all together, the language that connects every living being to the world around it.

At some point, however, we all forgot that language. We lost the ability to listen and respond to the natural world the way our ancestors did. Why did we lose it? Why does everyone now have their own separate language? It is because there exists an education that we cannot receive from schools or books. That is what I call "Nature's Language". It teaches us through experience, through silence, and through our connection with the elements. It cannot be written or taught; it must be lived.

Interviewer: The education on contemporary art forms has made people forget their roots. If we follow the roots of every art form that exists now, we can find folk forms as their starting point. But many people still do not know this. How can we bring the importance and value of folk forms to people's attention?

C.J. Kuttapan: That chapter you mentioned is something that has been consciously created

and developed over time. There is, however, an unconscious rhythm and language within music that cannot be easily defined. To truly learn and understand that, we need a new syllabus, the one that connects learning with nature, rhythm, and life itself.

Interviewer: Once, I saw you teaching over fifty students folk songs, but you only needed ten of them. While you were teaching, it was surprising to see how naturally ten students stood out. When teaching today's children folk songs, what qualities do you think they need?

C.J. Kuttapan: There is a tribal school in Ettumanoor. The principal of the school once called me and said, "Our students want a song to perform at the Yuvajana Utsavam (Youth Festival). We do not have any funds for this. Can you please teach our students a song?" I agreed without hesitation because I had confidence it could be done. Only after reaching the school did I learn that there were just two days left before the festival. Still, I believed it was possible. From evening till night on the first day, I taught the students a song with proper thalam (beat) and asked them to practise it the next day. To my surprise, they learned it perfectly and performed beautifully. They won the first prize at the festival. That experience taught me that children already have a natural connection with rhythm and sound. What they need is not just training but that belief that music already exists within them. I think this answers your question.

Interviewer: If we plan to conduct a folk concert, what would be its beginning and end? Nowadays, when talking about Ganapathi and Saraswathi .

C.J. Kuttapan: There is actually a mistake in what children are singing. It is not Ganapathium and Saraswathium as they say. It is Konapathi and Thorathithi. Over time, many such words have been altered, and their original meanings have faded. We need to understand these roots to preserve the purity of folk traditions.

Interviewer: How are people able to sing while adding beats using instruments or simply by tapping their hands and feet?

C.J. Kuttapan: When my brother and I cut wood with an axe, he strikes first and then I strike next, taking turns in perfect rhythm. If either of us breaks that rhythm, our axes hit together. Yet, without any formal training, we always maintain it. No schools or musicians taught us that rhythm. It was nature that taught us, even before we were born. When we were in our mother's womb, we heard her heartbeat, the first rhythm of life. Nature is our first and greatest music teacher. Every person is born with music and rhythm within them. There is one thing in this world that has no beginning or end, and that is a circle which is the shape of the mother's womb. The womb is the starting point of all creation, a place where there is no big or small, no black or white, no winner or loser. There exists only the rhythm and music of life. Now, somewhere along the way, we have lost that music. But we can regain it even today. For that, we do not need to rebuild the nature we destroyed. It is enough if we stop destroying it further and start listening once again to the rhythm of life.

Interviewer: Thank you! It was wonderful talking to you.

C.J. Kuttapan: Thank you so much.

Art Without Fear: Daniel Collins on Theatre, Pedagogy, and Process

A Conversation with Daniel Collins

In this conversation, Daniel Collins reflects on a journey shaped not by formal training but by instinct, experience, and sustained curiosity, identifying himself primarily as an artist whose earliest language was drawing and painting before theatre opened a collective and public space for his creativity. Beginning from the most basic roles in theatre workshops, he grew into a scenic artist and educator who values collaboration over hierarchy and learning over certainty, with a teaching approach grounded in patience, adaptability, and respect for individual learning processes. Throughout the interview, Collins discusses his instinct led methodology, his views on formal training, and the importance of creative bravery in both art and pedagogy, reflecting on theatre as a living, collaborative art form and on how his experience at the International Festival of Theatre Schools deepened his appreciation for cultural exchange, risk taking, and artistic freedom.

Interviewer: Can you share a brief overview of your journey as an artist? Can I describe you as an artist?

Daniel Collins:Yes, you can describe me as an artist. I have always seen myself that way. From a very young age, I was drawn to art in a way that felt completely natural. I have painted and drawn for as long as I can remember. When I was at school, I struggled with reading and writing, but art was something that always made sense to me. It became my way of expressing myself when words were difficult to find. So, when I left school, it was very natural for me to look for an artistic environment where I could work and grow.

It took some time for me to find my way into theatre. I was not brought up around theatre the way some people are. It was not something I was familiar with. A friend of mine who was working in the West End at that time knew that I was interested in painting and model making. One day, he suggested that I might really enjoy working in theatre. That simple suggestion changed the course of my life.

I started right at the bottom, doing all the small, often unglamorous jobs that needed to be done. From the very first day, I felt completely at home. Theatre made perfect sense to me. I understood its rhythm, its atmosphere, and the teamwork it required. Over the years, as I have gone on to teach others, I have realised that not everyone naturally connects with theatre in that way, which has made me even more grateful that I did.

Theatre has provided me with a wonderful opportunity to express my creativity. While I do paint and draw for myself, those works are private and deeply personal. They rarely leave my studio and often end up in a portfolio that few people ever see. In contrast, theatre gives me the chance to share my artistic vision publicly. The structure of a production, the presence of a stage, and the collaboration with others, all these give my work purpose and life.

What I truly love about theatre is the collaborative process. It is never about one person alone. There are designers, prop makers, lighting experts, scenic artists, and so many other people, each bringing their own expertise. Together, we work towards a single goal, and it is this shared creative effort that makes theatre so special. Every production is a collective piece of art, made possible through teamwork, communication, and creativity.

Experiencing theatre on an international scale has made me appreciate this collaboration even more. It is fascinating to see how theatre is a multi-disciplinary art form across the

world. Everyone brings a unique skill, yet it all comes together to create a unified work of art. Back home, when we are in the middle of technical rehearsals and the show is about to open, you can feel that intense creative energy. The actors are on stage, the lighting is being tested, the set is being painted and adjusted, and everyone is working together. It is exhausting at times, but it is also incredibly rewarding, because what we create together is living art.

Interviewer: What inspired you to develop your own methodology?

Daniel Collins: It is difficult to say exactly where the inspiration came from, but I think it started with the teachers I had in school. The best teachers I remember were patient, understanding, and kind. They never made me feel inferior for struggling. Instead, they encouraged me to learn in ways that suited me. That experience shaped the way I teach and interact with students today.

I have never been someone with a big ego, and I think that has helped me as a teacher. I have seen teachers who use their classes as a stage to show off how much they know or how talented they are. I have never wanted to be that kind of teacher. I believe teaching should be a two-way process. I bring my knowledge, skills, and experience, but I also try to learn from my students. Every student has something valuable to offer, and education becomes richer when that exchange happens naturally.

The most important part of teaching, in my opinion, is recognising that each student learns differently. Some understand things quickly, while others need more time and support. My role as a teacher is to identify those differences and adjust my approach accordingly. Some students like to experiment and learn by doing, while others feel more comfortable when given clear, step-by-step guidance. Recognising those needs and being flexible is essential to effective teaching.

In my classes, I try to get students working as soon as possible. Talking about art can only take you so far. The real learning begins when you start creating. I give short explanations or demonstrations, and then I encourage students to try things out for themselves. Most respond well to this approach, especially in scenic art, where practical experience is the best teacher.

Of course, there are always some students who need more reassurance and structure. They may feel anxious when asked to start independently, and it is my job to support them without taking away their opportunity to grow. Teaching is about balance. You have to know when to guide and when to let go.

Over the years, I have learned that people not only learn at different speeds but also in different ways. Understanding that has been one of the most valuable lessons in both my artistic and teaching journey. Recognising and respecting the individuality of each learner allows creativity to flourish. Ultimately, that is what art and education are both about: discovery, patience, and the willingness to learn from every experience.

Interviewer: What are the inspirations for your methodology?

Daniel Collins: That is an interesting question. To be honest, I am not entirely sure where it came from. My biggest secret, if I can call it that, is that although I now teach at both M.A. and B.A. levels, I never went to college myself. I left school and went straight into work. I have never been formally trained as an adult in what I do now. As far as my craft is concerned, particularly scenic art, I quite literally made it up as I went along.

In the early days, I was working in small theatres where there was not really anyone to watch or learn from. I simply did what felt instinctively right at the time. Some of it turned out to be right, and some of it did not. Over time, as I began teaching, I realised that I needed to deconstruct what I had always done instinctively. I had to take apart my natural way of working and analyse why I did certain things so that I could explain them to others.

I knew how to do things, but I did not always know how to explain why. Teaching forced me to examine my own processes carefully and understand the reasoning behind them. I had to look at what I was doing and ask myself why it worked at certain times and did not at other times. That was an interesting process because many of the things I did were simply

based on intuition. They felt right to me, but I had never needed to articulate the reasoning behind them.

When you teach, instinct is not enough. You must be able to explain your decisions clearly to others. You have to show them why a particular method or approach works. That was one of the biggest challenges for me when I started teaching. It made me reflect on my practice and re-evaluate the way I worked. Sometimes I discovered that what I had been doing instinctively was not the best method, and I had to change it.

I think that links back to what I said earlier about ego. It is important not to assume that your way is always the right way. Even now, my students sometimes come up with new and better ways of doing things, and I have to be open to that. I cannot just say, "Do it my way because that is how I have always done it." I encourage experimentation and discussion. If a student suggests an alternative approach, I will say, "All right, let us try your way." That attitude keeps the learning process alive and active.

Teaching and working in theatre are both constant processes of learning. One of the first things I tell any new group of students is that in almost every production I have ever worked on, there has always been something new. There is always a technique, a material, or a challenge that I have not faced before. That is part of the excitement. I can never claim to know everything. Every project brings a new lesson. It is a valuable life lesson too. You are always learning, no matter how long you have been doing something.

Interviewer: Do you think of this as a blessing, or do you wish you had a teacher or some formal guidance in the field of art?

Daniel Collins: I do think it would have been nice to have some guidance when I first started. It took me a long time to understand whether I was doing the right thing or not. In those early years, I often felt uncertain. I did not know what I did not know. That may sound strange, but I did not know what it was acceptable not to know. I thought I was supposed to know everything, and that was quite overwhelming.

One of the greatest revelations in my career came when I realised that it is completely fine to say, "I do not know how to do that." For a long time, I believed that admitting such a thing meant weakness or lack of ability. You feel pressure to be good at everything, to have an answer for every challenge that comes your way. You look at a design and think, "I have no idea how to make that happen." Accepting that it is okay to not know everything was a big turning point for me.

The key, of course, is to follow that statement with a determination to learn. It is fine to say, "I do not know how to do that," as long as you also say, "but I will figure it out." That attitude changed everything for me. It removed the fear of failure and replaced it with curiosity and confidence. Once I accepted that it was fine not to know everything, I was able to approach challenges with more creativity and openness.

So, yes, in the beginning, it would have been helpful to have someone guide me, someone who could have reassured me that it was fine not to know everything. I might have saved some time and avoided a few mistakes. But looking back, I do not know whether formal training would have made my journey better. I did not have it, yet I have still managed to reach where I am now, so I can only assume it turned out all right.

As a teacher of scenic art, I often tell my students that training does not make you an artist, but it can help you get there faster. It provides structure, guidance, and feedback, which can be invaluable. Some students come in already possessing strong instincts and natural ability. They could probably do the work without formal training, just as I did. But for many others, especially younger students around eighteen or nineteen, structured learning and mentorship are very important.

When I started, I was a little older, around twenty or twenty-one, and perhaps that gave me slightly more confidence to experiment and take risks. Still, training would have made those early years smoother. It would have helped me overcome that initial fear of not knowing what I should know. Having a mentor or teacher to tell you, "It is fine that you do not know this yet, just go and find out," makes a

big difference. Training provides that guidance and reassurance. It makes the journey smoother because you have someone to look to, someone who can share their experience and help you find your own way.

Interviewer: Which educators, philosophers, or artists have inspired you the most? Who do you look up to or study?

Daniel Collins: I think I am much simpler than that. I cannot say there is any particular philosopher or artist whom I study or look up to in a formal way. I am sure I have been influenced by many people and experiences, but I cannot pinpoint exactly who or what they are. My learning has come more from doing, observing, and reflecting rather than from studying any specific individual or philosophy.

Interviewer: How did theatre influence you? How did it welcome you? What drew you to theatre, and how did you end up choosing it?

Daniel Collins: When I was at school, I was good at both art and drama. I enjoyed both subjects equally. However, no one ever suggested that I could combine the two. After finishing school, I left drama behind and went into graphic design, thinking that would be my path as an artist. It was only a few years later, when I was a bit older, that someone suggested theatre as a potential direction for me.

I was fortunate to find the right theatre at the right time. It was a small theatre in Harrogate, in the north of England. At that time, the theatre still made its own productions, which is less common now. They had workshops, designers, painters, and a small team of craftspeople who built everything themselves. I went there without much knowledge, simply asked if I could help, and offered to volunteer. They were preparing for their Christmas pantomime, which is the busiest time of the year for any theatre. It turned out to be perfect timing.

I started by helping wherever I could. I made props, did some painting, moved scenery, helped rig lights, and generally assisted anyone who needed an extra pair of hands. From the very beginning, it felt like a place where I belonged. I had worked in other environments before and often felt like an outsider, but that never happened in theatre. It immediately felt like home.

Theatre has a very particular energy. It requires a certain sensibility, an attitude that values creativity, collaboration, and respect for others' skills. I cannot describe exactly what that quality is, but it is something you feel deeply when you are in the right place. Theatre is a world built on teamwork. Each department—lighting, set design, costume, sound, or scenic art—has its own experts, but everyone is united by a shared goal: to bring a production to life.

That collaborative spirit is what makes theatre so unique. Even in related fields such as film, television, or exhibition work, you rarely find that same level of collective passion and mutual respect. In a good theatre company, everyone is driven by the same creative purpose, and everyone values others bring to the process. That is why I have remained in theatre all these years.

Teaching has become an extension of that same environment for me. I still feel like I am part of theatre because, at RADA, we produce fifteen to eighteen shows a year. Even though technically I have not been working in theatre productions outside of teaching for about fifteen years, it feels no different. RADA operates like a real theatre. It does not feel like a school. Everything we do, from design to performance, is as close to professional practice as possible.

That sense of authenticity and collaboration keeps me inspired. It reminds me why I fell in love with theatre in the first place. It is a world that combines imagination, skill, and teamwork in a way that no other art form quite can.

Interviewer: What are the fundamental principles of your pedagogy?

Daniel Collins: I believe that understanding the true purpose of my teaching is essential to explaining my pedagogical approach. In many ways, my work could be described as practical and goal-oriented. My main responsibility as an educator is to ensure that when my students leave my workshop, they are fully prepared to find employment. At its most basic level, my teaching involves helping

people develop the skills they need to secure professional opportunities. However, one cannot achieve or sustain employment in the creative industries without also nurturing a genuine appreciation for creativity and artistic temperament.

Therefore, my teaching is not limited to technical instruction. I aim to nurture creativity and a fearless approach to artistic challenges. Students must develop what I call creative bravery, the confidence to face uncertainty and to continue creating even when the path is not clearly defined. Scenic art, in particular, is a demanding field that requires both flexibility and resilience. It is not possible to teach every aspect of scenic art, as the discipline itself is vast, and even I am constantly learning new techniques and processes. My goal is to instil in students the ability to adapt, to be unafraid of experimentation, and to remain open to learning throughout their careers.

In my current class, for example, I teach only a small segment of scenic art, which represents a fraction of the entire discipline. The essence of teaching this subject lies in encouraging curiosity and independence. Students must be willing to explore and create their own artistic processes. More important than teaching any specific skill is teaching students how to learn, how to innovate, and how to invent their own solutions when faced with new challenges.

Scenic artists are often required to produce work that matches the limitless imagination of designers. There are no fixed boundaries to what they may be asked to create. The only limitation comes from the designer's creativity, which in itself is infinite. For this reason, I encourage students to think beyond rigid structures. The process is not about following a fixed sequence of steps such as A, B, and C to reach a predetermined result. Artistic creation rarely works that way. The journey can be unpredictable and non-linear, filled with challenges that require both creativity and composure.

This uncertainty can be intimidating, particularly for students who are new to the field. They must develop the flexibility and wisdom to face the unknown with confidence. There are moments when we confront a problem without a clear solution, yet a deadline still approaches. For example, we might be asked to create a large-scale piece that must be ready for performance within a short time. In such circumstances, creative problem-solving and the courage to experiment become indispensable.

My experience helps me manage such situations with calmness and assurance, but my aim as a teacher is to pass that same confidence on to my students. They must learn that even when they do not immediately known how to achieve something, they can rely on their understanding of materials, techniques, and creativity to find a way forward. Teaching, therefore, involves much more than demonstrating skills. It involves shaping a mind-set that embraces experimentation, welcomes mistakes, and sees every challenge as an opportunity to learn.

In the end, the fundamental principle of my pedagogy is to combine practicality with creativity. I teach my students to be employable professionals who are also fearless creators. The ability to adapt, to innovate, and to respond imaginatively to any artistic demand is what defines success in scenic art and in the wider creative world.

Interviewer: As an artist, we often face creative blocks. When you encounter such challenges, how do you deal with them?

Daniel Collins: Creative blocks are a natural part of the artistic process. Every artist experiences them at some stage, and I believe that the key to overcoming them lies in maintaining activity. The worst thing to do when faced with a creative block is to stop completely. Instead, one must continue creating, even if the work seems unrelated or unimportant. The simple act of staying engaged keeps the creative mind active.

When I experience a creative block, I deliberately turn to something new or unfamiliar. Trying something different often breaks the mental stagnation that accompanies creative fatigue. I also find it helpful to work on something I do not feel emotionally attached to. That sense of detachment allows freedom to experiment without fear of failure. For example, I often use materials like chalk and charcoal because they are flexible and forgiving. They allow me

to make mistakes, erase, and start again easily. The process becomes liberating because it is not about perfection but exploration.

One of the most common causes of creative blockage is the fear of failure or the hesitation to destroy something that already looks good. Artists often reach a stage in their work where they become overly protective of what they have produced. They are reluctant to take risks because they fear losing what they have already created, even if it is not quite right. Overcoming this fear is essential. Sometimes the only solution is to start again, to paint over, or to rework the piece entirely.

Artistic freedom comes from understanding that not every piece of work needs to be a masterpiece. Some of the most valuable creative lessons emerge from mistakes and failed experiments. My sketchbooks are full of incomplete drawings, scribbles, and half-finished ideas. They serve as records of my process rather than examples of perfection. This approach removes the pressure of always producing something extraordinary. The joy of creation often lies in the act itself, not necessarily in the final result.

When I teach, I remind students that it is normal to struggle and that mistakes are a fundamental part of learning. I encourage them to take risks and explore new materials, even if they feel uncertain about the results. Using unfamiliar tools or techniques can stimulate creativity and introduce new perspectives. For instance, switching from paint to charcoal, or from paper to a textured surface, can completely transform one's approach.

The goal is to expand one's creative toolkit and to remain open to discovery. Every material and process teaches something different. By broadening their range of experiences, artists prepare themselves to overcome creative stagnation. The key is to avoid narrowing the process and to stay unafraid of experimentation. In short, the way to break through a creative block is to stay active, stay curious, and remain unafraid of failure.

Interviewer: Can you outline the key components of your teaching process?

Daniel Collins: My teaching process combines demonstration, application, and experimentation. It begins with demonstrating a particular technique or method so that students can understand the concept clearly. This is followed by immediate application, where students practice what they have observed. I believe that this practical approach is essential in scenic art, as the discipline cannot be mastered through theory alone. Learning happens most effectively through doing.

After demonstration and practice, I encourage experimentation. Students are invited to adapt the technique, modify it, and see how it behaves in different contexts. This phase of exploration helps them discover their own style and understanding. Scenic art is not a rigid or formulaic craft. It requires creativity within structure. While I allow freedom in experimentation, I also emphasise that scenic art is a craft designed to serve a purpose. The outcome must be functional — it must be able to appear on stage, behind an actor, or as part of a set.

Balancing creativity with practicality is one of the greatest challenges in teaching this subject. There are no fixed rules that can be universally applied to every project. From the first day of training, I tell my students that scenic art has no strict rules. This freedom makes it exciting but also difficult to teach, because each production demands a different approach. While some principles remain constant — such as the fundamentals of trompe-l'oeil or an understanding of scale and perspective — the way these principles are applied varies from one project to another.

My objective is to help students develop a comprehensive toolkit of techniques and materials. Each new experiment adds another skill that may become useful in future projects. The more knowledge and experience they accumulate, the more flexible and confident they become. Being open to new ideas and methods is essential, as scenic art often involves problem-solving in real time.

Ultimately, my teaching process aims to cultivate independent, creative, and adaptable artists who can apply their skills to a wide range of professional settings. It teaches them to balance imagination with purpose, freedom

with structure, and creativity with discipline. Every project becomes an opportunity to learn something new, and every challenge becomes a chance to grow both technically and artistically.

I***Interviewer***: n what ways do theatre and ethics intersect in your teaching?

Daniel Collins: I am not entirely certain how to answer that. On a very basic level, there are some ethical principles that we naturally follow, such as the idea of doing no harm. Because of the nature of what we do, we try, although it is very challenging, to be kinder to the environment. Unfortunately, the industry we work in tends to be quite wasteful.

However, in terms of being open to everyone who walks through the door, ours is not a department where ethical dilemmas often arise. It is not a field that easily lends itself to situations of moral conflict. We try to create an environment that is welcoming, inclusive, and kind to everyone.

We do our best to maintain respect and fairness in all interactions. In my workshop, these values are naturally part of how things operate. There are no written ethical rules or formal codes, but there is a shared understanding that kindness and respect guide everything we do.

This is what I mean when I say that the question is a difficult one. Ethics in theatre education often exists in the background rather than in explicit guidelines. I think the difference lies in the fact that performers are storytellers. They often deal directly with human values and ethical themes through their performances. My work, however, is about enabling those stories to be told. I am not the storyteller myself; I help others bring stories to life.

So, the way ethics manifests in my teaching is more through practice and example rather than through deliberate instruction. It is simply the way we work: we remain open to all, we treat everyone with kindness, and we do our best to be mindful of the environment, even though that can be difficult in such a material-intensive field.

Of the works you have done in the theatre, what is the memorable thing or memorable play?

Daniel Collins: One of the most memorable experiences I have had as a teacher is not connected to a specific play but to a student. Often, at RADA, people join the program without knowing that they want to become scenic artists. They discover their passion during the course.

There was a student several years ago who believed she wanted to specialize in lighting. However, she soon realized that she loved painting. She found she had a real skill for it and decided to focus on scenic art.

As part of the course, we paid a visit to the National Gallery to study paintings. There was an exhibition at the time — I cannot remember exactly which one, but that detail is not very important. What mattered was what happened during that visit.

The student initially appeared bored. She thought the paintings were uninteresting. I asked her to step closer and really look at them — not from a distance but up close. I encouraged her to observe the brush strokes, the layering of the paint, and even the faint pencil lines visible beneath the surface. I wanted her to see how the paintings were built rather than just what they depicted.

At that moment, she had a revelation. She realized that the great masterpieces she was looking at were not unattainable wonders but works created by people using the same techniques she was learning. She recognized the brush movements, the blending of colours, and the way the paint interacted with the canvas. She understood that these great artists had used the same materials and faced the same challenges she did in her own studio.

That realization changed her completely. She became excited, inspired, and deeply connected to the art. For the first time, she could see herself reflected in that world. What had once seemed distant suddenly became accessible and personal.

It was an extraordinary moment for me as well. Watching her discover that connection was profoundly rewarding. It reminded me why teaching is so powerful. That single experience transformed her way of seeing the world, and it also affirmed for me that education in the arts can be truly life-changing.

So, while it was not a play or a performance, it was deeply meaningful and artistic in its own way. It showed how art education can awaken understanding and reshape perspectives. That moment, more than any production I have worked on, remains one of my most memorable experiences.

Daniel Collins: Which is your favourite medium? Charcoal or a chalk?

It is not necessarily charcoal or chalk that I would call my favourite tool. Both have their uses. They are simple, effective, and forgiving mediums, allowing us to create interesting effects quite easily. They also enable flexibility, since we can make changes or adjustments quickly without waiting for materials to dry.

However, if I were to choose the tool that I value the most in scenic art, it would be the spray gun. One of the first things I teach my students is how to use it properly. Much of the scenic art we create — particularly large-scale sets — is achieved through spray painting at various levels of intensity.

It is an unusual tool because few people have the chance to use one before joining the program. To introduce students to it, I often assign them a large-scale project where they create a painting approximately three or four meters wide and two meters high using only the spray gun. The results are often stunning.

Students are amazed by what they can produce with it. The technique allows them to create detailed, photorealistic images with precision. It is one of those tools that can completely change a student's perception of what they are capable of creating. The projects completed using the spray gun are usually among the most impressive in the course.

So, while I would not say it is my favourite tool in an emotional sense, it is certainly one of the most valuable and effective. Every scenic artist should know how to use it. It produces professional, high-quality finishes that are essential for stage design. The spray gun allows for creativity, flexibility, and large-scale artistic expression. For those reasons, it is my preferred tool.

Daniel Collins: How has your experience at IFTS been? What are you forward to?

At this point, I am not entirely sure what to expect, so I am looking forward to everything. My experience so far has been incredible. Yesterday was one of the most wonderful days I have ever had.

It was unusual, slightly intimidating, and quite long, but it was also vibrant, colourful, and full of energy. The atmosphere was alive with creativity, music, and excitement. The production that took place last night was unlike anything I have ever witnessed before. It was extraordinary.

It is something that would not be possible in England because of the strict health and safety regulations. For instance, having a performer on fire on top of a building would never be allowed there. Seeing that performance here was breath-taking. It demonstrated the level of creative freedom that exists when there are fewer constraints, and it was inspiring to witness such bold artistic expression.

I was also eager to begin teaching, and I felt a real sense of fulfilment once I started. Yesterday, although I thoroughly enjoyed the experience, I felt a bit like an outsider. Today, after contributing to the teaching process, I feel like I have become part of the festival community. It feels wonderful to belong and to be part of something so collaborative and creative.

The environment here is extraordinary. The energy, the openness, and the passion of everyone involved make it a very special experience. I find myself surrounded by nature, sitting in a bamboo forest, being interviewed about art and theatre — it is both surreal and inspiring.

Just a few days ago, I was in a completely different setting, and now I am here, immersed in an entirely new cultural and artistic environment. This contrast makes the experience even more remarkable.

I have enjoyed every moment and feel incredibly fortunate to be part of this festival. It has been one of the most enriching experiences of my life. I sincerely hope to return if I am invited again.

Thank you

You' re welcome.

From Practice to Pedagogy: Design, Inquiry, and Ethics in Theatre Education

A Conversation with Dinesh Yadav

The relationship between theatre practice and pedagogy is never linear, evolving through experience, questioning, and ongoing negotiation between tradition and change. In this in depth conversation, Dinesh Yadav, theatre designer, practitioner, and Associate Professor of Design at Texas A&M University, reflects on a journey spanning rural Rajasthan, Indian theatre traditions, and contemporary design education in the United States.

Drawing from his background in science, performance, and teaching, Yadav discusses practice based research, ethical responsibility in design, cross cultural pedagogy, and inquiry as a living method of learning. From farm fields in Kankar Chhaja to digitally driven classrooms in Texas, the conversation explores how observation, curiosity, and empathy shape theatre making and teaching, and why education must remain a shared, evolving ecosystem rather than a fixed transfer of knowledge.

Interviewer: Good morning, sir.

Dinesh: Very good morning.

Interviewer: Welcome to the talk. As a practitioner, could you share where your journey began as a practitioner or as a designer? How did you transition to your current role as an Associate Professor of Design at A&M University, Texas? When did the shift happen from practitioner to educator?

Dinesh: If I consider my background, my father was a teacher, and I grew up surrounded by educators. Before joining the National School of Drama, I was also a teacher. I had a background in chemistry, completed a PhD in the subject, and was teaching at a college before pursuing theatre. So, teaching has always been part of my journey, even after graduating from NSD. As a practitioner, one naturally engages in teaching through workshops, production sessions, or directing. Directing itself is a constant teaching process. When working with actors or designers, you explain concepts, listen to their inputs, and facilitate a collaborative learning experience. Even in production meetings, designers communicate their ideas to directors, making sense of elements through discussion My first formal teaching position was at BITS Pilani in 2012 as an Assistant Professor. That was when I fully committed to teaching. Between 2007 and 2012, I was mainly practicing theatre, but at BITS, I continued professional theatre work alongside my academic responsibilities. In 2018, I moved to the United States and began teaching at the University of Wisconsin Green Bay. While my primary role was teaching, I also designed in-house productions. In 2024, I joined Texas A&M University, where 40 percent of my work is categorized as research, which is largely practice based. This means I engage in practical work and bring those experiences into the academic space as research. Theatre education thrives on a reciprocal relationship between practice and teaching. Globally, this integration is highly valued as it brings professional practice into the classroom and takes academic insights back into professional work, benefiting both students and practitioners. This dynamic is evident in many disciplines, including science, technology, and medicine, where major innovations often stem from universities before influencing the industry. The same holds true for theatre; it is an ongoing exchange, a continuous process of learning and sharing.

Interviewer: From what you have shared, your teaching is deeply rooted in practice based

methods. Do you think your background and the environment you grew up in shaped your teaching philosophy or influenced how you interact with students in the classroom?

Dinesh: Absolutely. Our backgrounds and contexts always travel with us. I grew up in a rural farming village in Rajasthan.

Interviewer: Could you share more details? Where exactly?

Dinesh: Sure. I come from Behror, a town located between Delhi and Jaipur, previously on Highway 8, now known as Highway 48. Near Behror is my village, Kankar Chhaja. When I was growing up, it had around 500 houses. My parents and siblings still live there. Whenever I return for festivals or academic events, I visit my village. Our context forms our identity and influences how we teach. Whether I am in an American, British, or Indian classroom, my journey from Kankar Chhaja to Texas A&M always comes with me. Sometimes, my village values emerge more prominently, while at other times, my academic experiences in Texas take precedence. It is a fine balance that shifts depending on the situation.

Interviewer: Do you still carry those values? If you had to pinpoint something from your formative years that continues to shape your teaching philosophy today, what would it be?

Dinesh: Definitely. Let me give you a simple example. As a child, I helped my grandfather on the farm. We would dig small holes in the field to check for moisture to determine whether a seed would sprout. We observed the sky, analyzed the clouds, and assessed whether there was enough or too much moisture. This observational and inquiry driven approach shaped my mindset. Later, as a science student, I reinforced this habit by questioning, testing, and proving concepts through experimentation. This inquisitive mindset remains central to my teaching philosophy. I encourage my students to question everything rather than accept information passively. If I present an idea, they should not just accept it at face value. They should analyze it, contextualize it, and determine its validity for themselves. This spirit of inquiry defines how I view both life and education.

Interviewer: Based on your experience as both a practitioner and a teacher, do you think this approach is modern, or does it have traditional roots? If you had to compare your pedagogy with traditional practices, how would you describe the differences?

Dinesh: My understanding of tradition is that you inherit knowledge from your roots, but you also adapt it to your context. I grew up performing Swang in my village, learning by observing others. However, no two children performed Swang in the same way; each interpreted it based on personal understanding and context. I see tradition as a foundation for experimentation, with modernism as its natural extension. Inquiry, in my view, is a modern mindset, and this inquiry is what keeps tradition alive. If tradition becomes rigid and stops evolving, it risks becoming stagnant. I encourage questioning and experimentation while staying true to the core value system. Therefore, I see my approach as modern in the sense that it emphasizes inquiry as a way to progress.

Through my teaching and practice, I have learned that the most effective form of education happens when curiosity meets reflection. When students are encouraged to explore ideas and make mistakes, they discover their own creative voice. I believe that theatre, at its core, is about exploration and empathy, understanding the world from multiple perspectives. These values are not separate from tradition but an extension of it. The stories we tell, the gestures we use, and the ways we communicate are deeply rooted in our cultural past, yet they evolve with each generation of learners and practitioners.

At Texas A&M, I constantly apply this philosophy in my classes. I design assignments that allow students to connect theory with practice, encouraging them to find the intersection between their personal experiences and professional aspirations. The process is not just about producing art but also about understanding its social and cultural implications. I tell my students that every performance is an act of research, an inquiry into the human condition. This makes theatre education more meaningful and relevant in the contemporary context.

Coming from a background in both science and theatre, I have always viewed creativity as a structured form of inquiry. Whether it is analyzing a chemical reaction or staging a play, the process involves observation, experimentation, and reflection. These methods, rooted in my early life on the farm and my academic training, continue to shape my teaching. I want my students to realize that knowledge is not static; it is a living and evolving process that thrives on questioning and curiosity.

In conclusion, the transition from practitioner to educator was not a shift but a continuation of the same journey. Teaching and practice are inseparable parts of my life. Each production, classroom discussion, and research project reinforces this belief. The journey from my small village in Rajasthan to an academic institution in Texas reflects not just professional growth but also a philosophical continuity, the idea that learning is a lifelong process of observation, questioning, and creating meaning through practice.

Interviewer: Otherwise, you risk getting stuck in the past. Now, coming to your teaching, particularly in design, design plays a significant role in theatre production, incorporating various elements. How do you introduce design to students who are new or unsure about it, helping them connect with the subject?

Dinesh: In recent years, I have approached design from a design thinking perspective. Design is not just about the tangible aspects of theatre; it exists in every field, whether visible or conceptual. Even as I respond to your question, there is a design process at work in my thought structure. Design has always existed, but what is modern is our approach to studying it as a distinct discipline. In my classes, I ask students fundamental questions: What is design? Why do we need design? Where do we see design around us? How do we differentiate between designed and non-designed elements? These questions broaden their perspective beyond lighting, scenic, or costume design. I show them that design exists in healthcare, city planning, propaganda, politics, and psychology. When students enter the theatre field with this mindset, they begin to think about design in a more holistic way rather than from a narrow perspective.

Interviewer: That expands the scope significantly, beyond theatre into everyday life. You mentioned propaganda design and non-propaganda design. Do you face ethical challenges when dealing with such issues? Do ethics and theatre intersect in your practice?

Dinesh: Absolutely, in many ways. Ethics in design teaching is a constant challenge. For example, as an Indian from a rural background teaching in the United States, I often ask myself: Can I bring my cultural context into my teaching? If I do, will students relate to it? If I do not, am I failing as an educator? When I incorporate classical Indian theatre into my design practice, is it cultural appropriation or an authentic integration? If I exclude it, am I conforming to a Eurocentric model of design education? These are ongoing dilemmas. Beyond that, ethical concerns arise in sustainability. In the United States, massive amounts of wood are used for theatre sets, which are later discarded. How should design address environmental responsibility? As a lighting designer, should I use 500 instruments, or can I achieve the same effect with 200? Does reducing my carbon footprint compromise my artistic integrity? These ethical considerations are always present and shape how I approach my work.

Interviewer: Do you have specific principles you follow in your design process?

Dinesh: I follow what I call the “plus one” philosophy. Every time I repeat a task, I add one ethical consideration. For example, if I teach a lighting course, the next time I include a non-Eurocentric perspective such as readings from underrepresented scholars. If I design lighting, I explore ways to achieve the same artistic effect with fewer instruments. At my previous institution, I implemented an eight-hour workday, enforced breaks, and ensured proper safety gear for all crew members. Even in panel selections, such as for World Stage Design 2025 in Sharjah, I ensure representation from diverse backgrounds. These small steps may seem minor, but collectively they create a more ethical and inclusive design practice.

Interviewer: As educators, how do we instill critical thinking and social awareness in students? Do you use specific theatre exercises?

Dinesh: Thoughtful theatre naturally fosters critical thinking. In my design classes, I assign research projects on cultural representation. Initially, students rely heavily on Eurocentric examples, but I challenge them to look beyond those. I tell them to research theatre in Africa, then explore Latin American traditions. This exercise helps them shift their perspective and broaden their understanding. In another project, I ask students to propose a design solution for a social issue. Since Texas has a refugee crisis, one student designed a project addressing border issues. This exercise forces them to think critically about design's role in society. Great teachers like Anuradha ji, Abhilash ji, and Robin Sir always emphasized the importance of questioning. They taught me to keep asking "why" repeatedly, and that habit now informs my own teaching. This approach pushes students to analyze their choices deeply instead of accepting things at surface level.

Interviewer: When students engage with social issues like displacement and refugees, do they develop a deeper emotional connection? How do you nurture emotional intelligence in design students?

Dinesh: Any meaningful project challenges students emotionally. While emotional engagement is usually expected in acting, it is equally relevant in design. I encourage students to draw from their own experiences and emotions. I ask them to use images from their personal lives, such as family photographs, memories, or everyday observations. This creates a deep emotional bond with their designs. For instance, in one class, we worked on a play about refugees. A Mexican student designed a border wall because she had personal ties to the issue. Another student who had experienced poverty created a design set in a scrapyard. One more student built a tower-based design inspired by childhood memories. When designers have emotional investment in their work, their designs become more powerful and truthful. I often ask them simple but meaningful questions: Why is this important to you? What personal meaning does it hold? This process nurtures emotional intelligence and helps students connect empathy with creativity.

Interviewer: In teacher-student relationships, concepts like discipline, responsibility, and freedom come into play. How do you balance these aspects in your teaching process?

Dinesh: This is one of the hardest parts of being a teacher. I studied most of my life in India, where the education system is highly hierarchical. The teacher says something, and the student obeys without question. It follows the tradition of "Guruvani," where questioning authority is often discouraged. While some liberal institutions allow students more freedom, the general system does not encourage them to challenge their teachers. In contrast, in the West, students are active participants in the classroom. They have equal responsibilities and rights, including questioning or arguing with the teacher. They can even challenge their grades and escalate concerns to higher authorities. Teachers in Western education systems do not hold absolute power in the classroom, unlike in many Asian educational structures, where the teacher wields significant influence. This power imbalance sometimes leads to the misuse of authority under the guise of discipline.

For me, the challenge was adapting to a system where students address me by my first name. Initially, it was difficult because I was conditioned to always address my teachers formally. However, I also recognize that both systems have their strengths. The hierarchical system fosters deep respect and sometimes a familial bond between teacher and student, but it may discourage independent thinking. On the other hand, Western systems promote critical thinking and questioning but may lack that same depth of personal connection.

In my teaching, I strive to create a balance between the two. I believe in discipline, but it should be the discipline of the subject rather than of the individual. For example, in scenic or lighting design, certain safety practices must always be followed, such as wearing gloves while handling hot lighting instruments. This

kind of discipline applies equally to teachers and students. I believe respect should not be demanded through authority or hierarchy but earned through good teaching, professional integrity, and genuine care for students' growth. My goal is to create a space where freedom and responsibility coexist, where students can learn not only artistic skills but also empathy, awareness, and respect for others.

Interviewer: You mentioned the differences in educational culture between Texas and India. Have you tried incorporating aspects of the Western system into your teaching here to create a more open and participatory classroom?

Dinesh: Absolutely. At the same time, I have also taken my Indian values and ethos to the West. That is why I focus on the discipline of the subject. From my Indian training, I learned that mastering fundamentals is crucial.

For example, in sketching, drawing a straight line is essential before attempting complex designs. The technique may vary, but the foundational discipline remains constant. Similarly, while I understand my Indian students may never behave exactly like my American students, I still aim to create a space where they feel empowered. I reduce my power in the classroom and give students a voice. They should feel free to question, argue their points, and challenge decisions without fear of bias or favoritism.

Interviewer: Have you faced challenges in implementing this alternative approach?

Dinesh: Yes, always. Changing the status quo is difficult because people are comfortable with their existing systems. In both India and the U.S., institutions resist change. It is like shaking a tree—there is always some resistance. That is why I follow a "plus-one" theory: rather than enforcing drastic change, I expose students to different perspectives gradually.

For instance, during this festival, I had three American students participate. My Indian students observed their punctuality and discipline, arriving at 7:30 AM for the bus and never being late for workshops. Likewise, my American students noticed the deep respect Indian students have for their teachers. This mutual exposure creates an organic exchange of ideas rather than an imposed one.

Interviewer: When it comes to teaching design in the digital era, how do you integrate technology into your pedagogy?

Dinesh: That is a great question. My first workshop proposal focused on pre-visualization in design and reducing the carbon footprint by minimizing electricity use. However, I soon learned that many students lacked personal computers, and installing software was a challenge. This is an area where India can improve. Conceptually, Indian students are brilliant and often ahead of their Western counterparts. However, they lack access to resources that allow them to test their ideas practically. In the U.S., every student typically has a laptop, and companies provide free software. In my lighting design classes, I use multiple software programs like Vectorworks and Vision to create full lighting plots, 3D renderings, and video simulations of lighting sequences. At my university in Texas, we have advanced tools that enable us to create fully rendered 3D video models of entire productions. Technology increases efficiency, reduces manual labor, and allows human resources to be used more effectively. My recent lecture discussed the ethical use of AI, emphasizing how it can accelerate design processes that once took months.

Interviewer: Do you think reliance on such technology could impact students' creativity?

Dinesh: It is a valid concern. Technology simplifies processes, which can sometimes lead to complacency. However, since every designer now has access to the same tools, the real challenge becomes how one's design stands out. This pushes students to think critically. If hundreds of designers are using AI and digital tools, what makes one design superior to the rest? Creativity and originality remain essential.

Interviewer: Given the challenges of integrating digital design in India, how have you navigated them?

Dinesh: The biggest challenge is that most students lack access to personal computers. Advanced design software requires high-performance systems, which can be

expensive. This creates a divide where only those who can afford technology benefit from it. However, there are always alternatives. I remember receiving a lighting plan from Bashir Bhai in Jammu and Kashmir, created using Microsoft Word's simple line and shape tools. It was a perfect lighting plot, showing that resourcefulness can compensate for a lack of high-end tools. Indian students excel at creative improvisation. They find innovative ways to use limited resources, often thinking beyond conventional applications. This adaptability is one of their greatest strengths.

Interviewer: You have worked with multiple institutions. How have they responded to your teaching methods?

Dinesh: I began my journey teaching at various institutions, conducting workshops in remote areas, tribal communities, and children's programs. I have taught at BITS Pilani, the National School of Drama, and several American universities. Each experience shaped my approach. Moving from India to the U.S. was a steep learning curve—culturally, ideologically, and technologically. In India, I used software like AutoCAD and Adobe Photoshop. In the U.S., I had to learn Vectorworks, new learning management systems, and online teaching platforms. The educational structure was different too. In India, students attend daily, long-duration classes, while in the U.S., classes are shorter and held twice a week. Adapting to this system was challenging but broadened my perspective.

One of the biggest lessons I learned is that every classroom is diverse. Some students come from privileged, highly educated backgrounds, while others come from rural areas with limited exposure. As a teacher, it is my duty to ensure that all students, regardless of background, receive equal learning opportunities.

Language is also a challenge in India, where many institutions teach in regional languages. If a student is admitted without knowing the primary language of instruction, we must support them. Otherwise, it is unfair to their time and trust in the institution. In my classroom, I constantly evaluate my methods to ensure inclusivity. A teacher should never become stagnant or repeat the same methods for years. Teaching is an evolving process, and adaptation is essential.

Interviewer: What is your one key message to all educators and students?

Dinesh: It is vital to ensure a healthy learning environment—one that fosters continuous growth for everyone involved: teachers, students, institutions, and the education system as a whole. Growth should not be limited to academic knowledge but should include self-reflection, institutional development, and ethical responsibility. A safe learning space is crucial, where no one feels targeted, unsafe, or marginalized. Institutions must take care of their faculty and staff by ensuring salaries are paid on time, health and well-being are prioritized, and resources are adequately maintained.

Infrastructure should never be neglected—whether buildings, facilities, or educational tools—because a well-maintained institution reflects a genuine commitment to education. For students, classrooms must be spaces where they feel emotionally, mentally, and physically safe. Only in a space of trust and security can true learning occur. Equity in education is essential; every student, regardless of background, deserves equal opportunities to learn, grow, and succeed. Ultimately, education is not just about passing on knowledge but about creating an ecosystem where teachers and students evolve together and where learning continues far beyond the classroom.

Interviewer: We have reached the end of the interview. Thank you for this insightful conversation.

Dinesh: My pleasure. Thank you for being such a thoughtful host!

Theatre, Dialogue, and the Poiesis of Peace

A Conversation with Emanuella and Ahmad

In times marked by conflict, fracture, and competing narratives, theatre and dialogue emerge not merely as artistic or pedagogical tools, but as urgent human practices. This conversation brings together Emanuella, a theatre maker, performer, and educator, and Ahmad, a dialogue facilitator rooted in peacebuilding and narrative work. Speaking from distinct yet interconnected lived realities, Israeli and Palestinian, artist and facilitator, they reflect on education, ethics, creativity, and responsibility in an age of war. Their dialogue unfolds across personal journeys, pedagogical philosophies, interdisciplinary methodologies, and the lived practice of collaborative theatre making. Central to their work is the belief that the personal is political, that storytelling is never neutral, and that learning spaces must hold complexity rather than erase it. Through initiatives such as the binational ensemble Anachnu and workshops like Theatre in the Time of War, they explore how theatre can become a space for ethical inquiry, emotional intelligence, and shared humanity. Situated within the framework of IFTS 2025 and its theme Poiesis of Peace, this conversation does not seek definitive answers. Instead, it dwells in the gray zones where listening begins, where disagreement is possible without dehumanization, and where art becomes a site of resistance, healing, and hope. What follows is not only a discussion on theatre pedagogy, but an invitation to rethink education itself as an act of dialogue, courage, and care.

Section 1 Introduction and Background:

1. Personal and Professional Journey

A. Can you share a brief overview of your journey as an educator?

AHMAD: My journey as a facilitator and educator began with my deep connection to storytelling and dialogue as tools for understanding and transformation. Growing up in East Jerusalem, I witnessed first-hand how narratives shape identities, perceptions, and conflicts. I initially worked in binational dialogue programs, bringing together Palestinians and Israelis to engage in difficult yet necessary conversations.

EMANUELLA: Both my parents were teachers, each in their own specialized fields, which led me to become a second-generation educator. Being raised in such an environment, I was deeply influenced by a liberal educational philosophy that promoted inquiry, curiosity, and critical examination of the world. I was educated in institutions with ideological leanings toward humanism, equal rights, and socialism. As I grew, I found that I could express my inner experiences through movement and dance. Throughout my childhood and adolescence, I dedicated myself to the study of dance as a means of communicating thoughts that words could never fully convey. I have always been fascinated by the process of creating and refining learned skills, which made it an exciting and fulfilling endeavor.

During my high school studies in dance, I became interested in issues of identity and the intersection between language and the body. After high school, I explored the body's engagement with words through the study of theatre and acting, which opened a whole new world of expression for me. I gradually became more interested in directing and devising. Following my acting studies, I sought experimental approaches and enrolled in a multidisciplinary arts degree at Tel Aviv University, majoring in theatre, film, and visual art.

I began my teaching journey by conducting dance theatre classes for children and youth. Later, I co-established a theatre workshop in Jerusalem with my partner, where our

mission was to build a thriving community of artists. Driven by youthful enthusiasm and an innovative spirit, we created a collective of artists and organized workshops and open stage events. Our journey continued in Europe, where we encountered live street theatre that expanded my perspective on the possibilities of live performance in public spaces.

After the birth of my first daughter, I enrolled in a performance art course, an area new to me but one I was eager to explore. Performance art emphasizes live action and audience interaction. I view it as avant-garde in its focus on action, which contrasts with conventional theatre. While theatre represents action, performance art embodies it, generating new meanings and contexts. Performance art presents action itself as an intellectual and poetic form, much like poetry, requiring specificity of image and gesture. Both use everyday actions in new contexts to evoke deep, recognizable human emotions.

Watching good performance art feels to me like reading a powerful poem. It creates an emotional resonance that is immediate and profound. I like introducing this approach into traditional theatre practice because it is open, cross-disciplinary, and demands intellectual depth, precision, and responsiveness to the performative medium. Thus, my teaching practice always includes performance art to demonstrate the power of action and environment.

After my debut full-length stage play, which explored the deconstruction of the Western construct of womanhood in the 1950s as it relates to contemporary issues, I was invited to co-direct a theoretical and practical workshop on theatre and performance art at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, where I have remained ever since. I am deeply drawn to the multicultural atmosphere of the university, where Palestinian and Jewish, religious and secular students come together to learn. It represents a microcosm of Israel, capturing its challenges and complexities while fostering hope for a better future.

I have also taught theatre and performance at various theatre and dance schools across Israel and have taught theatre and movement to diverse populations, including the elderly and individuals with mental, physical, or sensory disabilities.

At the Hebrew University, I co-established, in collaboration with the Social Involvement Unit and the Department of Theatre, the multidisciplinary and multicultural theatre ensemble Anachnu, meaning “Us” in both Hebrew and Arabic. I serve as the artistic director and co-facilitator, working alongside Ahmad Muqble, a Palestinian group facilitator specializing in binational dialogue between Israelis and Palestinians.

The Anachnu company brings together Palestinian and Jewish students in a year-long program that integrates acting, movement, and creative work with dialogue sessions and awareness-building activities about conflict and interpersonal relationships. The program provides a professional creative platform for students from diverse cultures and communities who wish to develop their performing arts skills while engaging meaningfully with peers from other backgrounds.

Anachnu was founded on the belief that theatre is both an onstage and offstage art, an art of questioning, inquiry, and argument. We believe that cross-creative practices create fertile intersections between identities and narratives, helping to mediate issues of identity, conflict, and change. The final outcome of our creative process emerges from the individual and collective material developed through group work. The process of creation emphasizes both individuality and ensemble collaboration, resulting in performances that are diverse in nature. These include site-specific productions in public spaces, poetry-based performances, and multidisciplinary works that transcend conventional stage boundaries.

Through these experiences, I have come to view teaching and creation as inseparable aspects of my identity. The classroom, the studio, and the stage are all spaces of discovery, dialogue, and transformation, places where art becomes not just performance but a means of building empathy, understanding, and shared humanity.

B. What inspired you to develop your own pedagogy and methodology?

EMANUELLA: I am continually developing and exploring my teaching methods. My approach is a dynamic blend of various tools and practices that I have discovered and continue to find helpful or inspiring, and I wish to share them with others. Throughout my journey, I have encountered many inspiring artists, teachers, people, and works of literature that have shaped my understanding of education and creativity. I would say that my deepest motivation comes from a genuine desire for sincere human communication and understanding of both myself and others, and from our shared need to make sense of life. I am also inspired by the pursuit of precision and by the effort to refine words, images, and movement in a way that encourages clarity without restriction. Precision, in my view, should not suffocate creativity but should open pathways for greater freedom and expression. Humanity, precision, and simplicity are therefore my greatest sources of inspiration, shaping the foundation of my pedagogy.

AHMAD: Growing up in a deeply divided and conflict-ridden society, I experienced firsthand how narratives shape people's perceptions of one another. I witnessed how limited interaction between communities fosters misunderstanding and reinforces separation. Facilitating dialogue became my way of challenging these barriers and creating spaces where individuals can engage with perspectives they might never otherwise encounter. For me, dialogue is both a personal and collective tool for transformation. It enables participants to recognize their own biases, humanize the other, and approach conflict as an opportunity for understanding and growth rather than destruction.

2. Influences and Inspirations

A. Which educators, philosophers, or artistic movements have influenced your work?

EMANUELLA: The influences on my work are quite varied and continue to evolve. They include the philosopher Martin Buber, particularly his book I and Thou, Paulo Freire, Augusto Boal, bell hooks, Ferdinand de Saussure, Antonin Artaud, Peter Brook, Jalal al-Din Muhammad Rumi, Yehuda Amichai, and Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, among others. Each of these figures has shaped my understanding of human connection, artistic expression, and the transformative power of education. In terms of artistic movements, I would say Dadaism, Surrealism, Realism, and Conceptual Art have deeply inspired me. These movements challenge conventions, question perception, and explore the boundaries between imagination and reality, all of which resonate strongly with my creative and pedagogical practice.

AHMAD: My approach is influenced by Paulo Freire, who viewed dialogue as a means of liberation and emphasized the importance of critical consciousness. I also draw inspiration from conflict resolution and peacebuilding models that prioritize active listening, narrative exchange, and the acknowledgment of historical and structural inequalities. These frameworks help create environments where participants can engage authentically, question assumptions, and build empathy through understanding diverse experiences.

B. How do your cultural background and experiences shape your educational philosophy?

AHMAD: As a Palestinian, my facilitation approach is deeply shaped by the realities of living in a conflict zone where voices are often silenced. I understand dialogue not only as a method of communication but also as a form of resistance and a path to reclaiming space, asserting identity, and challenging dominant narratives. My lived experiences allow me to recognize the emotional weight that participants bring into these conversations and to navigate sensitive topics with empathy and care. I place strong emphasis on understanding power dynamics within the facilitation process, ensuring that all voices, particularly those that are marginalized, are heard and respected. Through this, I aim to create spaces that empower participants to speak freely, engage critically, and work toward mutual understanding and transformation.

EMANUELLA: I was born to Jewish parents whose families left Europe before the outbreak of World War II. My mother's family lost all their relatives in the Holocaust, while my father's family immigrated to Israel just as the Nazis rose to power, escaping persecution.

My parents lived with the trauma and memory of that catastrophe, while my generation was born from its aftermath into a sense of hope for renewal. Both of my parents came from religious homes but chose to lead secular lives, so I grew up in a liberal household that valued literature, art, and music. Even though we were secular, there was always an inner dialogue about the nature of God, so the idea of spirituality was present but not in a religious sense.

My father's work allowed us to live abroad for certain periods, which exposed me to diverse cultures from a young age. My parents held strong humanistic and socialist beliefs and raised us according to those principles. I grew up understanding that the family unit is a foundation of support and inclusiveness. This early experience of belonging and acceptance shaped my worldview and my faith in human connection. I believe these experiences have influenced my educational philosophy by helping me recognize complexity, embrace empathy, and view narratives through multiple perspectives. They have taught me to value dialogue, diversity, and compassion as essential tools for learning and human growth.

3. Core Pedagogical Approach

A. What are the fundamental principles of your pedagogy?

EMANUELLA: At the core of my educational philosophy is the understanding that the personal is political, as expressed by Carol Hanisch and the feminist movement. Our personal experiences profoundly shape our understanding of larger social and political structures. I strive to create a safe and communal learning environment where students can share their stories, learn from one another, and grow both personally and artistically. I recognize that each student is unique, with individual needs and interests, and I promote active participation by asking thoughtful questions that encourage discussion and reflection.

I consider diversity and inclusiveness to be central to the learning process because they enrich discussion and ensure that every participant feels valued. My approach also emphasizes constructive and collaborative learning, allowing students to build knowledge together and provide continuous feedback within the group. Reflective practice is another key element of my teaching philosophy, as it encourages students to critically evaluate their own creative processes and identify personal growth. Ultimately, I aim to guide students in their professional and personal development and help them discover meaningful ways to engage with the world through art.

B. How does your approach differ from traditional models of theatre education?

EMANUELLA: I have always been drawn to experimental and independent theatre. I am particularly interested in theatre and art that constantly question themselves, their forms, and their purpose, and that remain open to transformation. However, to re-evaluate or innovate, one must first understand the traditional. Therefore, my pedagogical approach includes exposure to a wide range of theatrical and artistic methods, including classical approaches, so that students can make informed and conscious choices about the techniques and styles they wish to apply.

I believe that traditional models of theatre education often center around the teacher's authority or the director's vision. My approach, however, prioritizes dialogue with students and places their voices at the core of the learning process. While conventional theatre education tends to focus primarily on acting, directing, or production, I integrate a broader spectrum of disciplines such as history, philosophy, and psychology. This interdisciplinary approach allows for a richer and more dynamic creative exploration.

I believe that every individual possesses the capacity for creativity, and I strongly uphold the idea that the personal is political. Therefore, students' personal histories and lived experiences form the foundation of our creative work. I see no separation between the creative process and life itself; artistic expression must arise from authentic experience. For this reason, our creative process often begins not with written plays or pre-existing characters but with personal stories that emerge from the participants themselves.

This approach reflects a student-centered philosophy that values collaboration and

participation over competition. It encourages students to take ownership of their creative journey, to express their individuality, and to engage meaningfully with others in the learning process. In this way, theatre becomes a space of discovery, empathy, and transformation where both personal and collective voices are nurtured and celebrated.

Section 2: Pedagogical Framework and Methodology

1. Process and Method Development

A. Can you outline the key components of your teaching process?

EMANUELLA: In my teaching process, I aim to share principles such as equality, tolerance, and mutual respect while fostering self-awareness in students to deepen their understanding of themselves, others, and the environment. I seek to create a culture of dialogue that emphasizes the importance of living in the present moment, where every expression is valid within a shared ethical framework. I encourage students to develop awareness of language, actions, aesthetics, and reflective practices while understanding that life experiences serve as the foundation for artistic expression.

My approach involves designing learning experiences around broad concepts such as identity, conflict, image, and space, allowing students to explore these ideas through various disciplines like history, sociology, and architecture. I strongly believe in a multimodal learning approach that blends different methods and tools of expression, enabling students to discover and choose their preferred modes of creativity.

There are countless opportunities for artistic exploration that extend beyond performing on stage, and I promote research-based performances where students collaborate with communities through writing and devised performances. I also believe deeply in reflexivity and critical thinking, encouraging students to explore how different academic and practical disciplines can influence and enrich their understanding of complex issues and their creative processes.

2. Interdisciplinary and Transdisciplinary Integration

A. How does your pedagogy incorporate interdisciplinary learning?

EMANUELLA: The techniques and methodologies I use are inherently interdisciplinary, drawing from a wide range of knowledge domains. I believe that the intersection of different disciplines enriches learning by allowing individuals to engage with subjects from diverse perspectives. My approach integrates creative methods from theatre, dance, writing, performance art, and visual art, combined with group facilitation and awareness-building techniques. I also incorporate tools from therapeutic and reflective practices to support emotional and intellectual engagement.

Students in the ensemble come from varied academic backgrounds such as neuroscience, physics, mathematics, law, history, and philosophy. Their diverse knowledge becomes a valuable resource, and they are encouraged to contribute their expertise to enrich group discussions and creative outputs. My goal is to make learning as inclusive and inspiring as possible, encouraging students to explore different modes of artistic and intellectual expression.

At the conclusion of each meeting, we host an optional “open stage” where students present self-generated performances on topics of their choice. This space becomes a powerful avenue for artistic and personal expression, offering both creative fulfillment and opportunities for reflective discussion. Collaborative learning plays a crucial role in my pedagogy, as it allows students to share ideas, combine their skills, and produce more meaningful results. By promoting cross-disciplinary dialogue, I hope to extend students’ learning experiences, foster critical thinking, and help them understand how their artistic practices connect to wider social and cultural contexts.

3. The Role of Imagination and Creativity

A. How do you encourage imagination and creativity as tools for ethical education?

EMANUELLA: One effective strategy I use is the creative application of personal storytelling and scenarios illustrating moral conflicts. This approach invites students to explore multiple

perspectives and evaluate the possible outcomes of various actions. Participation in creative arts such as visual art, music, dance, and writing provides students with platforms to express their viewpoints on ethical and moral issues, allowing them to develop their own artistic voice and distinctive mode of expression.

Role-playing exercises also play an important role in enhancing student engagement with ethical themes. These activities encourage students to actively interact with the subject matter and think creatively about their responses to moral challenges. I facilitate discussions focused on creative processes and ethical considerations, enabling participants to exchange insights and provide constructive feedback.

Furthermore, I integrate digital tools and online archives to broaden the scope of creative expression. For instance, I encourage the development of documentary-based theatre that uses real-life materials such as interviews, transcripts, legal documents, and news reports as the foundation for performance. Through these creative processes, students engage with real-world ethical dilemmas, strengthening their social awareness and emotional intelligence.

B. How does your method foster critical thinking and social awareness in students?

AHMAD: Rather than offering direct answers, I pose questions that stimulate reflection. Participants engage with ethical dilemmas, historical narratives, and personal experiences in ways that challenge their preconceived assumptions.

EMANUELLA: I believe that a humanist approach is at the core of my facilitation. My students come from varied cultural and social backgrounds, encompassing a broad range of identities within Jewish and Palestinian communities. These include religious and secular individuals, Christians and Muslims, men and women, first-generation college students, and people from diverse ethnic backgrounds. Each person brings a unique history and perspective into the room. Our initial task is to acknowledge this diversity and to recognize both the similarities and differences among us. This awareness forms the foundation of social consciousness. I believe that creative processes themselves naturally cultivate critical thinking and social awareness. Because performance is a living and evolving form of expression, students encounter diverse viewpoints and confront personal and social issues through artistic engagement. I firmly hold that the personal is political.

Through theatre, performance art, imagery, sound, and movement, students learn to reflect on themselves and others in new ways. The collaborative and performative nature of the work fosters open discussion and encourages the exploration of challenging questions within a creative framework.

It is a collaborative workshop that you are conducting, and it is highly relevant in the contemporary scenario. Can you share a brief overview of your workshop “Theatre in the Time of War”? What are the collaborative inspirations behind it?

EMANUELLA: This workshop is inspired by our shared experience facilitating the “ANACHNU” ensemble at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. It combines group facilitation tools with creative methodologies to create a meaningful artistic and social experience that is both personal and collective. The fact that we, as facilitators, are both Palestinian and Israeli embodies a genuine desire to collaborate, share goals, and learn about each other’s differences as an essential part of dialogue. This process involves speaking, listening, and at times disagreeing, but most importantly, it promotes face-to-face, present communication. For me, this is where the true potential of dialogue begins.

Our experience facilitating both Palestinian and Jewish students during times of crisis has reinforced my belief in the transformative power of creation, theatre, and group facilitation to bring about change. The structure of the workshop allows participants to present their personal and collective histories, engage in meaningful discussions, and develop trust through shared creative work. Role-play, improvisation, and reflective exercises encourage participants to step into the perspectives of others, turning abstract concepts of conflict into lived emotional

experiences. This process nurtures empathy and fosters a genuine desire to understand.

The workshop serves as a space for artistic inquiry and critical reflection. It encourages participants to question structures of power, resist binary thinking, and create honest, thought-provoking, and emotionally resonant art that reflects complex human experiences.

AHMAD: The workshop explores how dialogue and storytelling can serve as tools for resistance, healing, and understanding during times of war. It provides a space for participants to process their experiences, engage with diverse perspectives, and challenge dominant narratives. Through structured conversations and interactive exercises, the workshop fosters critical reflection, emotional expression, and collective meaning-making in the face of conflict.

While my co-facilitator integrates theatre as a creative medium, my focus lies in dialogue facilitation. I guide discussions, ensure inclusivity, and support participants as they navigate the emotional and ethical complexities that arise when addressing issues of war, identity, and trauma. By integrating dialogue and theatre, the workshop creates a unique space where participants do not merely discuss conflict but engage with it on multiple levels. This engagement promotes deeper understanding, emotional connection, and empathy across divides.

4. Application of 'Poiesis of Peace' in Teaching

A. The IFTS 2025 emphasises the "Poiesis of Peace" as a framework for fostering empathy and nonviolence. How does your pedagogy contribute to this vision?

B. Do you integrate performance-based methods to cultivate emotional intelligence and ethical awareness?

AHMAD: Yes, emotional intelligence plays a vital role in dialogue facilitation, especially during high-stakes or politically sensitive discussions. I use several techniques to develop these skills:

• Active listening exercises that train participants to fully hear and reflect upon another person's perspective before responding.

• Perspective-taking activities that encourage individuals to adopt viewpoints different from their own, even when disagreement is profound.

• Mindfulness-based facilitation that helps participants regulate emotions, remain present during difficult interactions, and engage in thoughtful dialogue rather than reactive behavior.

• Ethical reflection prompts that guide participants to consider the moral implications of their beliefs and choices, shifting the focus from personal interests to shared responsibility.

EMANUELLA: Yes, I find this aspect essential to my practice. I work to cultivate emotional intelligence and ethical awareness through methods such as role-playing, improvisation, performance art, and voice and movement exercises. These activities allow students to experience diverse perspectives and develop empathy and understanding for themselves and others. I also encourage individual and group reflection to help identify the emotional and intellectual consequences of actions, words, and images. This reflective practice strengthens ethical awareness and deepens the sense of personal and collective responsibility in the learning environment.

Section 3: Ethics and Theatre in Education

1. Teacher–Student Ethics

B. How do you balance discipline, freedom, and responsibility in student–teacher interactions?

EMANUELLA: I believe achieving the right balance between these elements is essential. I try to establish clear expectations and boundaries to maintain discipline, which helps in creating a focused and respectful learning environment. At the same time, I encourage freedom by giving students space to express themselves and explore their ideas openly. It is important for everyone to feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and being innovative in their learning process.

Regarding responsibility, I think that through open and creative processes that promote reflection and discussion, students develop a stronger sense of accountability for their

actions and narratives. They learn to take responsibility for the choices they make and the consequences that follow. I also believe that by promoting open communication, we can create a space where questions and concerns are voiced freely and respectfully. Establishing this balance helps in building a classroom culture that values both discipline and freedom, where responsibility and mutual respect guide the collective learning experience.

2. Theatre as a Catalyst for Social Change

A. How do you use theatre as a tool for ethical discourse and social transformation?

EMANUELLA: I aim to use theatre as a medium for both personal and social transformation by encouraging students to engage with real-life issues through their performances. We often explore themes such as identity, conflict, hope, and justice. Students create their own pieces that express their perspectives and emotions in authentic and creative ways.

These exercises are shared with the class, followed by sessions of reflection and constructive feedback. This collective process, in my view, fosters empathy and understanding among participants. Together, we refine the artistic content and examine the impact of the performance on both the performers and the audience. We engage in discussions about the messages we wish to convey and the potential effects of our work.

By developing and performing these pieces, students not only share their voices but also inspire others to think critically and reflect deeply on societal and ethical issues. Through this continuous cycle of creation, dialogue, and reflection, theatre becomes a vehicle for exploration, emotional expression, and personal growth, which can ultimately contribute to broader social change.

AHMAD: Facilitation is not only about managing dialogue but also about cultivating a space where ethical discourse can flourish. In my work, I ensure that the conversations we create achieve the following:

• Challenge assumptions by encouraging participants to critically examine the beliefs they take for granted.

• Acknowledge historical and power dynamics because genuine dialogue cannot occur without recognizing the inequalities that shape lived experiences.

• Promote accountability by urging participants to take responsibility for the effects their words and actions have on others.

• Foster long-term engagement by viewing dialogue as an ongoing process that leads to meaningful and lasting changes in relationships and perspectives.

B. Can you share examples of student projects or performances that have successfully engaged with ethical issues?

EMANUELLA: Yes. In one of the sessions, a Palestinian student shared her experience of crossing an Israeli checkpoint, which forms part of her daily route to the university. In a deeply moving exercise, she broke down the sequence of actions required at the checkpoint: standing, spreading her arms, turning around, and opening her bag. She first performed these movements silently, then repeated them again and again until they evolved into a poignant choreography that expressed the emotional and physical strain of her experience.

The repetitive action created a powerful visual metaphor for endurance and entrapment. When she finished, the classroom was silent. For some students, the performance sparked discomfort and debate about the reasons for such barriers. Gradually, discussions emerged around themes of safety, freedom, human rights, and power dynamics. The exercise transformed into a powerful performance that opened up deep conversations on identity, justice, and empathy.

Another notable example took place in May 2024, when our delegation performed in Germany. The show was held in a library designed as an arena-style venue, where performers sat among the audience, moving in and out of the crowd. One of the central themes we explored was death and burial rituals. For the participants, death was not an abstract concept but a reality closely connected to their lives. The burial rituals became symbolic performances of remembrance and release.

On stage, a religious Jewish student and a

Muslim student each created their own burial rituals drawn from their faith traditions. They shared their customs with the audience, weaving personal stories of loss and pain into their performances. In the final act, they invited the audience to write down things they wished to say goodbye to and bury metaphorically. The response was profoundly emotional; members of the audience joined in, placing handwritten notes into wooden boxes on the stage. Both actors and audience members were visibly moved.

This performance led to powerful reflections on mortality, memory, and the things we carry with us in life. It invited everyone to consider what it means to let go. Later, we buried those notes on Mount Scopus in Jerusalem, symbolically connecting both East and West Jerusalem through an act of shared humanity.

3. Challenges and Ethical Dilemmas

A. Have you faced any ethical dilemmas in your pedagogical journey? How did you navigate them?

AHMAD: Yes, absolutely. One of the most significant ethical challenges is ensuring that binational theatre spaces do not become sites of superficial coexistence where systemic inequalities are ignored. I try to navigate this by allowing difficult conversations to arise naturally, rather than imposing a forced sense of harmony. Acknowledging power imbalances and ensuring that Palestinian voices are fully represented and respected is essential. True dialogue, in my view, requires courage to confront discomfort and to maintain honesty in the face of difference.

EMANUELLA: Yes, ethical dilemmas are a constant presence in my teaching journey. The Israeli–Palestinian conflict, in particular, brings forward questions at the intersection of representation, power, trauma, and audience impact. There are always questions such as: Whose story is being told, and by whom? How does the performance balance authenticity with artistic interpretation? How can we ethically stage real-life testimonies while honoring those directly affected?

Another concern relates to the effect of performance on the audience. Will it provoke critical thinking, or might it reinforce certain resistances? What role does the performance play beyond the stage? These dilemmas arise frequently. When faced with them, I take time to reflect, stepping back to re-examine my own ethical position within each situation. The process can be challenging and confusing, but it is also necessary.

I also believe in discussing these issues within the group. Ethics should not be viewed as an abstract idea but as an ongoing dialogue that artists and educators must continually engage with. Group discussions provide valuable perspectives and help everyone involved to process and think critically about the choices we make in our creative work.

Let me share an example from our work with the “Anachnu” ensemble. During one of our recent sessions, we were brainstorming ideas for our final project, and I suggested using the image of soil on stage. This single image evoked multiple associations related to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and the present circumstances, soil for burial, soil under which hostages are held, soil of destruction, and soil as a symbol of growth and life.

This concept raised several ethical questions about the connection between life and its representation, especially in times of crisis when emotions are raw and the pain is real. Can we discuss death and burial when so many victims surround us? Can we engage with themes of land and belonging when tensions are still high? How do we create meaningful art in the midst of suffering, and to what extent can we portray it through performance? Is there room to speak about hope or renewal when despair feels overwhelming?

These are questions we continue to grapple with, both as artists and as human beings. There are no simple answers, but we have come to realize that life continues to assert itself in the face of tragedy. Amid all the pain, people still love, new lives are born, and laughter persists. The resilience of life itself becomes a powerful reminder of the coexistence of pain and hope.

When creating theatre in such contexts, I believe we must approach our work with profound sensitivity, not a sensitivity that limits artistic freedom, but one that deepens it. It should push us to express truth with

honesty, empathy, and courage. Theatre, in this sense, becomes not only a reflection of life but also a space where ethical reflection and artistic creation coexist, challenging both the creators and the audience to see beyond their boundaries.

B. What are the challenges of implementing an alternative pedagogy in contemporary academic institutions?

AHMAD: One major challenge is working in politically charged contexts where the work is often scrutinized or even censored. Finding funding and institutional support for binational projects is another significant barrier.

A. How do you use theatre as a tool for ethical discourse and social transformation?

EMANUELLA: I aim to use theatre as a tool for both inner and social transformation by encouraging students to explore real-life issues through performance. We address themes such as identity, conflict, hope, and justice. Students create their own pieces, allowing them to express their thoughts and emotions in artistic and creative ways. The exercises are presented before the class, which then engages in reflection and constructive feedback. This shared process fosters empathy and helps refine the content to suit the artistic form. We also discuss the messages we want to communicate and the potential impact our performances may have on audiences. Through performance, students share their voices and inspire others to think critically and consider new perspectives. Ultimately, theatre becomes a means of exploration, expression, and personal growth that can lead to social change.

AHMAD: By combining facilitation with theatre-based dialogue, participants move beyond intellectual conversations and experience ethical complexity in a tangible way. This approach does not simplify conflict but encourages participants to sit with the discomfort of multiple truths, opening pathways for transformation and healing. As a facilitator, I use theatre not merely as a performance medium but as a framework for engagement, reflection, and ethical inquiry. My role is to create spaces where individuals can navigate complex social realities, challenge biases, and confront injustices while fostering empathy and mutual understanding. This method has consistently proven to be powerful and effective.

B. Do you see your pedagogy as adaptable across different cultures and disciplines?

EMANUELLA: Yes, I believe it is adaptable because it is rooted in universal human needs and emotions. It works with the core of what connects us as people, our capacity to feel, to communicate, and to understand.

Closing Reflections

1. Advice for Educators and Institutions

A. What advice would you give to emerging educators or artists who wish to develop their pedagogical approaches?

EMANUELLA: Learn, stay curious, and remain open to experience. Be willing to learn from others, experiment with new methods, and engage with fellow educators in your field. Learn from the past to reshape the present. Take time for reflection, invite feedback, and focus on the learning process rather than just the outcome. Create room for experimentation and creativity. Be adaptable—allow your methodology to evolve as you and your students grow. Stay involved in the world around you, for beyond being teachers, students, or artists, we are all human beings living and learning together.

2. Final Thoughts

A. If there were one key message you want to leave with students and educators, what would it be?

AHMAD: Dialogue is not about convincing others but about understanding, questioning, and broadening our perspectives. True change begins when we are willing to listen deeply, embrace complexity, and engage with empathy.

As far as Israel is concerned, it's a war. As far as Palestine is concerned, it's a resistance. To the outside world, it's genocide. How do you see it?

EMANUELLA: I see it as a deeply complex intersection of multiple narratives. Each perspective—whether Israeli, Palestinian, or international, has its own historical, emotional, and cultural context. Every narrative carries

layers of trauma and memory, each valid in its own way. Within each story lie sub-narratives and diverse interpretations shaped by history and experience. Therefore, any discussion of this issue must begin with an acknowledgment of its profound complexity. Beneath each term—war, resistance, genocide, there exists shared pain, fear, and devastation. Yet, these differences also illuminate the varied perspectives shaped by history and identity. I do not view reality in absolute terms of black and white. The gray space is where genuine listening begins, where understanding can take root, and where dialogue may pave the way toward a shared and humane future.

What inspired you to develop the idea of Theatre of Peace?

EMANUELLA: I would describe it more as a theatre for dialogue. The ensemble was founded shortly before October 7, 2023, in collaboration with the Unit of Social Involvement at the Hebrew University. This unit connects the university with diverse communities, providing students of all backgrounds with opportunities for academic and personal growth through social initiatives. When the academic year began in December 2023, we were uncertain if any students would attend, yet they all came. We were collectively in shock, experiencing trauma and searching for a safe and shared space. Within this space, Palestinians, Jews, both secular and religious, and even students serving in the army came together. The atmosphere was emotionally charged and complex, but we continued to meet, speak, and create. Gradually, we learned to collaborate and ultimately to build together. This experience reinforced my belief in the transformative power of theatre to foster healing and dialogue.

My work in theatre has convinced me that creativity has the potential to initiate meaningful change and to express the themes that daily life often cannot. The stage is a space capable of holding complexity, allowing contradictions to coexist and be explored safely. Theatre is not merely artistic expression but also an instrument of dialogue and empowerment. It fulfils a deep human need, the desire to be seen, heard, and understood. It creates a sense of belonging and acceptance. Based on these principles, we strive to use theatre as a catalyst for personal and social transformation. Though not therapeutic in the traditional sense, artistic creation has healing power. Especially in times of crisis, engaging in creative acts, through movement, sound, and visual work—enables individuals to confront pain and find meaning.

Theatre, therefore, can bring change at both the personal and collective levels. It is a form of art rooted in dialogue and in a profound understanding of human experience. Its true potential lies in fostering peace, within oneself and between individuals.

Following the ceasefire, how can the art fraternity contribute to the rebuilding of Gaza?

AHMAD: As a Palestinian, I feel a deep responsibility to contribute to the rebuilding of Gaza and the healing of my people. The devastation is not only physical but also emotional and generational. It lives in the stories of our parents and grandparents, in our collective grief, and in our enduring hope for justice and home. Though our pain is immense, our resilience is greater. Our voices must continue to be heard, not just in moments of tragedy but as part of shaping our own future.

Facilitation, for me, is both an act of resistance and a means of reclaiming our narrative. It connects communities, mobilizes solidarity, and reminds the world that Palestinians are not statistics but human beings with stories, dreams, and a will to live. Facilitation is also about healing—about creating spaces where people who have lost everything can speak, grieve, and find unity. It breaks the isolation of trauma and rebuilds trust. I want to create spaces where dialogue is not only about loss but also about reimagining what comes next: a future where Palestinians live with dignity, security, and hope, where our children grow up without fear, and where our right to exist is affirmed. This is my commitment, to use facilitation as a tool for action, healing, and collective rebirth.

EMANUELLA: I believe that artists and educators have the power to foster healing through creativity. Artistic collaboration can build bridges of hope and solidarity,

encouraging dialogue and empathy as vital components of social rehabilitation. Art can play a meaningful role in the recovery of both Gaza and Israeli communities by creating shared spaces of understanding and reflection.

It seems that the image of a house holds strong meaning in Palestinian plays. For Palestinians, a house is a reality, whereas for Israelis, it is a mythological quest. How do your cultural backgrounds shape your artistic philosophy?

EMANUELLA: The search for home is a universal human experience deeply resonant among both Jewish and Palestinian people. A home signifies safety, belonging, and identity, values at the core of personal and collective existence. Yet this same longing often becomes a source of conflict and displacement. The struggle over land and belonging lies at the heart of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, shaping rival narratives and historical pain. Both peoples yearn for safety within their own homes, yet the very land that connects them also divides them. Understanding these intertwined narratives reveals how shared human desires can also become sources of misunderstanding and tragedy. True peace requires recognizing these complexities and seeking solutions that respect the humanity and rights of both sides.

AHMAD: As a Palestinian, I see the image of a house as a deeply emotional and symbolic concept. A house is not merely a physical structure—it embodies memory, identity, and the essence of belonging. It carries the weight of our history and the scent of our grandparents' homes, the key to which many still keep from 1948. That key represents endurance, the hope of return, and the refusal to forget. For many of us, the house is also a place of loss, destroyed, occupied, or abandoned in exile. It is the childhood home turned to rubble, the village erased from maps. Yet, even in loss, the house remains alive in our memories, our art, and our language. It is a symbol we carry forward, a reminder of who we are and what we strive to reclaim.

3. Vision for the Future

A. What are your aspirations for the future of theatre education and ethical pedagogy?

AHMAD: I envision dialogue facilitation becoming an essential part of education, art, and community-building—recognized not as an optional skill but as a core practice for human connection. Institutions must see facilitation as vital for addressing conflict, not only in times of crisis but as an ongoing tool for cultivating empathy and understanding. I aim to expand methods that amplify marginalized voices, ensuring that those most affected by conflict are central in shaping discourse. Facilitation should challenge existing power dynamics and serve as a space for equity, empowerment, and systemic transformation.

EMANUELLA: My hope is that theatre will continue to evolve, expanding its thematic and structural possibilities while discovering new ways to connect with people. I aspire to integrate theatre pedagogy across diverse academic fields and cultural contexts. Beyond being an inspiring artistic form, theatre fosters collaboration, reflection, and creativity among participants. It allows individuals to address personal, social, and ethical complexities in expressive and innovative ways. I see theatre as a profound instrument of self-knowledge and a bridge to understanding others. It invites us to embrace complexity, to reflect, and to transform. Ultimately, theatre holds the power to inspire meaningful change, both personally and collectively, and to nurture humanity in its truest sense.

Costume as Co-Authorship: Pedagogy, Collaboration, and Care in ontemporary Theatre Practice

A Conversation with Grace Adinku and Rayna Dexter

At International Festival of Theatre Schools 2025, Professors Grace Adinku and Rayna Dexter came together for a reflective conversation on theatre pedagogy and the evolving role of costume in performance. Drawing from their diverse academic and cultural journeys across Africa and the United States, both educators bring interdisciplinary perspectives shaped by costume design, performance studies, and collaborative teaching practices. The conversation explores costume as visual storytelling and cultural research, challenging traditional hierarchies within theatre-making. Adinku and Dexter reflect on devised practices, collaborative classrooms, ethical design, sustainability, and care-centred pedagogy, while also addressing contemporary concerns such as digital culture and artificial intelligence. Rather than treating costume as a supporting element, the dialogue positions it as a central, co-authoring force in performance creation, offering valuable insights for educators, students, and theatre practitioners navigating changing pedagogical landscapes.

Interviewer : We have Professor Rayna Dexter and Professor Grace Adinku here, and it's really a pleasure to have you both as part of IFTS 2025. You've done the workshops, and this is a conversation for the larger kind of your engagements, pedagogy, etc. So, to start our conversations up, I would ask you to giveus detailsof your journey as an educator.

Rayna: I went to Mount Union College in Ohio in the US, and I got a BA in theatre. And in that program, everyone had to do a little bit of everything. So you couldn't just be an actor or just be a designer. And when I went to college, I thought I was going to be an actor. And that quickly changed because I got a job in the costume shop, and I fell in love with it. So, after college, I applied to graduate schools for costume design. And I went to Tulane University in New Orleans, but there was a big hurricane, Hurricane Katrina, and the school closed for a while, so then I went to Kent State University in Ohio, and then back to Tulane after the storm. It was a difficult time, but I learned a lot. And then right after school, I started teaching at Texas A&M. So, I've been there for almost sixteen years.

Grace: My professional journey shares similarities with many in this room, though it began in Nigeria. I completed both my bachelor's and master's degrees in Theatre Arts at the University of Ibadan, one of Nigeria's most prestigious institutions. Like many programs in West Africa, our training required students to explore all areas of theatre before choosing a specialization. Although I initially intended to major in directing, by my third year, I discovered a deep passion for costume design and makeup. I continued to direct productions, but the creative possibilities within costume design drew me in completely. This ultimately became my focus for my final year project and later my master's degree, where I also explored film studies.

I later enrolled in an MPhil/PhD program, concentrating on Theatre for Development, a field dedicated to using performance as a tool for community engagement and social transformation. This was in 1998, at the height of the HIV/AIDS crisis across the African continent. My research examined the stigma surrounding HIV testing and why so many people were reluctant to come

forward. Using theatre as an intervention, I worked to encourage dialogue, challenge misconceptions, and empower communities.

My academic path then led me to Ghana, where I earned a PhD in African Arts and Culture at Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology in Kumasi. I spent more than a decade living in Ghana and teaching at the University of Ghana's School of Performing Arts in Legon. These years deeply shaped my identity as a scholar, costume designer, makeup artist, and educator.

Three years after completing my PhD, I moved to the United States. Upon arrival, I recognized the need to further my studies to better understand performance in a new cultural context. I entered the Performance Studies graduate program at Texas A&M University, where my research focused on Afrofuturism in the Black Panther film. Drawing on my background in costume and accessory design, I examined how visual elements articulate both African aesthetics and Afrofuturistic visions of Black identity and possibility.

After completing the program, I joined the same department as a faculty member. Since then, I have worked closely with Rayna as a costume designer, technologist, and professor. My combined background in theatre costume design, African art and culture, and performance studies has shaped a uniquely interdisciplinary approach to my work. Our collaboration continues to grow richer because of the diverse paths we each bring to the table.

Rayna: When Grace came to get her MA in performance studies, I had started teaching a class called Dress and World Cultures. Grace came as a graduate teaching assistant into that class. She really helped me make some improvements and expand some of the things that were in that class. So we've been working together for a while, and it was in that class that Grace started the Reimagining Waste project for the workshop that we did here. That was a lot more than our student journey.

Interviewer: Costume is so ubiquitous and is such an important part of theatre performance culture. Yet also, it's something that is very understudied or under-discussed. Can you reflect on how that is part of the pedagogical world of theatre performance? How do you consider the place of costume, and how do you intervene with that?

Rayna: Costuming is visual storytelling. I think when we see a character come on stage before they ever speak a word, we learn something about who they are, or at least who they want us to think they are, through their costumes. I think that it's very important. At least in Western theatre, there has been this hierarchy that costume designers are serving the vision of a director and playwrights. What we're really trying to do is to break down some of those hierarchies and strengthen collaboration, so that costume designers are involved in the conversations from the very beginning.

Grace: That's very important because we are creators as well. In our minds, in our research, and in our creative work, we are also directing the play, in costume. Because as we read the text, we are thinking about those characters. We are even thinking about the movements those characters will make based on the text. The director has a visual interpretation, concept, and all that. We will work with the idea, but the director should understand that, as costume designers, we are also directors in our own way because the script that the director is using is the same script we're using to create those costumes.

Rayna: You become a co-author of the performance.

Grace: Exactly! So, we become a co-author of the performance in a creative way. We are also contributing to the director's visual creation. My professor and mentor, Femi Osofisan, always says, "The director is a brain. But the costume designer, the light designer, and the set designer are the veins in the main brain." He understands that he is the one who has the concept, but he needs all of us (designers) to study the script as though we are directors. So, when we come to the table to discuss with the director, we're bringing valuable ideas that will help a play grow.

Rayna: Increasingly, we're doing more work that doesn't start with a text. I've really been interested in how designers can become more part of the devising process. When I first did devising, it felt very much like the same thing.

Someone would come and say he needed five skirts tomorrow. Then I panic. But I don't feel like I'm contributing to this story and the co-creation. I do think it's a shift in the way we work. The last show that I did was co-created with our students, and I had to be at almost every rehearsal, which, as a costume designer, is not typical of my process. But, it's the only way that I can be a part of the ensemble in order to co-create by using those methods.

Interviewer: Could you elaborate, because it's a very fascinating point? Is there something that has changed within one of the forms that we use in theatre, like the costume? How do you know if the costume is right at the start? How, you know, how does that go down?

Rayna: I think it is a new way of working, at least for us. Perhaps other folks have been doing this for some time now. For me, that process really started after 2020, I think. We saw some groups who wrote things like We See You White American theatre. That was a big document that came out about how theatre can be more inclusive for people of colour and people with disabilities.I think in some ways I was already feeling disillusioned with the way theatre was going. It started to feel a bit boring. All schools were doing the same scripts. And so we thought, wereally need to take to heart this feedback that we're getting. How can we make the theatre that people want to see moving forward? I don't want to do the theatre that people thought was interesting a hundred years ago. You know, it's not that those things don't have important messages for us, but perhaps we can adapt them if we want and make new things. But then it's also about making sure that everyone has a voice at the table. Breaking down some of the power dynamics that have caused an environment where abuse can flourish. But if we're in a place where we all respect each other and are communicating on a regular basis as respected individuals, then perhaps some of those abuses can't happen or at least get called out and addressed right away.

Grace: One of the things that actually makestheatre unique and accessible to everybody, including costume designers, is that it provides a platform for everyone to do something new. Even as I do see the possibility of designers being part of devising theatre from the beginning, you find yourself in that space, and you want to design that piece, you begin to think differently. Because devising is different, it's not the conventional way of doing plays. We generate ideas; we build upon them. Every day, we continue to increase and build on the information. In the same way, if the costume designer, set designer, or light designer wants to be part of that production, you also have the opportunity to create something new. So, you probably will not be thinking about conventional costume techniques.

Rayna: In some ways, we have to break down the habits of our practice. Often, a costume designer takes direction from a director. I will create designs and then instruct the actors on what to wear. But in a collaborative creation, Ihave to give up some of that control. You know, we're creating the piece together. The actors are giving their input. I'm taking into consideration their ideas and their comfort levels with what to wear. You do have to change your work schedule to be at rehearsals, and you also have to change your mindset that I don't get to just decide and then tell someone what to do.

Grace: They're doing something new. So, you allow the actors and everybody in the group to come in with their ideas. First and foremost, to be able to do devised theatre, you have to be open. To be a costume person in a devised production, you must be extremely open. Because first, you have to deconstruct.

Rayna: Yes. Deconstruct.

But you still are the expert in the room on what you do. So you're still going to receive respect from the others. You still own the expertise to make some of those design decisions. It's just that you're not mandating them.

Interviewer: This is very interesting in the sense that, at least in the discourse, there is a change. And would you kind of reflect on that? How do we work with students to make that communication?

Rayna: It's an ongoing conversation. I think we need to encourage our students to learn about many people and many cultures. Our institutions need to be a space where people

can take risks and not have the fear of being pointed at or accused. It's a conversation. It's a collaboration. It's a dialogue.

Grace: One reflection that continues to stay with me is how different our formative years were from the present moment. In our generation, we did not have social media or the abundance of digital imagery available today. Yet we were able to stage plays set in sixteenth-century Europe with confidence, and European companies, in turn, produced works set in ancient Africa. How did we manage this without the visual resources students now take for granted? We relied on books, carefully reading the descriptions, analyzing the imagery, and allowing the written word to guide our understanding of unfamiliar cultures. We became quick learners, open to absorbing the cultural context necessary for our work.

Today, students have access to unprecedented resources. Social media alone offers countless visual references, and when combined with archives, museums, scholarly texts, interviews, and digital collections, the possibilities are limitless. This is why I strongly believe we must encourage our students to be bold and fearless in their research. There is no barrier to accessing information: images, artifacts, oral histories, online exhibitions, everything is at their fingertips.

As artists, our work is always grounded in storytelling. Our responsibility is to represent those stories authentically through costume and design. For a garment to communicate meaningfully to its intended audience, it must come from a place of informed creativity. This requires in-depth research, unrestricted exploration, and a commitment to gathering all the material that can help us make thoughtful, culturally aware decisions. When students embrace this approach, they not only avoid issues of cultural appropriation but also develop the tools to engage with global cultures respectfully and intelligently.

Grace: The philosophy behind why people dress the way they do or why they adorn their bodies in a certain way is something we need to understand and respect. And treat it with a lot of authenticity.

Rayna: This process takes time. In a lot of commercial theatre and even academic theatre, we try to do everything so quickly. It costs money to have a staff and to rent a space for rehearsals. The investors want to get a return on their money as quickly as possible. So, the rehearsal period has to be very short, and then you open the play. But I think the processes that we're talking about, making collaborative creation and having time for conversation and research, part of that means to slow down. And I think that's difficult for everyone to do.

Grace: But it is important to teach students why this is necessary. If they choose to enter the industry, they must already understand the value of cultural respect in their work. When a designer is hired to costume a film, they are expected to deliver authentic, culturally accurate materials. Without a solid foundation in respecting the cultural items and traditions encountered during research, a designer is unlikely to succeed professionally. Directors and producers quickly recognize when someone lacks this awareness, and they will choose not to work with that person.

Rayna: It's impossible to be an expert in everything. You'll never know everything. And I think part of it is just recognizing that you will always have something to learn.

Grace: Yes. Exactly.

Interviewer: This is very important in terms of actually having the classroom space as an open, collaborative space. Could you also elaborate on certain strategies you might have used, like flipped classrooms?

Rayna: I do like flipped classrooms for skills-based classes primarily. So when I'm teaching sewing techniques, I want the students to do some reading, watch some videos on their own, and then come in and do the techniques with me in the room. Because if I demonstrate in class and then say, go home and do these stitches, theywill forget. I think a flipped classroom works really well for that. I've started adopting a word called plork. It's from Sister Corita Kent, who was a nun, artist, and teacher in the nineteen sixties. She uses this word to be play plus work. I find that a really useful concept because I want the work that my students do to have rigor and discipline. A daily practice of just noticing things around

them, being observant. But I also want it to be playful, imaginative, and creative. I like this idea of plork. It's a funny word, too. So the students get a kick out of it. Play plus work!

Grace: At our institution, collaborative learning is a central component of our teaching philosophy. We place significant emphasis on teamwork because it enables students to experience the joy of collaborating, sharing ideas, negotiating creative choices, and shaping a collective vision. When students collaborate, they take ownership of the work as a group, and that shared investment strengthens both the process and the outcome.

A key element of this collaborative approach is playfulness. During the creative process, students play with materials, experiment with language, and explore ideas freely. Even in the research phase, as they gather data and discuss their findings, they are constantly testing, refining, and "playing" with concepts. Through this process, each group eventually distills its collective thoughts into a single guiding word or idea that anchors their project.

This spirit of collaboration is essential. It not only builds community and confidence but also deepens students' engagement with the creative process. Teamwork is something both of us prioritize in our classrooms, and it continues to shape the way our students learn, create, and imagine together.

Interviewer: Is AI dangerous, or is it a sort of technical ability? How is it affecting your sector where students have access to certain things? How do we define creativity in that?

Rayna: That it's difficult, we've actually been having a conversation this week. I think that AI is a useful tool. But I don't want my students to forget how to be creative and think for themselves, and be critical about the things that they encounter. So I think we should find ways to structure assignments that make it very difficult for them to use generative AI. If they want to write something and then ask AI to help them edit, it is fineas long as the thoughts are theirs. I think that's really important as a teacher to instill that kind of pride in their work. They want it to be their work, not a computer's work.

Interviewer: Classrooms, especially in the US are diverse with different cultural backgrounds, and that is very crucial. But that encounter is also difficult in terms of student to student as well as teacher to student. How do you navigate that? Those are the kind of spots that can become very hierarchical. What is your take on it?

Rayna: I try to address that on the first day of class or at least the first week. We might, for instance, talk about agreements that we can make for how to be together. So what are they expecting of me? What do I expect of them? What do we expect of each other? Here are the things that we agree on. Then they tend to keep each other in check of their behaviour, and I think that helps everyone, regardless of background. I typically use Liz Lerman's critical response process. Liz Lerman is a dancer, and she uses this critical response process for works in progress. It's a way for artists to get feedback from an audience. I really like that process for classwork because it gives a chance not just for people to tell you what they thought, but also for the artist to ask pointed questions. The audience also should ask questions and rather than say, it was good. No, because it's not enough.

Interviewer: They learn at least to give critical criticisms. That is not really challenging. I think we have been talking about the conversations to go on. What would you think is something that you think is needed? Something that's really difficult and needs to change in the larger kind of pedagogical world.

Rayna: That's a tough question.

Grace: A lot of things! The attitude! Acting on the way people react to things! I think we need to be a little bit mindful of the fact that the world is not the same. We need to recognize that. I believe that is a significant aspect for me as a designer, artist, and scholar. When I enter a space, I want to respect that space, respect everyone there, and recognize that we're all from different worlds and cultures, and it's a learning moment for me. And even as a scholar, when I'm doing research, I want to know more. The only way I can learn more is by respecting every single work that I encounter.

Rayna: That's tough. I want to feel human in

the classroom. And I think sometimes in large classes, it's easy to feel anonymous. I also think, as teachers, when we're overworked, it's easy not to make personal connections because it takes energy to do that. But I think having students ready to learn in the classroom requires having students who are cared for. They can't come to class hungry, worried about where they're going to live, worried about whether they can afford their medicine, which I think many of our students do. And it's very difficult to come into a classroom and really learn when you're worried about what one can eat. So, I wanted to take care of people first, and then we can learn from each other. I have things to learn from them as well, but I also want them to respect the expertise and respect the fact that we have experience working in lots of different places. I do want there to be a dialogue, but I don't think we're able to do that when professors are stressed out and tired, and the students are hungry, worried, and anxious. No one can do their best learning under those situations.

Interviewer: Your perspectives are to make certain kinds of transformations within people and students, and to reach out to the world. I know you work with waste, questions about climate change, culture, etc. What has been your experience of giving these sorts of modules?

Rayna: I think we're definitely incorporating it more into the curriculum now, especially in the new BFA program over the last year. It's becoming really ingrained in us. The very first class our theatre students take is called Creating with Care. It's about learning to take care of yourself, to watch out for those around you. It's about being respectful and working in safe conditions. We want all the work they do to be rooted in the fact that we're a community. And all the students in our college are able to take that, but it's required for the theatre majors. So we really want to start there.

Grace: I totally agree. It's a space where students feel safe and learn how to take care of themselves. They are also free. They feel comfortable coming to you as their professor and sharing with you whatever challenges they're going through. If it's personal, we have an open-door policy in our school. We have several resources at our university that faculty can direct students to for help. Because it's a terrifying world that we live in today, and we cannot just close our eyes to the realities of our world. Most of the things that we are going through now may not be so physical. But a lot are emotional and mental. So, when we have students who are struggling and don't have a place to go for help, I fail. Because as an instructor or professor, my primary duty is to make sure that my students are fine emotionally, psychologically, and intellectually. They feel safe in the university. Therefore, we, as faculty, are also trained accordingly. Every year, we are required to take some courses.

Rayna: I think it's almost impossible now to make a space where everyone feels safe. It's so difficult. I hope that they can at least have a space where they can relax and be brave. I think it takes a lot of bravery to be vulnerable and share with people. I hope we can make a space where they feel comfortable doing those things.

Grace: Students come to college, leaving their homes and families behind. They are coming to this space where they are going to be mingling with different people. I guess it takes time. That is where, as educators, we need to be very mindful and try to go an extra mile to make them feel safe. Let them know that they can feel safe talking to us if they have any problems. Any university that really wants to succeed in caring for its students must provide those resources.

Rayna: Because that's not our area of expertise, I can be there as a support person, but I'm not your counselor.

Grace: Yes, we are not trained to becounselors. But, when the students have a problem and they come to me, I will say, “here is a number that you can call”. I will be happy if the students get the needed help.

Rayna: I'm excited to see what these students go out and do.

Grace: We have universities from different regions represented here, each with their own groups of students. As I sit back and observe the interactions between professors

and their students, I feel truly encouraged. Theatre functions like a village, deeply interconnected, and we are distinct from many other professional communities. However, this sense of connection requires intentional orientation and guidance. When professors model genuine care for their students, that attitude often trickles down, fostering a culture in which students also care for and support one another.

Rayna: And being here, caring for us. You know? I mean, the students have been so kind and caring! We make the worlds we imagine. What we pay attention to grows. That's what Adrienne Maree Brown says. So, you focus on those things, and then that's what grows. If you pay attention to the negative, the negative grows.

Interviewer: I guess it's a place that is really making a difference. A place where I have all these people together in a different context.

Rayna: It's fantastic! I think building trust worthy spaces where people have time to really speak to each other and learn from each other is important.

Interviewer: It was real pleasure talking to both of you. Lat's call it a day.

Rayna: Thank you for having us. We feel really honoured.

Grace: Absolutely! I feel very honoured to be here. Thank you so much for having us.

Interviewer: Yes. Thank you.

Beyond Training: Theatre as Ethics, Experience, and Human Connection

A Conversation with Jyothish

At a time when education is increasingly shaped by industry demands and digital technologies, questions of ethics, vision, and responsibility become central to theatre practice and pedagogy. Theatre, rooted in human presence and lived experience, continues to offer a space to rethink how artists are trained and how knowledge is shared. This conversation with Jyothish, an alumnus of the School of Drama and a leading theatre director and acting pedagogue, unfolds within the thematic framework of IFTS 2025: Theatre and Ethics. Drawing from his experiences across theatre, actor training, and interdisciplinary practices, Jyothish reflects on institutional vision, mentorship, experiential learning, and the evolving relationship between theatre, society, and education. Rather than proposing fixed models, the dialogue frames theatre as a process grounded in human connection, discipline, and risk. It positions theatre not merely as training or entertainment, but as an ethical practice that continues to question, transform, and remain deeply connected to life itself.

Interviewer: Jyothish, we are really happy to receive you. You're not just our alumnus. You've become one of the most successful directors in Indian theatre. You have also developed your own pedagogy of teaching, acting and direction.

I would now like to raise certain questions, and these questions are based on Theatre and Ethics, because this year's IFTS thematics is developed around Theatre and Ethics. Most of the questions will be based on theatre. But we know that now you are mainly training actors for cinema or for different mediums. But, since you started from theatre, the questions will be more inclined towards theatre. Is that alright?

Jyothish: Yeah, no problem.

Interviewer: Okay, the first set of questions are based on theatre and pedagogy.

As an artist and educator, how do you see the intersection of theatre and pedagogy in shaping ethical consciousness?

When we take classes here, different teachers have different approaches to teaching, be it a chapter, an exercise, or talking about Stanislavski's seven points etc. But what is the proper way of teaching it? How should it be conceived? Each teacher has developed his/her own pedagogy. Yes, Stanislavski has written it, but eventually the teacher needs to teach this ,keeping ethical consciousness in mind. Because, whatever we teach, there is an ethics to it. Like, we should not copy others' work, and our work should be original. There are so many ethics we already know.

So like that, how can we incorporate this ethical consciousness into our pedagogy and theatre? How can this be developed even more? In today's digital world, is the definition of ethics constantly changing? This is one of the major questions I wanted to ask you.

Jyothish: The first thing is, when a student is trying to study this, by being part of an institution, our entire dependence is on the teacher, followed by the senior students etc.

In my academic days, one of the major problems I faced was that art education had no proper systems. From one perspective it is a good thing, but from another, it can be a limitation. Before joining drama school, for around one and a half years, I had professionally practiced theatre, so I knew the fundamentals of theatre. But without this prior knowledge, when a youngster joins an art institution, he largely depends upon his

teachers and senior students.

So, what should the institution's vision be? Should it be training people for industries? Or is it a place which teaches art? An institute should have a vision. Without that, definitely, the students will suffer.

When I was studying theatre, I did not feel there was a vision to the institution. So things would be random, and we wouldn't know in which direction we were being led. This was, in one way, a good thing for an experienced person. But for a person with no background in theatre, there are high chances of getting confused.

So I would say the most important thing is that the institution should have a vision. The pedagogy and the related components should be under this vision. Vision is very important.

Interviewer: I totally agree with that. Because if we have a vision, we gain clarity on many things, and it also becomes our reference point. We can build everything upon it. Even if we see some of the institutions and methodologies that have grown really well, they all had some form of major vision—and under that, we can form different methodologies.

Jyothish: The reason for that is—it's not just for the students. It really helps the faculties as well. They should work under a certain kind of perspective or vision. Otherwise, people will be misled. So there should be a vision.

Interviewer: Even the National School of Drama, during Alkazi and B.V. Karanth's time, had a very strong vision. During Alkazi's time, he worked deeply on the details. Even while talking to Deepan, he used to say that one of the first scenographers in Indian theatre was Alkazi. Not just him, every faculty had that sense of detailing. They would go from micro to macro, and the life of these elements lies at the micro level. That was his vision.

Jyothish: Actually, if we dig deep into the problems, we'll see that it's the lack of vision. In an institution, people constantly change—directors change, teachers change, etc. They start practising their own visions, which even affects administration. So no one can properly function. But if our vision is clear, especially in a government-funded institution like the National School of Drama or any drama school, they are highly privileged. A huge fund is being invested in students by the government.

This is not a place where we train people for the industry. And of course, the industry is also changing. This is not a polytechnic college. This is an art institution. I personally believe creating an artist is the righteousness of an institution.

Interviewer: When Karanth ji came in NSD, it became a totally different approach. It became completely traditional. He worked on urban forms, understanding drama through its form.

Individuals had their own individual visions. Even though those had disadvantages, it helped some students find their way. I've noticed that when there is a proper vision, it shows a path to both teachers and students. But when there is a shift in vision, which usually happens when people change, it creates a blankness. That affects both the batches and the teachers.

How do you see that? When vision and ethics come together, what usually happens is that the compromising factor tends to be ethics. So how do you look at that?

Jyothish: Yes, ethics and all these are related to vision. So when the vision changes, the ethics also change entirely. That's why I said an art school has nothing to do with the industry. But at the same time, there is a possibility of it affecting the industry.

The greatest evidence for that is, recently there was a discussion at the Film Institute. Commercial film directors and art house directors used to come and have workshops with students. What I've observed is that, in today's Malayalam film industry, the films being made cannot fall below a certain standard. That standard was consciously created by students who graduated from the Pune Film Institute.

So, an art school can change an industry. When a film or theatre festival happens, so many people participate, and these festivals are highly influential. Film or theatre studies have the power to change the industry. But many people are confused. "Should we be industry-oriented?" But there's nothing like that. We have chances to interfere with the industry, though not instantly. We can create

a huge impact, be it in drama or film.

We should have clarity that we are learning art, and deeply researching new forms of it. As said before, in relation to ethics, it all follows vision. Ethics is developed within that. Say,we take a Brechtian approach or a leftist stand, the ethics will depend entirely on those and evolve accordingly.

Also, recently I've been thinking about the so-called teacher. That time is over. Now there are ChatGPT, Deepseek, etc. Students are gaining more information than their teachers. They know everything.

When I say "know everything," I mean they have information, not experience. You can understand that when you talk to them. They're speaking based on their information, not from experience. So in today's world, the difference between students and teachers is that we are more experienced, so we can guide them. That position still exists.

So, now the position we must take is that of a mentor, and I strongly believe that is the ethical position.

Interviewer: Yeah, definitely. Now, your work has spanned multiple disciplines and performers' traditions. How has this interdisciplinary approach influenced your teaching and methodology?

Jyothish: When I worked in a theatre group, I have worked with very common people. I've worked with children, people in institutions, different styles, mediums, etc. They all have very different experiences.

For example, when working with a student in an institution, he may be very informative. But when we work in a local area, those people will be rich in their experience. We cannot compare them to a student studying in an institution. They are so rich in experience.

Recently, I was working as a coordinator on a government project called Kinavu. I was really happy and proud from the start because I got the opportunity to do it. At first, the children there were really not very open to us. They were felt alienated in the space. At night, we planned a campfire. We sang and danced, and after that, the children showed their real skills. They were immensely talented. So, as I said before, when we work in different places like institutions, non-institutional places, clubs, etc, we need different approaches and ethical positions.

But on a common ground, we should go with a personal narrative, not the so-called popular narratives. What I, as an educator, try to do is make them see, experience, and express things that surround them on an individual, personal level.

It is much easier to communicate things like intercultural, multimedia, or experimental works when we are moving through an academic space.

Interviewer: Can you share an instance where your theatrical work significantly impacted a student—or even in your acting classes in front of the camera—a student or performer's ethical and artistic evolution?

Jyothish: I usually prefer to focus on a single work at a time. If I'm teaching, I put my full focus on teaching.

I really feel that the world has changed very much from earlier times. For example, if we take movies—say the new Lion King movie—I felt that now films don't even need actors. They don't even need any human element for a film to work nowadays. Maybe in the near future, the physical film theatre may not even exist, as AR technologies continue to advance.

Now, corporates have completely hijacked it. The theatre system has completely changed into a corporate activity. They are now the deciding authorities of a film.

When observed carefully, I found that there are more people willing to watch a good play than a good movie nowadays. That's the reality. There is a state award-winning film called Prapedha. If we ask how many people have watched it, the count is very low. A state award-winning film is not available for people to watch. It may get one show or so in a film festival. That's the situation of a good film today—it doesn't get a proper screening.

In this perspective, film is in a crisis because corporates have hijacked the medium. But I think there are more people willing to watch a good theatre production. That's the difference between these two mediums.

When I think about theatre training—now the world has changed. Mobile phones have brought everything to our hands. Now that we are doing theatre and teaching it to students, we should ask: what is the meaning of these things in today's world of technology?

Let's take Koodiyattam as an art form. If it is still surviving, it is because it has been institutionalized. We can see Koodiyattam now only because it was institutionalized. Such an amazing art form could have gone extinct—not because of its flaws, but because institutionalizing helped it survive.

Now if we take theatre, which doesn't even have a proper structure, when people have a wide variety of entertainment options, if theatre, just as an art form, needs to survive, it can only do so if the government supports it.

So I have thought. What is the meaning of various theatre schools, including drama schools?

My answer to that is, theatre's process is fundamentally human-to-human connection. So it requires a big discipline. This discipline influences and brings huge change in humans. There is no doubt about it.

Film lacks that, as it's a director's medium. In my life as someone doing actor training, I'm really happy. Because more than producing good actors, there is a good change that can be induced in people through training.

Interviewer: Now, I will ask some questions based on ethics in theatre and education.

The theme of IFTS 2025 highlights the poises of peace and ethics in education. How do you integrate ethical considerations into your theatrical practice and teaching?

Jyothish: The performance tradition has been with humans from early stages. I think its behaviour changed when it started to evolve as entertainment. It may have started as rituals, and from there, as it evolved into entertainment, it became an industry.

Educational institutions, in general, are people-training centers for various roles and purposes in society.

One of the greatest experiences I once had was when I went to Thekkady and, while walking through the reserve forest, there was an Adivasi man who also my friend, guided us. While walking, he occasionally bent down, and I didn't understand why he was walking like that. So I asked him why he was bending, and he said it was to avoid breaking the spider webs on the path.

I think there's no education greater than this. This is not knowledge he gained from school. Knowledge gets meaning only when it can be applied in real life.

We mostly see such communities as "uneducated". When Nanjiyamma received the state award, an argument was raised that she was not a trained singer. Her reply was, "I am a person who has heard the sound of a thousand birds and the sound of a thousand trees when wind blows on them. The sound produced when the wind hits a mango tree is not the same as when it hits a jackfruit tree—both are different."

I think there's no education more powerful than this. We are in a Eurocentric education system, and I think it's very industry-oriented, which we still label as "modern". This is a major problem. If we look at Pan-Asian cultures, education was different everywhere. I am not talking about the gurukula system. I'm talking about tribal communities. If we look at folk art, their pedagogy is entirely different. They study everything through experience.

This Eurocentric worldview has played a big role in the wars that we see. Developing humans for industry is the major concern, and not only do we pollute ourselves with this mindset, but we also pollute the people who follow us by teaching them this.

They (tribal and folk communities) have a huge amount of knowledge and experience of their own. Instead of trying to understand their knowledge, we bring them to our schools in the name of "educating" them. The experiential learning they have is, I think, what we are missing.

Interviewer: In an era where education is increasingly commodified, what role can theatre play in challenging this paradigm and fostering inclusive ways?

Jyothish: We should develop some contemporary rituals.

See, in modern day clubs, parties etc, we all still carry those tribal instincts. That's what makes us dance together, get tattoos, etc.

Nowadays, children don't even have space to play. Entertainment is now only focused on commercial movies. These commercial movies now give all the entertainments primitive humans had like dancing, singing and even fighting in a capsule form, and that stays as the major form of entertainment.

If theatre does not go back and find its primitive energy, it will not survive.

There is an immense need for theatre in education. The primitive energy of students needs to be brought back. I strongly believe this can only be done by theatre and not by films.

Theatre should change its behaviour into an applied theatre form.

Interviewer: Yeah, then this commodification will be addressed in a different way. Now, a similar question! The festival (IFTS 2025) also questions the limitations of state and corporate-funded education models. From your experience, how can theatre training navigate these challenges while maintaining artistic integrity?

Jyothish: If we see today, artists are trying to become a brand. Now, everyone has the pressure to brand themselves.

Today, survival in our field isn't possible without branding through social media and other platforms. Now, you have to brand yourself, only then will you be able to "sell" yourself.

But I consciously stand out of this branding, and I am very happy educating. The best thing that can be done today is to be a mentor and give good perspectives to students.

I think it is a real need of our modern time because corporates have affected this world so much. Now that everything is being controlled by corporates, theatre should not compromise. Theatre should stay rooted in its rituals and original spirit.

Interviewer: Yeah, that may be the way of approach for these corporate-funded education systems now. As someone who has worked in both Indian and international contexts, do you see ethical differences in theatre pedagogy across cultures?

Jyothish: Yeah, when we travel to festivals in Europe, what we can clearly notice is that racism is very strong. It can be seen clearly when we interact with them, and in every way we can see the hierarchy they maintain toward other people.

Interviewer: Now I'll move to the next section: Theatre, Social Change, and Performance.

Many of your productions have explored complex themes such as power, identity and existential conflicts. How do you approach directing performances that resonate ethically and socially?

Jyothish: One thing I strongly believe is, "to the extent that it gets personal, to that extent it gets universal". That personal way of looking into a text—I don't mind which text it is—it's all about experience. It should match with my personal worldview and other things. I see art in an individual and personal way.

Interviewer: Your works have been showcased at renowned festivals worldwide. How does global exposure influence the ethics of storytelling in your theatre practice?

Jyothish: Cent percent! I'd like to share an interesting experience related to this.

We were doing a show in France. They are people who follow a very professional working method. We worked with a different kind of imagination. There were so many technical meetings, planning sessions, paperwork, and other procedures.

At one point, I said, Let's stop all these technical meetings and planning. Just give us our equipment, and we'll do it ourselves".

Within two days, we set up everything that was needed. They were shocked to see us walking through the truss. I even had a small conflict with the technical director, where he said, "Your working process is unscientific". And I said, "For me, rehearsal is important."

Just moments before the show, some five groups of police came and did many checks—fire safety, wiring, and all. They said the wiring wasn't safe and raised many issues.

I totally understood the reasons for their concerns. At the same time, I felt there is a problem with their professionalism as well.

One complaint they raised was the lack of a handrail on just one step, and because of that, they considered cancelling the show. But later, when the show started, I realized it was difficult for elderly people to climb stairs without a handrail.

Out of all this, what I understood is that there should be a balance between professionalism and imaginative way of working.

Yesterday, when speaking to Peter Cooke, he said something about your play, which happened in Trivandrum with circus artists. They were doing the play with no safety measures, and the next day, another play was staged, which was done with full safety precautions. He said the safe play was boring for him.

Interviewer: Yeah, the most interesting thing is that those circus artists told me, "How can we see this as a performance? This is fully safe. Even to clean a window, they're wearing a harness".

Jyothish: Yeah, what he said was, "If there is no element of danger, theatre is exciting".

Also, now if we see, so many movements like the #MeToo movement are happening. But this creates a problem in theatre.

While doing theatre, we may touch, hold, and be physical with each other in many ways. We don't ask for permission, because we know we are ethical.

When talking about ethics in theatre. I don't know how to define it, because I think a good art form always challenges all forms of ethical positions. It's a different kind of ethics.

Interviewer: Yeah, it challenges ethics and also creates new ethics.

Jyothish: As I said before, this primitive madness of humans is what is being sold in movies these days. This madness was once dealt with very interestingly in theatre.

Another thing I feel is: problems that need to be politically addressed should be politically addressed, but I don't think that should always be connected with art.

I'm not saying this as a universal statement—it's my personal thought. Because, as I said before, in an ethical form like theatre, there is no need to ask permission to touch, hold, share each other's sweat and presence.

A person who is not part of a commercial industry is ethical—they can't even think of going unethical. So there's no need to ask permission. This touching and holding is part of human beings' togetherness, affection, and love for each other.

It itself is ethical, beyond every morality.

Interviewer: Absolutely. In your view, what is the future of theatre education in India, especially in the context of the evolving educational landscape?

Jyothish: I think the future of theatre education in India lies in reconnecting with its roots. We need to move away from the institutionalized, eurocentric models and embrace the experiential, community-based approaches that have been the hallmark of traditional Indian theatre.

Institutions should serve as facilitators rather than dictators of knowledge. They should provide spaces where students can explore, experiment, and experience theatre in its truest form.

Moreover, we need to integrate theatre with other disciplines. Theatre has the potential to enhance empathy, critical thinking, and creativity, skills that are essential in today's world. By collaborating with fields like psychology, education, and social work, theatre can contribute to holistic development.

Lastly, digital platforms offer new avenues for theatre education. While they can't replace the live experience, they can serve as supplementary tools for learning and sharing.

In essence, the future of theatre education in India should be about relevance, inclusivity, and adaptability. We need to ensure that theatre continues to be a living, breathing art form that resonates with the contemporary world.

Interviewer: Yeah, very true. Considering IFTS 2025's focus on alternative education models, how do you think non-traditional theatre training spaces contribute to a more equitable

learning environment? Do you believe theatre practitioners have a moral responsibility to address contemporary socio-political issues through their work?

Jyothish: If somebody is specialized in it, if it's their area of interest, they can do it.

But I don't think I alone is correct. Theatre is a tool, and you can use it in your own way.

We can't generalize it and say it's everyone's responsibility.

I may see art in a different way. It's not a responsibility, but if someone wants to, they can do it.

Interviewer: We move on to the last set of questions. This is about the future of theatre and educational engagements.

What advice would you give to young theatre artists who wish to balance creative exploration in theatre or in performance with ethical responsibility?

Jyothish: Theatre has its own politics. It's the politics of expression.

It shouldn't always have to go along with the so-called social structures.

I think an artist can find inequality in every so-called equality that exists.

If we had a very happy and healthy world, everywhere, without any problems, art wouldn't exist.

Art is always in search of inequality. We are always in search of balance in society, which I think never really happens.

And in every equality we claim exists, someone is always facing inequality within that.

Art is constantly in search of human beings' fundamental insecurities.

Art does not exist in a happy, healthy world.

The balance we try to find can cause severe problems in people. This discipline that we try to incorporate might seem ethical, but sometimes it can seem unethical too. But I think that's how humans are.

Art is a place for people to express their madness.

I once heard someone say,

"If Buddha had existed during the time of communism, the communists would have put him in a mental asylum".

I think people should have the space to express themselves.

Interviewer: With the rise of digital and immersive theatre, how do you see the ethical dimensions of theatre evolving in the future?

Jyothish: As I said before, if theatre doesn't go back to its fundamental roots, it can change.

But even if technological developments happen, people may still prefer the old, organic forms more.

What do you think about it?

Interviewer: I think it will be there. But I doubt it at the same time.

The digital world, in other ways, can make this questionable, because it is reproducing humans in a different way.

And when this multiplies, I think humans grow sharper.

Now, as humans are becoming more inhuman, I think when technology enters, we may actually become more human, grounded, and rooted.

Also, human minds get sharper. Even now we can differentiate between AI-generated images and human-made ones.

Human beings will eventually reach back to humanity.

Jyothish: Yeah. This AI, I think, largely works on templates, and human imagination is much greater than templates.

In the future, I think more forms of entertainment are going to arise—not just cinema but also AR and other audiovisual advancements.

And in that time, the organic nature of theatre is going to rise in interest among the audience.

There is a huge need for this human-to-human connection in such times.

Interviewer: As an educator and mentor, what are your hopes for the next generation of theatre practitioners in India and beyond?

Jyothish: Like we said before, theatre is so

close to life, while film is a director's medium.

There is no direct connection between people. Sometimes actors don't even see each other while acting.

Sometimes, they may only see the other actor in their movie when the movie releases.

Film has an end. But theatre is not ending, it keeps on developing.

Theatre is so close to life. It is a refined form of life.

Interviewer: So, last question! As we know, Jyothish studied here at the School of Drama.

You have a huge trajectory as a creative artist, director, and a senior educator in a leading film school, that too, in acting.

So in this trajectory, how do you see the way the drama school should go?

Where should the drama school go?

Jyothish: See, if we look at the fundamentals of film, be it the three-act structure or anything, film is so connected to theatre.

Even in film institutes, the fundamentals that are taught there are dramas.

How to create drama is one of the things taught there.

Even if we say film is not related to theatre and has its own form, I think drama has an influence on it.

It may be the combination of different types of drama.

Whenever someone tells me film is not connected to theatre, I think about Brecht.

He creates so much drama in his plays, be it The Caucasian Chalk Circle or Mother Courage. It's so much drama.

But people usually don't get it.

Film and theatre are really connected, and I don't think there should be a separation between them.

Interviewer: Jyothish, it was wonderful talking to you, and thank you for being here. Thank you so much.

Jyothish: Thank you.

Voices That Refuse Silence: Theatre, Truth, and Transgender Lives

A Conversation with Kalki Subramaniam

At the third edition of the International Festival of Theatre Schools, a space dedicated this year to ethics and sabbatical theatre practices, the festival welcomed a presence that embodied both urgency and grace. Kalki Subramaniam joined the festival alongside the performance Vila, enacted by Prema, bringing to the stage lived experiences that are often pushed to the margins of society and art. An acclaimed poet, theatre activist, entrepreneur, and national voice for transgender rights, Kalki's work consistently bridges art and activism. Through theatre, poetry, performance, and storytelling, she transforms personal and collective trauma into acts of resistance and affirmation. Her journey, rooted in lived experience as a transgender woman, offers not sympathy but clarity, dignity, and pride. This conversation unfolds as an exploration of theatre as truth telling.

Interviewer: Today is a great day as we have today with us, Kalki Subramaniam, along with her performance, Vila, performed by Prema. She's from Pollachi, a very nearby district of Kerala. Prema is from Coimbatore. This is the third edition of the IFTS , the festival of theatre schools. This year, we have given due attention to the sabbatical theatre practices. That itself makes your presence here a blessing. Kalki Subramaniam is a well-known activist of LGBTQ+. And she has worked for the civil rights of transgender women. We're very happy to welcome you to the IFTS. She's a poet, theatre activist, entrepreneur, and inspiring speaker, and she gives a lot of talks across India on the rights of the transgender people. So can you just describe your travel, both as an artist and as an activist?

Kalki: Thank you, sir. I think, as an activist, I'm using art in all forms, especially theatre, painting, voice, poetry, literature and storytelling. I am using all these art forms for my marginalized communities to give them a voice, to amplify their voices, to give more vibrance, more attention, and more sound to their voice. I'm using the art form for people like me because I have lived that experience of being a transgender woman, and being marginalized, discriminated against, harassed, rejected, and a subject of violence, sexual abuse, and all that. I understand my community because it's like mirroring my soul. I could mirror their soul, and they mirror me because we go through the same kind of experiences in spite of the languages we speak, caste, religion, space and the kind of circumstances that we come from. A transgender body is marginalized. It becomes a question of exploration. It becomes a quest if it becomes a space for exploitation as well. So, it's important for any marginalized person to stand up, resist, oppose and fight against this. I'm using all these art forms to tell our stories and ask for justice.

Interviewer: Stand up on your feet and raise your voice for your right! This is the February post. 2014 and after 2014. Are there any visible changes?

Kalki: Is it for the transgender community or for the entire LGBTQIA community? Which one?

Interviewer:You can be focused on the transgender community.

Kalki: I think after the legal recognition by the supreme court in 2014, there are a lot of opportunities for transgender people, especially in the academic sector, corporations, and also in other spaces of art and cinema. But it has a catch, because there are opportunities,

but are we treated equally, or is it coming out of sympathy, is the question. For example, if you take Indian cinema, there were roles previously, in the eighties and nineties, where transgender people were looked down on as clowns, sexual perverts, and all that in Indian cinema. But then in the 2000s, because of our constant fighting and activism, it changed. The narratives changed. Slowly changed, I would say. Now Indian cinema makes movies also on transgender people, but mainstream actors act. Not all transgender actors take a place. It's very rare that a transgender person is acting in a movie. Majorly, trans people are used for comedy, dancing, as vampires, and all that. So what kind of an opportunity and recognition, are we getting is the question. But then, I wouldn't say all of it is not good, but there are so many aspects where, for example, Indian corporate companies are coming forward offering jobs. I mean, every week, I get almost two calls from a corporation offering a job for the trans community. But our community people are not qualified enough to get a job because the majority of them are school dropouts. Education is missing. Education is missing in our community because they have been pushed out of their homes. They lost their chance to get educated and get a degree. So there are opportunities now, but our people are not qualified enough. So it's a big challenge for our community.

Interviewer: theatre has got this entertainment factor dominating on one side. And the other one is theatre can be used as an instrument for social change. How are you balancing both of these in your practices?

Kalki: I think, because of the experiences I went through, there has been an urgency for me to express, tell my story and the stories of people like me. And art was a tool to express it. I started during my teenage years. I used to write poetry in Tamil and English because I was bilingual.

Interviewer:Your poem in Tamil is very famous.

Kalki: Thank you! I used to write in English as well as Tamil. I also used to dance and act. Dancing because I loved wearing female clothes and expressing my gender as a woman. So in any form, whether it's dance or poetry, it was all about my gender identity and how I am enjoying being my authentic self. At the same time, how I am discriminated against and not understood in my authentic self. So, theatre especially, I've done it right from my school days, eighth or ninth standard onwards. I wrote a play. And then constantly, when I was in Auroville during my transition, running away from home and living in Auroville, I joined the Auroville theatre group. Jill Naber was my mentor in theatre. I learned a lot from her. Then I got this opportunity to act in a movie in a lead role, a Tamil film called Narthaki, and then I got a Hindi film. Of course, the movie acting is different from theatre, but my confidence and my understanding of acting actually come from theatre. The little experiences I've had in theatre gave me the confidence about what the audience would expect, how to deliver a dialogue, and all that. So I think apart from all the technical things, theatre for marginalized people is a very powerful medium. Whether it's a song, a performance, a painting or poetry, it is such an important tool to express the agony of the marginalised, the oppressed or the affected. Remember, how the Tamil film Parasakthi, written by Kalaignar Karunanidhi and acted by Shivaji Ganesan, was a very loud and outstanding movie of that time because it spoke about oppression! It spoke about superstitious belief. It spoke about social injustice and about people who have been marginalized and all that. So I think that is the power of art and theatre.

Interviewer: There are two factors when you are performing. One is sympathy; the other one is empathy. Which factor are you trying to work on while you are performing? And what is the response you usually get from the audience? Is it sympathy or empathy?

Kalki: I think more than sympathy and empathy, it's the pride that I'm not a person to be sympathized with. It's my right to live the way I want to, and that's my pride. It's something of a statement I'm trying to put. Empathy, definitely, because I want understanding and friendship, to exercise our rights,and recollect and reclaim our spaces. So definitely empathy, and beyond that, the pride and celebration of being who you are, not being ashamed of being a transgender. In

fact, celebrate yourself for not being bound to social norms. For example, I'm about 30 now. But if I were a cisgender woman, everybody would ask me, why am I not married? Why am I not having children and all that? I think, if you're accepted by the society in a way traditionally, it also becomes a sort of a prison where you're expected to do something. But I think in rejection, I also find my freedom!

Interviewer: This year for the IFTS, we had taken ethics and theatre. As the major content of the festival. What are the usual ethical questions that you face while you are doing theatre?

Kalki: The ethical question is telling the truth. That is the basic ethics of storytelling, especially if you're telling your own story or somebody else's story. And, everything around is all artistic, and how you amplify the truth, how you make it in a way that reaches the audience, how it touches their emotional heart, how you create that support system from them, and how they come and stand with you for your fight and justice. So basically, the ethical question of ethics is about how truthful you are to your art form.

Interviewer:Have you faced any challenges when you're working with other actors?

Kalki: Yes. I have worked mostly with queer actors. Especially, working with Prema is a very deep experience for me because, beyond being an actor-director, we are both best friends. Right from our childhood, we have been friends, and I've known the different side of Prema. Even before being a victim, I've seen her different chirpy, beautiful and glamorous side. Once she was rejected by her family, and she was exploited, trafficked, and sold out. Then I saw her after twenty years. It's both a shock and a grief for both of us. I would say that it took us eight years to work and come out with a performance of her life. I think working with her is beyond just theatre. It is telling both our stories through her eyes, voice, and life, and I'm just sort of putting it together as a director. That's all. So I think theatre is a very beautiful art form because it's just not a long play but her play. It's thirty minutes long. But in those thirty minutes, we are able to tell the truth in its raw form. We are not professional theatre directors. I haven't studied theatre at all. She hasn't studied theatre either. We are from a marginalized group. We both are affected, but she is more sort of affected than me. She has gone through so much. So it's her voice, but I, as a person from the community, who is much more privileged than her, am supporting her to tell her story, and that is what this direction is all about. So I think as a friend, fellow human being, sister and director, I am creating a space accommodating her to tell her story to the world, and ask justice for her and thousands of people like her. That is where I stand out as an activist, and she stands out as an artist.

Interviewer: There are community performances. While you are performing this play or any performance for a community and a general audience, what usual differences do you feel?

Kalki: I think we've done this play among students, families and everybody. There's no difference, actually. Everyone connects with her because happiness, joy, celebration, and grief are all human experiences, and everyone goes through them at some point in their life. So it's easy to connect. Every person in the audience has a lot of questions about transgender people. Where are they begging? Why are they doing sex work? Why are they wearing makeup? Why are they walking like this? Why are they standing on the traffic? Why are they standing in the highways? Why are they doing sex work and all that? And, when they get the answers, there is transformation happening. It's coming out of sympathy sometimes, but more than sympathy, it's empathy, friendship and love. I've seen that in her performance. More than artistic and aesthetically beautiful, it is theatrically correct. Her performance connects people and creates a transformation. I think that is what a true theatre, acting, film, and poetry do. Through her performance, it really happens.

Interviewer: Especially from Tamil Nadu, there were a lot of political movements like Dravida Kazhagam, DMK, ADMK etc. Do you think all these political parties have given justice to transgenders?

Kalki: I think they have given visibility to transgender people, especially Periyar. He is a visionary, and he has done so much work

when it comes to revolutionary work on gender justice. He spoke about women's rights that also include people who have become women, and talked about why women should be educated, should stand on their own feet, and not be confined to the kitchen and all that. A reporter once asked him, “Can everybody come to your meeting?”. “ Yes, even sex workers and eunuchs can come to my meeting.” That's what he said. There is a documentation of that. He is very inclusive as a politician. He's a revolutionary. And people like him were very instrumental in creating the Dravidian movement. Whether it's MGR or Karunanidhi, they all come from the same school. There are different political parties like the ADMK and DMK , but the ideology is the same. They support the trans community. But as always, we need to constantly push the politicians, of course.

Interviewer: When this performance happens, do you feel that the audience keeps a distance from the performer? Do they look or stare strangely at you?

Kalki: That happens because they are very curious to know the life of a trans person. What is she going to do? What is she going to say? How is she going to move? What is her story? As the performance actually unfolds, they get involved, and she takes them on a journey into her life, and they go through different kinds of experiences and emotions. I think, as an audience, it's very moving for them.

Interviewer: People have discussions.

Kalki: Very much! With our own community, with other transgender people, with my mother who was seeing her performance, our best friends, some of our people from the outside, and all that.

Interviewer: Does this interaction happen as opposed to performance activity?

Kalki: Yes. It happens. Sometimes it happens if there is enough time and space. Sometimes it doesn't happen. We just leave it. But the initial challenge that I had with Prema was that she's a victim, of course. I'm also a victim, but more than me, it's she who has gone through a number of experiences. So to her, to re-enact that life, is like bringing all of it back, all the twenty years back in twenty or thirty minutes. And it's a rush of emotions. It's a rush of experiences, and it is overwhelming for her. Naturally, for the first two performances, she broke down. She cried, but she completed it. Eventually, she knew how to cut the emotion and come out as a character. Art, especially theatre, has been healing her also. She's able to tell her story to the audience, and also seek justice because there are people to listen. Previously, she didn't have anyone to listen to her story. Now she has people to listen because now she's an actor, and you have an audience. Now she tells her story, and that is again a healing experience for her, I think. It would be lovely, if she can talk about it herself here!

Prema: Yeah, what Kalki said has truly happened to me. Not just to me, it happens to many other people, but they don’t say it publicly, but I will say it.

Interviewer: What is the need of saying it?

Prema: My pain, insults, and many other bad things that life has given me, and I am here speaking and educating people so that no one else has to undergo what I went through. Only if I speak more, will more people know about our problems. Only if we are accepted like everyone in this society,, will there be an opportunity for us to gain education and do good jobs.

Interviewer: Did you get the social justice you deserved?

Prema : Yeah, definitely, we got social justice.

Interviewer: There are a lot of taboos that rule the society. So this annihilation of taboos, is it a performance?

Kalki: I think so. A lot of people who come to the theatre to see her performance, would have never seen a transgender person perform before. They would have never gotten an opportunity to sit and listen to a transgender person's story. They might have seen it in a film ,song or viral video. But in reality, a person telling their own story is something they are seeing for the first time. I think that is very transformational, seeing a live person tell her own story through a playback solo theatre performance.

Interviewer: We have some performances here by Sreejith Sundaram and Manai. At one point the audience kept saying that these were glorified stories of a torment that happened to personalities. So all artworks are going to sound a sort of escalation while you are telling the story. Yes. So, this gap between the truth and the reality, how are you balancing it?

Kalki: I think, as a director and an actor, we are making sure that her entire truth, is in no way affected because of the aesthetic elements that surround it. We don't want to lose elements in her performance. So, I don't push her because I want her to be real with all the flaws.

Because in our performance, there are a lot of flaws in the movement of the body and transition from one character to the other. , The flaws will fade away eventually with more and more experiences and performances.I don't think our intention is to glorify, and there's nothing to glorify. Rather celebrate! We are not ashamed of ourselves, so we celebrate ourselves. We're not glorifying ourselves. And in a theatre performance, you don't perform; you don't glorify the truth. You'd rather see it. That's all. We are doing it in a way that is real, raw and truthful.

Interviewer: There are a lot of NGOs working in this area. What is your take on them?

Kalki: Yes. I think all organizations have been doing amazing. Each one has done a lot of work, whether it is Ashok Rao, Kavi in the gay rights movement, the pioneers like Sylvie and a lot of them. Shabnamause, Kamala Jaan and Gauri Savan, and South of India, A. Revathi, Priya Babu, myself, Sheethal, Faisal, Renju and Shreekutty. We all do it in our own ways of expressing, standing firmly on our grounds, and voicing for our community's rights.It is a collective effort. We are not enjoying the fruits of it, actually. It is the next generation that will be free and happy. For example, they should be studying in this school as well, The School of Drama. Our community has to get educated, get a degree, get into acting, get into direction, get into being a scientist, or be a professor. That is the most important thing, and that's why we are all working in our own ways.

Interviewer: Sloganism! Is it there at any point in your performance? It has become too didactic, and slogans have arisen.

Kalki: Slogans do arise.For example, Slogans like “my body, my rights” and all that. I think it's just a theatre thing to create slogans and its attention-seeking. Probably, it's a way of resistance. We also do it. Sometimes we don't do that also. We try to experiment and see what works for her, what works for the story.

Interviewer: Each performance would be different. So there will be entirely different reactions from the audience from each show. And each performance would be different.

Kalki: Yes! This morning when we were sitting near a table, we wrote a song together and recorded it. In today’s performance, I will be singing that song before her performance begins. So that kind of experiment, too, we are trying to incorporate wherever there is an opportunity. I've never sung. I'm so scared to sing because I'm a bad singer. It's only one minute, but I think it's a very powerful song.

Interviewer: Is there something that you want to advocate to theatre people?

Kalki: I think the only thing I wanted to advocate to theatre people is that I'm not a very experienced person, but coming from a marginalized community, I think more opportunities should be given to our theatre. It's powerful and is also entertaining. It bangs their hearts and transforms the audience. Her performances definitely will be like that even though they're not aesthetically or professionally theatre-made. I think it all depends on how you constantly learn and practice. I think we need to learn rather than copy, and then create from our own creativity. We make a lot of mistakes. Unless you make a mistake, you will not know what mistake you are making, and then you learn from it. So for me, marginalized theatre is an important thing because social justice sprouts here, and those are the voices that need to be heard. For example, we don't know anything about how many children died in Ukraine. Many of them died bleeding to death, smashed under tanks. I mean, we sit comfortably in our privileges. How many have been victimised by acid attacks? How many have been bombed? How many have been amputated because of war? How many women have been raped in

Syria, Afghanistan, Ukraine and Gaza? These are just stories to us. But as a marginalized person, I can feel the pain of a refugee or a war victim, because we have been victims of marginalization. We have been victims of being pushed away from our homeland, villages, towns, and our homes. So that pain is the same whether you're a refugee, a war victim, displaced, homeless or transgender. That way, I can very much connect with people from the other part of the world who have been victims of political change, of war, of all these things that are horrible in civilization.

Interviewer: While working with the so-called artists, what do you feel as a transgender artist? What makes the difference?

Kalki: I think there is no difference at all.I see an actor as a human being rather than looking at them from a gender perspective.

Interviewer: What I mean is that the emotional expressions will be more powerful when you are rejected by society. The other so-called actors are well-placed in society. They might have to work through a whole rehearsal to express an emotion. Aren't you more spontaneous?

Kalki: That's a very interesting question! I think so. Because Vijay Sethupathi did Super Deluxe, and Jayasurya, did Njan Marykutty. As actors, they were good, but were they truly depicting or expressing our lives on the big screen? They were not. There were a lot of stereotypes in both these films, which we didn't like as activists. We didn't like it as transgender people. That is why it's important to cast transgender actors in transgender roles as well. I'm not saying that as a transgender character, only transgender actors can act. I think we have to be given opportunities as well. A transgender person can elevate a performance if given an opportunity because it's a lived experience. I think we can bring more intensity to a theatre, performance, symphony, opera, or whatever form it is. They have to do a lot of homework. For example, Kalidas actually spent a lot of time with our trans people in Chennai for this character, Thangam, in Sudhakongra's short film on OTT. He spent a lot of time with our transgender community. He was very friendly and empathetic.

Interviewer: All such things happen when they sometimes imitate the physical action or something like that.

Kalki: A little exaggeration. Yes.

Interviewer: Then can they go beyond the body to the soul for creating the characters?

Kalki: I think they are just trying. They're just trying to do the best. I think, 50 to 60 percent they are okay, but they have never lived that experience, and they're just trying to mimic it. At least they are trying to do something, but are they doing cent percent justice to the role? They cannot.

Interviewer: How do you feel about that? Even in the creative field, there are a lot of taboos. What is the possible suggestion that you have to tie down this problem?

Kalki: I think you should read a lot. Research a lot. If you're going to do a subaltern theatre, for example, a theatre about a gay person, we should know who gay people are, what their issues and problems are, and what kind of solutions there are, the political problems that they have, the legal rights that are required, the kind of shame that society puts on us, and the stereotypes. If there is a chance to go and meet gay people, they should do that as well. I think that is important. I don't think Vijay Sethupathi or Jayasurya actually know a lot of transgender people. I don't think they lived with a transgender person, at least for a week. They didn't do it. They're just imitating. Only when you live with them, you understand them, accept them as they are, and love them unconditionally as humans. I think that will reflect you inside, and come out as a performance. Until then, you would only imitate.

. Not all transgender people wear lipstick twenty-four hours. That doesn't happen all the time. Not everybody claps. So, these are film clichés, but that will not happen in theatre. That is the beauty of theatre. So theatre gives you the truth and empowerment to be more real.

Interviewer: There are a lot of Dalit theatre practices happening in Tamil Nadu. A lot of people are working in that direction. How do you feel about the transgender theatre practices?

Kalki: Even after Periyar came and passed by, the transgender people were not even given enough space and visibility. Not at all, I would say. It's only after the arrival of the HIV/AIDS epidemic that these agencies from outside started to target NGOs. NGOs actually began to create sexual health projects and they tried to identify the population that is spreading HIV. Then they found gay people. Then they found transgender people. These people are all marginalized. And, transgender people were doing sex work, and they were very vulnerable to HIV infection. So that is how transgender people became their targets and beneficiaries. Thus, transgender people became visible because of these NGOs, sexual health projects, and all that. Then this visibility transformed into civil rights in India. So, gradually civil rights upgraded to legal rights, inclusion, family rights, and everything. It all started with the arrival of AIDS. Not just here, around the world, I would say.

Interviewer: Prema, can you tell us about your rehearsal process, as it may not be the same as a usual rehearsal process? The script won't be there, the official rehearsal schedule won't be there, and you are creating it together. Please tell us about that.

Prema: I have the emotion for the play, and Kalki told me to speak very naturally and tell my story. During the initial days of rehearsals, I used to cry a lot while performing. I was so emotional that I could not control it. Then Kalki told me not to extend too long and to finish within a set duration.

Interviewer: Who was your first audience?

Prema: Two people, Jasmin and Shakthi.

Kalki: One trans man and one trans woman. They were our audience. 37-year-old trans woman and 17-year-old trans boy.

Interviewer: What was their reaction after seeing it?

Prema: They were very emotional.

Kalki: They could connect with her.

Prema: Then we performed at Krishna College, at a Transgender Equality Fest, then at Kochi Darbar Hall, etc. I do it in every language.

Kalki: When we come to Kerala, she does it in Malayalam. When we go back to Tamil Nadu, she does it in Tamil, and next month we are going to Delhi. In the Delhi LGBTQ center, we have our art show and her performance together. So there she'll be doing it in Hindi. She's multilingual. She knows five languages. I think for an actor, that's really a blessing. It is now a blessing, but once it was actually a difficult situation because she was pushed away from her home. She became a migrant. She went to Bangalore. She lived there for more than a year. She also learned Kannada, and then went to Delhi and Mumbai. She also lived in Kochi. So, through these migrations, she learned not just languages but the art of survival. That includes the language.

Interviewer: Very happy that you have spent this much time with us. Are there any final words?

Kalki: Thank you, for asking such deep, lovely questions. I think there were a lot of things that I could share for her and myself as well. Festivals like the IFTS or any other festivals should always give opportunity for a transgender actor, trans director, transgender-based, or LGBTQI queer-based place. I think the marginalized voices have to be given as prominent space so that our voices are amplified, and it reaches the public, and there is a transformation happening. So, I would really like to thank the School of Drama, the University of Calicut and the festival, IFTS. And, of course, you!

Interviewer:Thank you, and I wish you all the success.

Kalki: Thank you, sir. It was a pleasure meeting you. Thanks.

Crossing Borders of Theatre Practice and Pedagogy

A Conversation with Marcin Brzozowski

At the International Festival of Theatre Schools, we engaged in a reflective conversation with Marcin Brzozowski, theatre artist, pedagogue, and Vice Director of the Aleksander Zelwerowicz National Academy of Dramatic Art, Warsaw, whose two decades of experience as an actor, director, and educator have shaped contemporary theatre education in Poland. He speaks about the evolving landscape of Polish theatre beyond the legacies of Jerzy Grotowski and Tadeusz Kantor, highlighting pedagogical approaches centered on improvisation, physical training, and process oriented learning. Drawing on influences such as Eugenio Barba, collaborative devising practices, and his long standing engagement with India and forms like Kathakali, Brzozowski reflects on curriculum design, assessment, and the meeting of Indian physical traditions with European psychological approaches, offering insights into theatre as a living pedagogy shaped by experimentation, intercultural dialogue, and sustained artistic curiosity.

Interviewer: Good afternoon! Today, we have with us a theatre person and professor from Poland, Marcin Brotonwski. I welcome him to the show.

Marcin: Hello.

Interviewer: I would just like to introduce you!

Marcin is a distinguished theatre artist, educator, and the vice-director of the Alexander Zelwerowicz National Academy of Dramatic Arts in Warsaw, Poland. With a career spanning over two decades, Brotonwski has made significant contributions to the fields of acting, directing, and theatre education. As the vice director, he plays a key role in shaping the academic and artistic vision of one of Poland's most prestigious institutions for theatre trade. His professional journey began with a deep passion for theatre and performance. He graduated from the National Academy of Dramatic Arts in Warsaw, but later returned as a faculty member. His early career as an actor saw him perform on stage across Poland while he developed a reputation for his dynamic presence and versatility. Over time, his interest expanded into directing and pedagogy, leading him to pursue a career in theatre education. As a director, he has worked in numerous productions, collaborating with both established and emerging talent. His work often explores innovative approaches to classic texts and contemporary performances, blending traditional techniques with modern theatrical experimentation. He has been particularly influential in fostering a creative and collaborative atmosphere at the academy, mentoring young artists and guiding them in the development as performers and creators.

Since we had seen a few Polish plays from Poland in Kerala, I'd like to know the contemporary theatrical scenarios In Poland and also the theatrical element of the theatre academia.

Marcin: Polish contemporary theatre is not ,as everybody thinks all over the world, is Grotowski and Kantor. They had a great tradition, but they don't inspire a mainstream theatre, I would say, anymore. A little bit maybe. It's just a fraction of alternative theatre that continues this path. So Polish theatre is mostly quite contemporary in language and in themes. So there are many young and old playwrights who write contemporary hot plays on our everyday life subjects. Also, these directors make very new interpretations of classical texts, very often set in contemporary times. But, of course, there is a second branch, which is a very, I would say, academic theatre, trying to be lucky. Academic theatres, I mean, are the theatres that are very traditional, that try to use traditional costumes, and do not go too deep into interpretation. But Poland has 40 million viewers and so there's place for both. T What I love about Polish theatre are

the works of directors who cross the lines. They do not think if they do visual theatre, dance theatre or dramatic theatre, but try to use all these means of creation to make their own kind of theatre.

Interviewer: Okay. So, what are the new methods or new pedagogy systems used in your theatre school?

Marcin: Okay. Five years ago, I for the second time, was the tutor of the year. Every year, we have an artistic tutor. So, I said to the dean, this time, if this is my year, I want to teach an elementary acting course. And we started working with combining Viola Spolin, Stephen Book, and Keith Johnstone to make improvisation, which meant that every student in every course could do several exercises. I always started with Eugeno Barba's physical exercises. Because Eugeno Barba was doing those with his actors to show them that they can quickly catch something that they think is difficult, just by catching the right balance in the body. So, we did a lot of physical things. And then we jumped to improvisation.

Interviewer: Have you had any workshops with Barba?

Marcin: I never had a workshop with Barba. I have only watched his performances live, and I love his performances. I have only watched the films about his training.

We finished the first semester with conflict exercises, like bilateral conflict, without talking. And then we went on to the second semester, adding some talking to that. And then we didn't make exactly the scenes, but put some text into these exercises. So, we took a lot of time, and I didn't want to make it strictly fixed. I wanted them to be in a process because II thought the second year and the third, they will teach you to fix that, and now let them do it openly. And, also, I said that notes for exams are not good in the first year. That is good because I didn't want to really put these notes. And we didn't have the the exams, but the open sessions in the end. So it was, and it worked. And my colleagues also were very surprised because that year was much better equipped in tools than previous years. And so, now it is an official program. Officially, there are no notes at the end. There is just one open session at the end of the semester, and that works perfectly because they're more open. They don't feel judged. That's wonderful! So, that was my one of the latest approaches.

But the second one. . . I am very grateful that I could work with one of the best Polish directors at the moment, Marcie Beshawski. And he works with a method of an English filmmaker, Mike Lee. So he meets the actors for three months individually, creating very precise biographies and giving some exercises, like thinking exercises and moving exercises. So you create your character. You know everything about your character, and then you meet your partners. But before you go, you have the instruction, which they don't know. Everybody has instruction. And we are put together. And this is how, by this kind of improvisation, having the character very deeply in our heads after three months, we improvise, and the re-improvisation is recorded. Then the dramaturg, or dramaturgist, just takes this text and writes all the things based on what happened, sometimes using our sentences and sometimes rephrasing it. So, actually, when I went on the stage, we had the text two weeks before the premiere. But when I stepped on the stage, I didn't have to think about how to say that line. It was the most wonderful work, and I loved the performance. I don't have so much time, but I try to do that with students, especially when I work with them on their third year, when we're building the role. This is the final acting task, so I use it. And it works for me. I have to tell them so much then because we have so much information before that and they can build up concrete things on that. What is worse for students is, when they are doing something in general! And here, they are so precise. So these are the two things that I'm exactly working on because it's currently working.

Interviewer: I'd like to know about the curriculum. We are following the new curriculum. Yeah? There are a lot of changes. So, I just wanted to know about the curriculum. I mean, they have electives where students from other disciplines come and take electives in theatre. You have the choice.

Marcin: Okay! So, first of all, we have something that is called a faculty. So there

are several faculties, and we think of joining the faculties of acting, directing, and theatre knowledge because that may be more interesting. But if we do that actually, we have to do that according to the European system. And what is special about our school, in combination with other schools in Poland? theatre schools are the only schools, with the exception of medicine schools, run four or now five years courses.

Interviewer: Five years.

Marcin : Yes. And it's only MA. So, it's a complete course. In Warsaw, there are two specializations namely dramatic and musical puppets. But the base is the same. In the first year, the basic subjects are elementary acting exercises and prose. The second year is, actually, verses, speaking in verses and scenes in prose. Then the third year, scenes in verses and monologues. And, the fourth year is working on the role. And to that, some other things are added as specialization. For example, dramatically, they also have a monodrama. Musically, they also have scenes in musicals, or more singing exams. For puppeteers, they have puppets in general in the first year, followed by modern and classical techniques to subjects, and then they have a very modern subject called the theatre of life material. So they do their own things. All of our students at the end can do their little performances that they can take from school. But outside of that, they also have a final diploma performance. It is this one, which is a big performance made by a director from outside. Of course, there is also the theory. There are also speaking classes, musical classes, and some theory, but the core is practice. Also, dancing. Yeah.

Interviewer: Do you have in the curriculum, courses like, maybe applied theatre or visual arts and multimedia theatre?

Marcin: This is for faculties, actually. It is in the educational law. I think twenty percentage of the subjects of all disciplines have to be for the faculties. So, we have these kinds of things.

Interviewer: Okay, you've been to India before. Right?

Marcin: I've been to India eight times, I think.

Interviewer: Okay. Fine. That is good. So I just wanted to know your impression of Indian people, Indian theatre, and the Indian theatre academy.

Marcin: My impression of India is very simple. I'm in love with India, so I'm coming back here. And one of my biggest dreams is to be able to live here some day because it's my favorite part of the world, and I specifically like Kerala and the South. It's like a dreamland, a beautiful green land for me. Indian culture is so complex and so wide because it's a subcontinent. When you go from Kashmir to Sikkim, from Karnataka to Tamil, or from Odisha to Maharashtra, everything is different. Yet there is, of course, something very Indian. And so, it has never happened that I come here and I know everything.

I always have to learn new things. So, it's very exciting, and the climate and food are perfect to live, I think. And, about Indian theatre, my first taste Indian theatre was Kathakali. It was in Kochi. There are these theatres for tourists. And whenever I went to Kochi, I watched Kathakali. Of course, I've seen some others, like Rajasthan puppetry or so. But they were not so interesting for me. But Kathakali is like a combination of visual arts, of body, of acting,and everything. Of course, it's very traditional and very strict, but when you see that as a European, you see a wave of colours,movements,repetitive actions, and it's great.

Interviewer: Have you watched any folk performances or folk theatre performances?

Marcin: I've seen some of them, mostly by accident, while going to the street, and I see somebody performing. Yeah. I didn't do that for a long time. I wanted to do that this time.

Interviewer: Yeah. Kerala is very rich in ritualistic indigenous festivals like Theyyam.

Marcin: I know. Performances like these are very attractive visually as well.

Interviewer: That's true. And we have what can be claimed as the first intercultural performance. That is, Chavittunatakam. It's from Europe. It's Portuguese. There are African rhythms, African beats. So, it's kind of an intercultural performance, you could say. That's something that took shape in the sixteenth or seventeenth century and is practised till today.

Marcin : I've only seen I've only seen it in films. You can watch them in the folklore museum in Ernakulam as well. We get to see them in the streets of Kochi as well. We've been to Jaffna this summer. We saw a Hindu, Tamil celebration in the temple and over the village around. There were many similarities, actually. So it was very exciting. And then, I'm seeing here some modern approaches, and what I always like is this physical core of Indian theatre. Because, as one of the speakers here said, European theatres are often inspired from here. Yes,to the bottom! That's true! I think that mixing our psychological approach with the Indian physical approach is something that has to work. And that is something that has been practiced by Eugenio Barba, for example, because there was this anthropology of theatre, and they were inspired and had wonderful results. Grotowski as well.

Interviewer: The first play he did was also Shakuntala.

Marcin: Yeah. Shakuntala. It's a very famous play of his, of course. So, something in this direction will be wonderful. I did everything to come here for the festival again because I have this fixed idea that we would be able to make a longer and deeper cooperation both from research and artistic front. For example, a faculty exchange programme for a brief period of three months or so can be planned. Our directors can come and work with the students here for a while. We try to gather the money for that also from the European community. But, you know, that's interesting because much money is going out for Ukraine programmes in Europe. We applied for, like, €30,000, and we got €3,000 only.

Interviewer: So, your reflections on our festival which has been here for three days now? We have two more days to go though. So, how can we make it better?

Marcin: When I come here all the time, I feel like I am in some secluded island full of greenery, in some kind of jungle with these whitewashed buildings. So, actually, this is, like, cutting off the walls, which is wonderful for theatre. Then, all these arrangements done here in the space and these visual things, they work great. What I like about this festival is that it flows. So it's not just the performance and the lunch here. The chat over the tea, the lectures, and there's some kind of inspiration when you write what you would like to change and so on. And last year, I was determined to come back this year. So, I like this festival a lot. And, I said that already last year, I like the combination of art with reflection that often comes from artists who have already developed something, and this young, vibrant art of our students. It's wonderful to see them if they go high or if they sometimes fall. It's theatre. It happens also in professional theatre. But with students, it's wonderful to see how they develop by doing all these things.

Interviewer: Great. So one last question. What are your plans as a teacher for the future?

Marcin: I was talking with the Dean of Direction in Warsaw that I was very worried about the way that actors speak in verses at the moment. And I suggested to her that I would like to make a course for the directors on how to work on this with the actors. For example, we saw a versus performance from a Polish two days ago, but Camille is a rapper. He treats this like music. And that was okay. That was okay because there was a musical flow. But often the verses are spoken like prose. This is what I would like to bring to the attention of Polish directors. I'm the Vice Director of the school. I'm dealing with a lot of things. So, we've done many things already. Also, through this international cooperation, we want to make a better plan for our students and teachers, who can also take up a lot of skills going abroad.

Interviewer: Okay. Wonderful! That's our goal here as well! A real exchange of ideas, methodologies and pedagogies!

Marcin: Yeah. Last year, I bought some online books that I didn't know. I once had someone sent me the Natyasastra , which nobody knew anything about in Poland. So now I know, and I'm happy. And here I also got some more books that I didn't know. So also, interactions with people here. . . yeah, it's a treasure!

Interviewer: Thank you very much, ***Marcin***. It was great talking to you!

Marcin: Thank you.

Designing Mood, Meaning, and Mystery

A Conversation with Neil Fraser on Light, Pedagogy, and Life

In this reflective and richly layered conversation, the ***interviewer*** speaks with Neil Fraser, an eminent lighting designer, teacher, and writer whose career bridges theatre practice and decades of pedagogy. Drawing from his formative years studying drama in Manchester during the 1970s, and his long association with RADA, Fraser reflects on how lighting shapes psychological experience, theatrical meaning, and human perception. Rather than treating light as mere technology, he speaks of it as an emotional and contextual force, inseparable from darkness, shadow, and the human body on stage. From chiaroscuro painting traditions to classroom exercises with a single lantern, from candlelight and natural sources to virtual reality and AI, the conversation moves fluidly between practice, philosophy, and the future. Equally revealing is Fraser's personal turn toward writing in his later years, where his visual sensibility finds expression in novels and poetry. The interview closes on a deeply philosophical note, touching on memory, art, teaching, and the enduring mystery of human existence. This conversation is both a masterclass in lighting design and a meditation on seeing, teaching, and living.

Interviewer: Welcome, sir.

Neil: Thank you.

Interviewer: It is a great opportunity and privilege to talk to you. I know, you have wonderful long-lived experiences.

Neil: Yeah

Interviewer: So, it is a pleasure! I just want to know your perspectives on visual and lighting especially. So, what I have personally felt is that light is psychological.Light influences people's mind.

Yeah, it does!

So, when did you realise you are a light designer?

Neil: I went to study drama at the university in Manchester in the United Kingdom as a literary subject. But inevitably we did study staging and we were given the opportunity to stage things ourselves, a part of which was lighting. I went to the university without ever knowing anything about lighting but I gradually discovered more and more things about it, learnt about it, was able to do it, which is the most important thing, and then I began to do it professionally. So, I fell in love with the idea that you could change the mood, the character, the feeling of a stage just by pushing a button and by changing the lighting. So, it was at the university which was in the 70s that I first began to understand lighting and use it. No matter how many theories you have about something, drama is to stage something. So, to light something you need to be actively doing it, trying things and playing with it. Whenever I do a workshop, I try to make it a practical workshop, so that the students create lighting that we can discuss and criticize.

Interviewer: Mostly, we say we are not designing light, we are designing darkess. What is your take on this?

Neil: I think what is important is to understand that the interplay between light and dark is important. And yeah, darkness is every bit as important as light. But you have no darkness without light and no light without darkness. What you are really talking about is that there is direction of light and casting of shadows.

When you shine a light on something you have to worry not only what are you doing with that light, but where is the light going afterwards and where are the shadows going. You can have a lot of fun there, and you can create a lot of ambience. You are not designing with dark; you are designing with light. The two have to work together. It is like the Italian concept of chiaroscuro, by the great masters like Caravaggio, Rembrandt and Vermeer,who want you to create light that looks like that.

Interviewer: Yeah! Most of the cinematographers are also using the same chiaroscuro techniques. So, another thing, as a pedagogue, how do you approach teaching lighting ? From where do you start?

Neil: I start by saying, from the very beginning that I want students to play with lighting. I've just been in the festival now, talking about lighting; had three three-hour sessions where I've been speaking and interacting with the students. That's enough for now. We now need to do something practical. I might do a 20-minutes talk about something, might be about colour or direction of light, just to get the ideas going. But then I will set a student or a group of students, a task. First task might be . . . you have one unit, you have one lantern and you have somebody sitting in a chair. Where do you place that one unit? Where do you place two units? How do you use three units? Do you need more than three units? And so on. But I will get them to show me. And once you begin, immediately, in a small group, you begin to see differences of opinion and the formation of different kinds of light designers. They begin to develop their own ideas, and that's great to see!

Interviewer: When you're designing light for production, how do you choose colour?

Neil: Colour is the most common subject. But when I ask students, which aspect of light do you have the most problem with? They say, colour. It's because colour is emotional. We talk about loving colour. We love somebody's dress or their shirt. We hate the colour of somebody's dress or shirt. We talk emotionally about colour and so people get very worked up about it. Most of the time we're using very pale colours because we're lighting skin tones. Our focus should probably always start on the performer. Whether you've got dark skin tones or light skin tones, the light has to more or less reflect what you're seeing. So, we're not using a lot of colour. We have to understand that in the world of colour, we generally work from warm to cold. That's fairly basic, isn't it? Warm to cold. And we start from there and build from there. We also know there's a whole world of symbolism with colour. And that's different culturally. I mean, in my culture, in the UK, green is more often than not seen as a bad colour, as an evil colour. In India, green is not seen as a bad colour. It's in your national flag. It's expressive of verdant growth and abundance in a way that it's less so in the UK. So, there are cultural differences, but there are also a lot of similarity between how we think of colour. We can use colour symbolically on stage, red for rage or red for lust. But that is less often. And it's also contextual. People get bored with that. All lighting, I think, is contextual. What is the rest of the stage telling you? And lighting has to support that. Lighting is veryseldom used as an opposing idea. It's always a supporting idea. It's a sunny day. It's a winterday. It's a tragedy. It's a comedy. We support the mood. That's what lighting does. It supports the mood of any given moment, and changes as the mood changes. And we have to be able to follow it. It's difficult to articulate how you do that. But once you begin playing with light, I think it becomes obvious very quickly.

Interviewer: Apart from theatre practice, you did huge shows like Olympics.

Neil: No, I've not done big stadium shows. I've not done big West End shows. Because I took my career into academia, I worked for RADA, the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art for nearly 40 years. I kept lighting as a profession, but I didn't have time or opportunity, maybe not the talent, to become one of the big, famous professionals. I had lit a few shows in London, a few shows that got to the West End, but no, nothing on that scale. Because I had spent all my career teaching, I saw my students go that far. But not me.

Interviewer: So as a pedagogue and teacher, what's your thought on alternative lighting?

Neil: What do you mean by alternative lighting?

Interviewer: We have a lot of equipment and technology. So how do we make something different?

Neil: You mean the use of LED lighting or moving lights?

Interviewer: Maybe even with natural lights.

Neil: I think natural lighting is great. I mean, there's a huge difference between stage and film.

Interviewer: Yeah!

Neil: Film begs to be able to use natural lighting sources, because we recognize those as an audience, and we emotionally connect with them because they're real. You can't do that on stage. You don't usually open a door on the stage and let the sunlight in.

Interviewer: And fire is also very restricted.

Neil: Well, fire, candlelight, even electric light on stage, in a fitting which we understand to be real, like a table lamp or something, it connects to an audience. So yeah, on-stage candlelight is one of the most effective modes of lighting, but it's not very bright compared to usual theatre lighting. So we often have to supplement it. But I've done lots of shows with real candlelight, with electric torches supplementing the light. Those alternative sources are very good if you can use them. They are very rich and powerful. But a lot of the time, we can't, because you can't dim a candle the way you dim a lantern. You can't turn it off remotely. Somebody has to come and turn it off. So it has its restrictions as well.

Interviewer: Can you tell me about your personal, childhood memories on light? How did it influence you?

Neil: No, because I didn't look at light until I was trained to. When I was in school, I appeared in school plays, but I can't tell you what the lights were doing, because I didn't think about lighting, much as audiences don't think about lighting. Only when I got to the university was I shown how to look at it in a way I wasn't looking before. So, I have no childhood influences in terms of the way things look visually, because I wasn't looking at it as a child. You start looking at paintings, films and people's work on stage. You look at real light in real situations, and you learn from that, and you try and replicate it sometimes. The difference between looking and seeing is enormous. And it's a good thing to be educated in that.

Interviewer: So, do you have any perspective on the future of this technology and lighting?

Neil: Well, I think one of the big things in the future is virtual reality. It's putting on something or moving into something which convinces you that you're in a different place, seeing different things. You can touch, smell, feel and see different things. That, I think, is the future of some kind of theatre or film experience where the audience is given an individual experience of being in the actual place. And of course, light will play as important a part there, as it will do anywhere else. But it will always be based on the human experience and what the human is seeing and then translating through one medium or another to the audience . So, whether it's virtual reality or 3D films, I don't know what it will be. Immersive theatre is one similar thing. You light to tell the story.

Interviewer: And AI is also going to influence lighting technology, isn't it? What do you think?

Neil: AI has a kind of literary value, hasn’t it? It tells you what to write, it offers you things. I suppose it will do. I'm not quite sure how it will. It will influence the stories that are told more than how they're told, I think.

Interviewer: Yeah! So, we're discussing about light and all. Apart from that, you're a writer too.

Neil: Well, I've always tried to write. I've always written poetry and stories, but I've not had much time. I've written technical books, five technical books and a history book namely a history of theatre book. But now I'm retired. I have retired about five years ago. I have lot of time. So, I know I'm writing much more seriously. I've finished two novels. They haven't been published yet. And that's what I do with my life now. But I write about things with a very visual eye, which is why I don't write plays, because they're mostly about dialogue. I write descriptions of people in settings and visualize where they are.

Interviewer: You're a visual storyteller.

Neil: Well, maybe! I do write dialogue in my stories, but not like the way it's written in plays. Well, often it's only dialogue, isn't it?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Neil: Oh, yeah. And that I enjoy very much. It's like a hobby, really, but it's a hobby I take seriously and I'd like to be published sometime.

Interviewer: Yeah, you write novel and poetry mostly, do you?

Neil: Yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah, okay. Some personal biography?

Neil: Yeah, it's all personal. What can you write that is not personal? I've written about my parents, my work, being in a drama school and so on. My poetry is often love poetry, God forbid. So, it's all personal. It reveals who you are, but it reveals who we all are, hopefully.

Interviewer: As an artist, how do you feel about your experience of life?

Neil: As an artist?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Neil: It's a mystery. What is life? Why does it end? I mean, it's just the most peculiar thing. Why do we spend years and years working hard at something, then we retire and that's gone? Why does it become important to us? It is important that we work; it's important that we work with people.My work as a teacher is to help people move forward, especially young people, than I move forward with their lives. But it's a mystery to me. It's a mystery to many people, isn't it? What it's really for. What a waste at the end of our days when it just disappears.We disappear! All that accumulated knowledge is gone. I think that might be one of the motivations I have for writing it down. I don't want it to be gone. I mean, art is a continuous discovery of what life is about, what humanity is about, what humans are about and why! I find nothing more mysterious than that. But alongside, I'm fascinated by quantum mechanics, the bigger universe, black holes and white holes. What is that about, the scale of it? I'm not a religious man, but you have to believe there's some kind of plan there. Surely!It can't be random. It would be so much easier for nothing to exist. This is so complicated. Why is it here? Well, that's my search, I suppose. I'll never find the answer to that. I wonder if anybody ever will.

Interviewer: Yeah, that's what we call life!The mysterious life! Thank you so much for your great philosophical, aesthetic and practical input. Thank you so much.

Neil: You're very welcome. Thank you for your questions. Thank you.

Drama as a Moral Force

A Conversation with Nilambur Ayisha

At nearly ninety, Nilambur Ayisha remains one of the most uncompromising and luminous voices of Malayalam theatre. A pioneer who broke social, religious, and cultural barriers, she was the first woman from a Muslim community to step onto the Malayalam stage, at a time when doing so invited fear, resistance, and social isolation. This conversation, held during her second visit to the School of Drama after four years, is both reflective and resolute. Ayisha speaks with sharp honesty about the fading centrality of theatre, the growing dominance of cinema, and the urgent responsibility of the younger generation to carry theatre forward. She recalls a childhood steeped in song, humour, and artistic openness, shaped by women, workers, and lived cultural practices such as Kissa paattu. Moving seamlessly between memory and critique, personal history and social philosophy, Ayisha insists on seeing human beings beyond caste and religion. For her, theatre is not merely performance but a moral force, a way of living with dignity, courage, and joy. Even today, she declares with a smile and certainty that if handed a script, she would still perform.

Interviewer: Welcome! This is your second visit to the School of Drama—the first was four years ago. Now that you're here again, how do you feel?

Nilambur Ayisha: I feel proud and happy that you have called me for the second time.

Interviewer: You were the first woman from a Muslim community to act in Malayalam theatre, and you're now approaching 90. Looking at the growth of theatre today and the importance given to women in it, what do you have to say about it?

Nilambur Ayisha: I feel that drama itself is no longer present—so what can I say in response to that question? Drama is a powerful force and a path that leads humanity in the right direction. Today, people are drawn more to cinema than to theatre. But that's not what we intended. We want the younger generation to carry the torch and become the future leaders of drama.

However, their mindset now is, "Why should we still give importance to theatre?" We need to reflect on the earlier days. I was the only actress at that time who came from a Muslim community. Later, others like Zeenath and Amsath, who were also from my family,followed.

Now, many people speak out against cinema, and we feel saddened by it. They are beginning to lose their artistic sensibility. As a theatre actress, I hold a strong artistic sense within me.

Interviewer: Earlier, you mentioned that some people from the Muslim community—even your relatives—told you that if you acted in dramas, you would go to hell. So how did your own family come to accept your decision to pursue theatre?

Nilambur Ayisha: My brother, Maanu Mohammed, was the one who introduced me to the world of theatre. At that time, no one else was involved in theatre, but our housemaids used to sing Kissa paatu (songs), and my Umma (mother) would ask them to share that art with us.

Interviewer: Can you please explain what Kissa paatu is?

Nilambur Ayisha: Sings Kissa paatu

Interviewer: So this is known as Kissa paatu. You were so fond of theatre that, at the beginning of your career in theatre,, you didn't take money for any play you did.

Nilambur Ayisha: My family was a wealthy one—we even had two elephants in front of our house. Some Harijans and maids also lived with us, so our first exposure to art came from

them. The Harijans used to sing (sings a song), and our maids would also sing (sings a song). These were the songs we learned back then, right inside our own home.

My mother used to listen to gramophone records—those were Hindi songs (sings a Hindi song). She herself was an artist with an artistic mind, and that's why some of us children developed a similar artistic sense. That was one of the reasons I got the opportunity to act in films. When I started acting, I noticed a clear difference between cinema and theatre acting—but I found success in both. I acted in many films—around a hundred. However, when new people entered the industry, they began to ignore senior artists. Even now, I sing occasionally and tell jokes to children. Our home is always filled with humour and laughter. We don't have serious discussions—and even if things do get serious, they very quickly turn into laughter and smiles.

Interviewer: When you started doing plays, did you face any problems?

Nilambur Ayisha: My family trusted me, so whenever opportunities came, they allowed me to participate. I also used to trust others deeply. But if someone ever approached me with bad intentions, they would see a different side of me. That's how I became the person known today as Nilambur Ayisha. As I mentioned before, I feel proud that you invited me here for the second time. If I had shown arrogance during my first visit, you wouldn't have called me again.

Interviewer: You are a towering figure in theatre, which is why we respect you deeply, and continually invite you to be part of our events.

Nilambur Ayisha: What we need to observe is the modern generation's perspective toward the arts.

Interviewer: You still carry the strong presence and vibrant energy of an actor.

Nilambur Ayisha: I still have a strong desire to act,even if you give me a script now, I might perform.

Interviewer: I think we can say that Umma was the first woman from a Muslim family to act in Malayalam theatre, and I am the first woman from a Muslim family to become an academician. We share a special similarity. Now I direct plays, but due to academic work, I am now not able to act.

Nilambur Ayisha: Teaching acting is a great fortune in itself. When the children you teach are able to transform into a character, that alone brings immense satisfaction. I teach my children, and I am truly proud of it. In my house, even the little ones are very talented—and that's because they have an artist like me around them.

Interviewer: I believe theatre is also evolving. Today, it is even being taught as a subject in many academic institutions. In Kerala itself, we have two institutions teaching theatre namely the School of Drama and Fine Arts and Sree Sankaracharya University of Sanskrit.

Nilambur Ayisha: I entered the world of theatre at the age of 14. I had already absorbed the essence of art from the Harijans at my home, and when I stepped into theatre, I discovered a wide range of roles waiting for me.

Interviewer: Today, we consider everyone as human beings and don't differentiate based on caste or religion. So when you use the term Harijans, why do you still say it that way?

Nilambur Ayisha: No, people who believe in the Communist Party, remain communists. Others may follow Congress or the RSS. But it's those who have left the Communist Party who are now doing these things. What I observe is this.The Harijans who lived in my house—we always saw them as human beings. So why should we see them any differently? We should not command or look down on them—they deserve respect. Even today, we can't command our own children, and we shouldn't. I'm not sure in what context you understood what I said—did you perhaps take it the wrong way? What I meant was: we should see humans simply as humans. Beyond that, there is no caste or religion. Caste and religion were created by humans, and they've only led to wars, conflicts, and violence. There's really no need for any of it.

Interviewer: Yeah, we all are humans. Yeah. Thank you, Umma, for spending time with us.

Embodied Knowledge and Ethical Practice

A Conversation with Noushad Mohammed Kunju

In this conversation at International Festival of Theatre Schools 2025, Noushad Mohammed Kunju reflects on a theatre journey rooted in village performance traditions, shaped by rigorous institutional training, and sustained through pedagogy. An actor, director, and Associate Professor at the University of Hyderabad, Noushad speaks about theatre as embodied knowledge, the slow cultivation of the actor's body and voice, and the ethical responsibilities of training diverse performers. Moving across institutions such as the School of Drama Thrissur, the National School of Drama, and international spaces in Asia, he articulates a practice grounded in discipline, equality, and lived experience. This conversation offers insights into acting, teaching, and ethics as deeply interconnected processes rather than separate domains.

Interviewer: Welcome sir. Welcome to the IFTS 2025 edition. Can you please introduce yourself for our readers? How do you identify yourself as an artist?

Naushad: Hello. I am Noushad—Noushad Mohammed Kunju. I'm an actor and an Associate Professor in the Department of Theatre Arts at the S.N. School of Arts and Communication, University of Hyderabad. I trained as an actor because my passion for this field has always been strong. Later, I had the opportunity to work in play production and direction, and now I am also involved in education. I teach theatre extensively, and most of the time I work with actors. Now, I see myself as an actor trainer and director.

Interviewer: When did you first identify yourself as a theatre artist? Or before theatre, was there something else? Where did the inspiration for this life journey start?

Noushad: That was long ago. I think, even before the tenth standard, I had started working with local theatre groups in my village in Trivandrum. The villages were called Kunnumpuram and Andoorkonam. Andoorkonam is my birthplace. From there, my theatre journey began. It was pure passion. I liked my voice, and I liked being on stage, confronting the audience through the characters I played. I didn't care about the audience's opinions- good or bad or even about what theatre truly was at that time. I simply wanted to memorize the lines, do the rehearsals, and face the audience. That was the kind of passion I had. We did a lot of amateur theatre there. While I was in school and college, I didn't do much theatre work, but for the annual cultural programmes in the local theatre group, I was always there. Some local directors would also come to direct us. It was very interesting, and I would always get the villain roles.

Sometimes there would be laughter, sometimes fighting, and all of that gave me energy and made me feel very good. Connecting with people—that was the main idea. Back then, we didn't even know the word "theatre." We were only doing 'natakam' every year, and every year we would rehearse for a month. Some teacher would come to train us, and we would rehearse at the local library from six to nine in the evening.

Later, I got a chance to work with Lenin Rajendran sir in Swadhi Samskarika Sangam, Trivandrum. Then I was introduced to the School of Drama in Thrissur by my senior, friend, Sreelatha chechi. That was how I was introduced to theatre as an academic discipline.

Interviewer: That's exactly my next question. You first did theatre for pleasure. Then you realized that knowledge there is also worth seeking. getting pleasure, whatever you are doing. When was that transition period?

Or, if I can add one more thing, what kind of knowledge system is involved in performing?

Noushad: I got it. Look, the first stage was not knowledge for me—it was only doing. You know, what the teachers taught us. Even if we were doing Kathakali, Koodiyattam, or Kalaripayattu, we didn't need theoretical knowledge. We simply had to absorb what the teacher taught us and imitate it. The knowledge part came later, when the body gained experience through practice. Sometimes we would write classroom notes—not to satisfy the teacher, but to understand what we had done during the exercise sessions, what yoga we practiced that day, what gesture we learned, what angigam is, what bhuvanam is, and so on. Slowly, we began to understand that this was not just practice. We did many productions at the Thrissur School of Drama during that period. We worked on many characterizations and improvisations. But again, the knowledge part came later. The teachers gave us a certain awareness about why we were learning theatre and how the aesthetics of this practice made life more meaningful. It was not just doing. That openness came only at the Thrissur School of Drama through seminars, conferences, and workshops—like Ramanujan sir's—helped us acquire a great depth of knowledge. And I am still exploring that knowledge. You know, we are talking about theatre as a knowledge domain. Even the practice of acting adds so much knowledge to the system. It is a very slow process that builds body experience and awareness. The knowledge part comes later; the first experience is with the body. This is what I discovered through my education in theatre.

Interviewer: Sir, who are the key figures who influence you in acting in the time of study in the School of Drama? And you can also talk about other institutions as well. International institutions also have trained you.

Noushad: You know, dear, I personally like Naseeruddin Shah's acting. Everybody will like his acting. I like Amitabh Bachchan, because of his character exploration and dialogue rendition. Even Rajinikanth, for that matter. I have personally observed Naseeruddin Shah's work many times. Some of the films I watched, and his talks and interviews on theatre and films, would give new lessons to us. And in the Kerala context, Bharat Gopi sir, Karamana Janarthanan sir, Nedumudi Venu sir, and Thilakan sir are exceptional. I like Thilakan sir especially for the articulation of his voice, which gives intensity to his characterization. I used to listen to his voice in the famous radio plays. Also, Leelama Chettipuzha and Vakam Shakir, to name a few, are people who inspire me. They are fantastic in radio plays.

Interviewer: You have learned from different institutes. So what are the things you got from each school?

Noushad: I have that good body memory. From the Thrissur School of Drama, there is the body memory of working with the traditional disciplines like Kudiyattam, Theyyam, Kathakali, and Kalaripayattu. These are all multi-talented creations happening here in the Thrissur School of Drama. Our body is culturally cultivated through everyday practices like Yoga, Kalari, or Kathakali, etc. and music also. Then slowly, our muscles start talking about that kind of cultural body-'The Thrissur School of Drama' body. Once I completed my course here at the Thrissur School of Drama, I went to the National School of Drama. The National School of Drama is completely in this practice-oriented thing. You don't need to acquire much knowledge, only memorize the lines. I was struggling. I had to fight because I had to change my body to something, to confront other people from other cultures. Then the struggle was language. And I used all studios in the NSD for practice. Every day, I would read the Hindi newspaper, even though I didn't understand the language. But later, that helped me a lot. Pro.Ram Gopal Bajaj bought a Hindi speaking course guide, and then he told me, 'Noushad, practise it, by heart it, memorize it, and read it aloud to me in thirty days'. Those teachers and my classmates were very helpful. They supported me whenever I was doing the characters. I did the main character there. I still don't understand how I did Robina's 'Mitti ki Gadi', productions. I did Shakaar and Ram Gopal Bajaj's 'Bahut bada sawal' productions as well. I always had the curiosity to learn and interact with people. We did extensive practice in NSD three years. Now I am acknowledged

as an Indian actor rather than a Kerala state actor.

I loved working with practitioners like MK Raina, Ram Gopal Bajaj, Prasanna, and more. I worked with many people there in the NSD Repertory Company. Many devised productions happened during those times. It is a kind of diverse culture of practice. But the limitations of my language and accent do not fetch me many character.

Then, I worked with international collaborations in Tokyo and thought I needed to study on an Asian level. So, I went to ITI Singapore later. That was between 2002 and 2005. The training was very systematic there.

Interviewer: You got systematic training from there. So, can you talk about the system you are working on now? I also personally know that as I worked under you for three years. I have a very good memory of it and also have some notes as well. I couldn't trace the training. I have a good memory of it but I couldn't crack it because I was a beginner. I was enjoying it though. Could you just elaborate on that? What is your pedagogical approach?

Noushad: My primary approach as an actor involves the body, voice, and mind. When I work with the body, I focus on preparing it, understanding its nature and limitations, and working within those limits. That is the foundation of my training. So first comes the preparation of the body, followed by connecting the breath with the body. We breathe every day, every moment, but in performance, that breathing has to become cultured—meaning every action must be guided and shaped by breath.

After that, this body must learn to connect with other bodies. We then explore as much as possible, drawing different nuances from traditional disciplines. We don’t simply imitate these art forms; instead, we absorb their core energies—such as the slowness of movement and other essential qualities. I then guide the students through this process, helping them slowly understand why we prepare the body in this way and how to connect with each other. This practice can be applied in their performances, whether they use it in a stylized, performative manner or in more realistic acting.

Interviewer: What are the basic things you should follow as an actor in a training period? What are your suggestions?

Noushad: My suggestion is that you have to be yourself. You shouldn't imitate others. Your body, voice, and thoughts are shaped by your own metabolism and conditions. Students come to theatre not yet ready to take instructions and practise because they arrive imitating some of the famous celebrity figures they admire. The images of those figures are strong inside them. When those images are removed and they are emptied of expectations, they can be introduced to the basic elements of training.

Interviewer: Now we have this edition of IFTS focused on ethics. What is the ethics of an actor? What is the ethics of an actor trainer? And, did you ever, as an active trainer, go through any kind of ethical dilemma?

Noushad: Yes, I have many examples. Look, sometimes the academic area is a little bit risky for an actor-trainer because we have to work with the diverse bodies. In every batch, some of the students are not equal to others. And in my approach to acting practices, I want to make everybody feel equal there.

You have to surrender to the co-actor and you have to surrender to the entire team. If you have negative thoughts in your mind, it will affect the entire team. So be quiet and calm, and do your work. That is my motto. It is the same I do in the university context.

Interviewer: Sir, what do you think about IFTS? What is your experience?

Noushad: I am coming for the first time. My colleagues came last year, and they have been regularly visiting IFTS. I think it is a fantastic initiative, and they are providing a kind of meeting space where ideas are exchanged among theatre pedagogues, trainers, scholars, students, and practitioners. It is a beautiful space to understand theatre cultures and practices, and to see how they work in different atmospheres. I think IFTS is capable of bringing about revolutionary changes in the field.

Interviewer: Sir lastly, would you like to give a message to these upcoming acting trainers and educators?

Noushad: Students are very much aware of training because of the festivals and workshops held in Kerala and other parts of India. You cannot cheat in training with students. You have to acquire more knowledge first and then practise with your body. Then you can apply that to the students. Don't randomly explore with the students because they are coming with a good understanding, and you are the responsible person to give proper training. We are living in this contemporary digital world full of information. But the students do not get as much practice. If you are a good practitioner-guide, you have to practise with your body and collaborators and eventually apply it to the younger generation.

Interviewer: Thank you very much for your valuable time.

Noushad: Thank you very much for inviting me and giving this wonderful session.

Between Body, Ethics, and Freedom

A Conversation with Sachiko Tange

At the third edition of the International Festival of Theatre Schools, we had the privilege of engaging in a rich and reflective conversation with Sachiko Tange, a theatre actor, performer, and pedagogue from Tokyo, Japan. Trained extensively in traditional Japanese dance and later shaped by contemporary theatre, film, television, and intercultural performance practices, Tange brings with her a rare synthesis of discipline, physical intelligence, and artistic independence. Her journey moves across continents and cultures, from Japan to London, Australia, and now India, marked by moments of success, resistance, reinvention, and renewed freedom. At IFTS 2025, she joined the festival not only as a performer but as a resource person and pedagogue, sharing her insights on ethics, embodiment, Stanislavski, pedagogy, and the socio-political responsibilities of theatre today. This conversation traces her artistic evolution, her reflections on global theatre practices, her concerns about market-driven cultural production, and her deep belief in theatre as a space for communication, exchange, and peace. What emerges is the voice of an artist who sees the body as knowledge, movement as thought, and theatre as a living, ethical practice that must remain open, critical, and humane.

Interviewer: Today, we had Sachiko Tange with us.

Interviewer: She is from Tokyo, Japan. She is an actor there in theatre filming, television productions, and even in advertisements.She had acted in many movies and had a long training in the dance performance tradition of Japan. Madam, welcome to this interview, and we are very happy that you are here as a resource person and pedagogue for this third edition of the International Festival of theatre Schools. Can you just brief your artistic journey?

Sachiko Tange: It is a long journey. I was born in Japan, and then grew up in the city of Tokyo. And, my parents sent me for many a training, such as traditional dancing, ballet etc. I did many of them, but my interest sustained only in Japanese traditional dancing. When I was in elementary school, I went twice a week to do exercise. We started like this, bending the knees and just wearing the kimono, and then the dancing.

But when I was a teenager, I wanted to be an actor. And, I went to the contemporary theatre institution and I started the career as an actress. Till my 30s, I was very lucky to get a lot of filming, TV commercials, and dramas. But later I fell in my industry; I felt just something was wrong. I often felt uncomfortable with certain pressures related to sexual harassment during that time. So, I decidee to move out. I moved to Europe first. I I went to London, but I didn't expect to get a job as an actress because I couldn't speak English. So first of all, I decided to learn English. And then while was learning English, I needed money. So, I got into a job of voice over work in an in-flight movie. I worked a lot. So many jobs I've done, and I met some of the Indian filmmakers and also Indian-style players. I experienced a sense of freedom and made a lot of friends. I stayed for five years, before I left London. It was fun. Then I met him, an Australian man. And then I moved to Australia. Then I fell in love with the NIDA as well. That built me up. NIDA gave me a lot more energy. I don't expect much, but during the NIDA period, I was freer because Japanese women were different from the overseas ladies. And I would more like to work overseas, such as Australia or France. And now, I'm just very lucky and happy to get a chance to come to India. But I had no idea about India. I only know three of the artists here.

Interviewer: And this is your first visit to India?

Sachiko Tange: First visit! It's not easy to fly to here. No direct flight. I must stop over for one night in Delhi and then get a local flight. But I feel something here, just when I arrived at this campus. It is such a wonderful heaven. It's the same feeling as being in NIDA. Peter Cook made a speech last night were he also mentioned the same. I was moved by Peter's speech. The performance last night was also

awesome. There is some magic about the Indian actors here. That's very wonderful. I respect you.

Interviewer: Every year we have a theme. Last year it was an ecology. And this year it is ethics and theatre. So, being a traditional performer cum actor, how do you look at it?

Sachiko Tange: I am from contemporary theatre background. Also, I trained a long time in the physical movement of traditional Japanese dance approach. So that's why I can understand both. And, I think, for Indian people, there is already a physical sense. So it does not need to be invoked. An intellectual approach means just reading a book and then applying the Stanislavski system into my life. And this morning, I talked to them about how the Stanislavski system works, but in a short period, it's not easy to teach. So I decided to take the essence to make it easier for the actor to enjoy jumping into the imaginative space. That's my plan to do this time.

Interviewer: Actually, there can be very different approaches to creating a character. One is from your inner feelings. The other way is, you are getting the stimuli from your external body which then travels to your mind to create the character. Which one do you prefer, from the external to the internal or from the internal to the external?

Sachiko Tange: Alright! I understand now. In my case, it's the same. But when I was young, I trained for a long time. It's just like that. My body actions came into effect on the inside. It is even two ways.

Interviewer: So, it's the process from external to internal and then internal to the external. Is that the way the cyclic process moves?

Sachiko Tange: Yes. I agree with that.

Interviewer: Have you been teaching for a long time?

Sachiko Tange: Not much! Just since I got back from NIDA. I was offered to teach at Tokyo Tech, National Institute. They had set up a culture and cultural center.

Interviewer: Since you're working with theatre, film, TV, and even commercials, is there any new pedagogy that you can suggest develpoing?

Sachiko Tange: Before I came, I just didn't know that word, pedagogy.

Interviewer: Yeah. It's the teacher-student relationship. How you are teaching things? And what is your vision in teaching? How do you expect the student to learn things? All come under the term pedagogy.

Sachiko Tange: Okay, I understand! A pedagogy!I have been using more script in my work but now I want to learn how to use the Stanislavski systtem. I just want to use a more physical approach. That's why I decided to do it today, this morning. Yeah!

Interviewer: Okay! You're trying that with students? And what is the usual strategy that is adopted in Japan, especially for these theatre schools?

Sachiko Tange: Big question. I spent twenty-five years overseas. Then I came I back to Tokyo more than ten years ago in order to teach at the university. Since then, I have been feeling that they must be more flexible. Contemporary theatre production is, I think, losing motivation. They're just copying. They are importing the successful production from London or the United States. The underground theatre companies, like the small theatre companies, have lost the critical mindset.

Interviewer: So, is it more colonialist?

Sachiko Tange: It has become all a matter of money. If you want to create a production, the audience has to pay the money, but most big theatre companies such as Lion King come up with

big productions.

Interviewer: So, this colonial damage is affecting the traditional part of Japan. Do you think so?

Sachiko Tange: I think so. I think most of the audience is lost or losing. Can I say that the government is also to blame?

Interviewer: Absolutely! No problem. Most of the time, when you have to compete with other Western financial powers, even the government policies will change. They have to adapt to cope with the situation. So this market is the main concern of modern society.

Sachiko Tange: Yeah. Maybe. So what about your country?

Interviewer: The same way. Even in your traditional theatres, they market. They will cut it short. They'll make it showpieces, museum pieces. And, they sell it. That happens everywhere in the world.

Sachiko Tange: What else can I ask you?

Interviewer: What about the situation in India when it comes to children's theatre? How to educate?

Interviewer: Yeah. Actually, the National School of Drama is one of the institutes where the student's theatre is given as an optional subject to our students to study. The National School of Drama had one project called TIE, theatre in Education. And they had some branches where even official courses were running. We had a course here, namely the children's theatre. And very recently,

the government introduced theatre, film, dance, music, and everything to the curriculum.

Sachiko Tange: Curriculum, wow!

Interviewer: Yeah! So this is something where the art is used for teaching curriculum. So that has already started.

Sachiko Tange: You need a teacher, yeah?

Interviewer: Teachers who are qualified theatre persons. We had a children's theatre degree here

The students have to learn creative dramatics, crafting, and psychology. And, they have to do three productions.

Sachiko Tange: Three productions? A year?

Interviewer: No. During the entire course of three years. Each year, one production, where either the adult is performing for children or children are performing for children.

Sachiko Tange: I want to see the children's production.

Interviewer: Yeah. Last week, we had two productions.

Sachiko Tange: Oh, really? Not this time?

Interviewer: Most students have their examinations as these productions.That's the mode of examination we had. Very little theory, more practice.

Sachiko Tange: Wow!

Interviewer: So how do you look at the function of theatre, as a catalyst or something like that for social change?

Sachiko Tange: In Japan or in general?

Interviewer: You may say both. Do you believe that theatre can change society?

Sachiko Tange: It depends on politics. Politics can change.

Interviewer: There is a play called NINGAL ENNE COMMUNIST AAKI (YOU MADE ME COMMUNIST) written by Thoppil Bhasi. It has made a drastic change in the political scenery of Kerala.

Sachiko Tange: Wow!

Interviewer: So, that much power is within theatre which can change the society. So theatre can be used as an instrument for social change.

Sachiko Tange: In India, everywhere?

Interviewer: Yeah. In India, we are practising it.What's the scene in Japan? Japan, the whole, because you have traveled a lot and performed a lot. Yeah.

Sachiko Tange: We are more focused on business. We need more focus on just education. But I think since I came back to Japan, I always say to my students that we are able to see Japan better from overseas. Most people in Japan speak only Japanese. That's why we're just important. I always say to the students that you should have your opinions. And then possibly, once or twice, you must move out of Japan and then just physically stand, have an experience, and then you create your own journey. From outside Japan, it's always better to see your country. That makes you more independent and broader minded. There's future for Japan. There is more possibility to change Japan little by little. In Japan, people don't like changing quickly though.

Interviewer: After the world war, in the aftermath of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki, is there any drastic change in the approaches to theatre or performance making? Have you heard of Suzuki and/or Tadashi Suzuki and all.

Sachiko Tange: After the second world war, the way of thinking has changed. Before the World War II, contemporary theatre had already started, that too by Tsuki ji Shouge kijo, the guy who ran from the German or just Moscow. And, during the war, they were just moving around and touring. But after that, our society totally changed.

Interviewer: After the world war, there was the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombing. Japan has been totally ruined.

Sachiko Tange: Yes!

Interviewer: Both financially and otherwise. How far is theatre able to contribute to building the nation next?

Sachiko Tange: Nation? Spiritually or just physically?

Interviewer: Both.

Sachiko Tange: We are good at making buildings. And, now it is easy to crush, crush, build, and crush, build.

Interviewer: Nice.

Sachiko Tange: More easy! Unbelievable if you come to Japan to see! And even I was born in the city of Tokyo. My mother doesn't like to move out of there. So, we have to survive together in tiny, building like spaces. It's incredible!

Interviewer: To finish off our dialogue, there was one more question.

Sachiko Tange: Yeah! One more interesting question, please!

Interviewer: Yes. What do you want to advocate to

the new generation of theatre practitioners?

Sachiko Tange: I didn't think about that anyway so far. Still, I think people have to communicate to understand each other. That makes people's lives good. I invited a bunch of pedagogues from other countries. That's a kind of exchnge of knowledge, and people here just physically meet each other. That's a very important to create a peaceful world.

Interviewer: You have worked on a lot of intercultural projects!

Sachiko Tange: Local productions!

Interviewer: Intercultural productions mean you are working with Indian actors as well in London or Japan. So you come across a lot of cultures.

Sachiko Tange: Yes. But all theatre people are international. Easy to communicate. I visited RADA, and then saw the National Theatre many times during the five years I stayed there.theatre people are easy to communicate with. No sense of divide and boarders for them. They are just government setups.

Interviewer: Okay. Thank you, ma'am, for spending time with us.

I really appreciate it.

Sachiko Tange : I I really enjoy staying here. Thank you very much for having me.

Thank you.

From Resistance to Representation: Theatre and Trans Lives

A Conversation with Sheethal Shyamon

Standing firmly on her principles and responding boldly to every challenge, Sheethal Shyam has carved a unique space for herself across activism, theatre, cinema, and public discourse. A theatre artist, actor, model, and transgender rights activist from Kerala, her journey is one of resilience, resistance, and reimagining identity in deeply conservative social landscapes

From grassroots community organizing and policy advocacy to writing, performance, and pedagogy, Sheethal's work consistently bridges art and activism. In this conversation, she reflects on her lived experiences, the formation of queer collectives, the politics of representation in theatre, and her belief in art as a powerful tool for social transformation. Speaking with honesty and clarity, she reminds us that inclusion is not charity, it is a right.

Interviewer : The one who has been standing firmly on her principles and responding boldly to every challenge,leaving her unique personal mark wherever she went! We welcome the theatre artist, model, transgender activistand actor, Sheethal Shyam.

Welcome, Sheethal!

Sheethal Shyam: Thank you.

Interviewer: So Sheethal, can you please tell us about yourself?

Sheethal Shyam: I was born in Kozhikode but brought up in Thrissur. My family includes my father, mother, and elder brother. I faced many struggles during childhood—my brother was very masculine, and I was quite feminine. I was surrounded by people who couldn't accept the identity I expressed.

Later, I joined an institution where I experienced sexual violence, discrimination, harassment, and stigma. It was overwhelming, and I dropped out in 9th grade. I then went to Bangalore in search of a job, and there, I met many queer people. Through them, I understood who I was and began to identify myself.

We are all human—we have our own uniqueness and identity. I started building a space where I could express mine. I returned to Kerala and began activism at an organizational level with the help of SANGAMA in Bangalore and FIRM JWALA in Kerala.

I went to Bangalore in 2002 and returned to Kerala in 2006, when Kerala was still very conservative. It was difficult to talk about rights, identity or dignity. Many people migrated to escape society's ill-treatment, but I didn't want to run. I stayed.

With the help of a few supporters, I created an empowering system. I started activism in Thrissur and expanded to other districts. I founded an organization called VOICE and became its founding member in 2006. By 2011, I became the state-level secretary of SMFK.

I also got the chance to be a district and state-level coordinator for the second transgender survey in the world. I participated in policy drafting, and in 2016, when the first Transgender Justice Board was formed, I became a board member.

Later, I received film opportunities. I took it up, not for fame, but because I wanted to explore acting. I also started writing columns in Mathrubhumi Weekly as Kerala's first queer columnist. In 2017, I stepped into theatre with the help of the Kerala Sangeetha Nataka Akademi, where I coordinated a workshop for queer people, especially transgender individuals, at the School of Drama.

Honestly, I never imagined doing all this—but I'm grateful I did.

Interviewer: When you returned to Kerala in 2006, you mentioned founding VOICE. What were the goals and plans of that organization?

Sheethal Shyam: I worked in many places but felt discriminated against everywhere. It was in Bangalore, through SANGAMA, that I learned about activism and understood what I truly wanted to do. Bangalore was more accepting, free, and non-judgmental than Kerala.

Even now in 2025, Kerala is still not fully inclusive. That's why we started a Community Based Organization (CBO). Initially, the registrar refused to register us because we were a queer group. But we fought, and they eventually accepted—it wasn't illegal.

VOICE focused on community empowerment. Many people supported us: sex workers, health workers, , human rights activists, writers, film groups, and more.

It helped educate people in Thrissur, and things improved. VOICE also participated in protests and raised awareness.

Interviewer: Can you talk about SMFK?

Sheethal Shyam: SMFK stands for Sexual Minority Forum Kerala. SANGAMA brought a project called PEHCHAN to Kerala, where I worked as a community counselor and later became the project manager. It ran until 2014 and was funded by the Bill Gates Foundation, focusing on TB, HIV, and Malaria prevention across nearly 200 CBOs.

VOICE conducted the PEHCHAN project, which deeply focused on identity. Later, we approached the government, and with their support, we conducted a statewide transgender survey with about 4,000 participants. The survey revealed major issues. Over 62% had dropped out of school and many faced severe crises from society and family.

This pushed the government to begin drafting transgender policies. Though SMFK later dissolved, it led to the formation of many other organizations and movements. Today, even in remote places like Wayanad and Idukki, there are justice boards and CBOs—a major social shift.

Interviewer: When you moved into the arts after your activism, what differences did you notice?

Sheethal Shyam: Art is a means of protest, a voice—it's about survival and communication. Theatre is not separate from activism—it is social work. At the School of Drama, we were asked to suggest someone to lead our theatre workshop, and we recommended Sreejith Sundaram Master, a well-known theatre director and queer activist.

That's how Parayan Maranna Kathakal began.

Fifteen trans people came together and shared our life stories. We rehearsed, learned theatre techniques, made properties—and got tremendous support from faculty and students. Our first play premiered at the School of Drama, and later, we performed at ITFOK, the Bangalore Theatre Festival, and Shimoga Theatre Festival and many other festivals.

We felt it shouldn't just remain a play. So, we founded the Mazhavil Dhwani Theatre Group. In 2022, we started the next production, Puranangal Punarjanikkumbol, a musical theatre performance with 20 musicians. It was staged in 2023.

Interviewer: What kind of change do you think you've brought to the theatre field?

Sheethal Shyam: Body politics is a serious topic in theatre and cinema today. At festivals like ITFOK, we see diverse performances from across the world—but those conversations rarely continue afterward.

There's still discrimination within the art world. Festivals like IFFK receive heavy funding, but theatre festivals don't. Why? Communities must be prioritized in all forms of art.

We're not asking for favors. These are our rights.

What we speak about now is Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (D.E.I).

Interviewer: Do you think that queer community is represented enough in theatre?

Sheethal Shyam: In most plays, the narrative is dominated by cisgender men and women. Transgender individuals don't fall under

"normal theatre"—we're placed in a box labeled "trans theatre" or "queer theatre." That must change.

Transgender characters and stories should be represented just like cisgender ones. We're tired of cis-hetero love stories and lives. Let new narratives emerge—ones the current generation can relate to.

Cinema is changing rapidly, but theatre is still behind. Even woman's identities aren't fully expressed. Female technicians in theatre are still rare—whether in videography, lighting, or stage rigging. We rarely talk about gender and sexuality in these spaces, and that needs to change.

Interviewer: Who inspired and supported you in your theatre journey?

Sheethal Shyam: Revathy Amma, Sreejith Master, and Mangayamma have all inspired me.

Mangayamma trained us, and it was such a joyful experience. Sreejith Master is someone I feel very comfortable working with. Their support has meant a lot.

Interviewer: You mentioned facing issues during theatre work. How do you handle them?

Sheethal Shyam: Yes, we've faced many issues. During rehearsals once, a participant's parents forcefully took them home, telling them not to perform with us.

But on the other hand, after a show at ITFOK, the parents of a transwoman artist, Daya Gayathri, publicly addressed her as their daughter for the first time on stage.

We need to face these ups and downs—for a better tomorrow.

Interviewer: Can you tell us about Parayan Maranna Kathakal and Puranangal Punarjanikkumbol?

Sheethal Shyam: Parayan Maranna Kathakal had no script—it was based on our own stories.

Puranangal Punarjanikkumbol was scripted, a musical theatre production with around 20 musicians. We performed it twice at the School of Drama, but unforeseen circumstances prevented more shows.

Still, it was a valuable experience—it explored what history says about gender and sexuality, and how we can reinterpret it artistically and scientifically.

Interviewer: Now that you're a trainer and pedagogue at IFTS, how does it feel?

Sheethal Shyam: I feel very proud and happy. I'm glad I was invited.

We often say we live in a progressive society—but are we really giving queer people equal space? That's the real question.

Here at IFTS, I feel comfortable. The emotional bond with everyone here is very special. I don't know how many academic spaces can offer this level of comfort.

That's why I can say: School of Drama is the best queer-inclusive campus.

Interviewer: So thank you so much Sheethal for being a part of this festival and contributing towards it. Thank you

Sheethal Shyam: Yeah,thank you and I had great time talking to you.I am so happy.

Thank you so much.

Between Theatre and Cinema: Ethics, Language, and Contemporary Practice

A Conversation with Shyamaprasad

The inauguration of the third edition of the International Festival of Theatre Schools marked a significant moment for the School of Drama. The festival was inaugurated by distinguished alumnus and veteran film and theatre director Shyamaprasad, whose work has left a lasting impact on Malayalam cinema and contemporary theatre. Shyamaprasad made his acclaimed debut with Agnisakshi, which won the National Film Award, and later directed notable films such as Ore Kadal, Elektra, and Akale. His body of work is recognised for its literary depth, visual precision, and ethical engagement. In this conversation, he reflects on the IFTS 2025 theme, Ethics and Theatre, addressing issues of marginalised voices, theatre's relationship with new media, the diminishing role of dramatic text, and the growing emphasis on spectacle. He also revisits the legacy of the School of Drama and considers broader questions of language, pedagogy, and the future of artistic practice across mediums.

Interviewer: This is actually a very proud and happy moment for the School of Drama, that we have got this third edition of the International Festival of theatre Schools inaugurated by one of our alumni and veteran film and theatre director, Sri Shyama Prasad. And then by his first debut film, Agnishakshi itself, he had won the national award. Later, Ore Kadal, Elektra, and all such films had acclaimed national-level attention, had visited many international festivals, and won awards. Welcome, sir.

Shyamaprasad: Thank you so much.

Interviewer: And this is not the apt time to ask how you feel about IFTS, since it's the first day. But I think you have already sensed the ambiance of the thing and all those.

Shyamaprasad: Of course. More than me being the person inaugurating this function or whatever, I think the very fact that you were able to put together an exciting and important event like this with the students and with whatever facilities are available. I think, it's remarkable. So I'm just reminiscing about how while we were students here, some thirty or forty years ago, we were struggling to actually make both ends meet with the available resources here. But now you have such dream projects like an international festival for theatre schools. I think it's awesome. The kind of vibe I'm getting is something we have all, the former students, had dreamt about. Congratulations!

Interviewer: Every year, we had a theme. Last year, it was Eco Theatre. This year it is, Ethics and Theatre. It's actually a carnival of pedagogues. Pedagogues and students both!

Shyamaprasad: Right.

Interviewer: And this year, the theme is ethics and theatre. Can you share something about that?

Shyamaprasad: Well, I would like to know: ethics in what context? Ethics as in theatre practices or ethics as a general aspect of society and history? Nevertheless, to think about theatre in such varied life contexts like ethics, and I was told that Environment was last year's theme. So it just shows how very dynamic and adventurous way the forms of theatre and arts are integrated in this society. So I think it's wonderful. It's one of the core issue. I mean, artists are conscience keepers with regards to ethics in a society and we indeed have a very important role to play.

Interviewer: Actually, this year, we had plays by the marginalized theatre practitioners, like LGBTQ+ people and so on. Can you observe any sort of ethics denied to that marginalized community in Indian theatre?

Shyamaprasad: Well, denied justice is certainly a matter of concern, you know. And the kind of segregation, the isolation that they feel in our society, is very formidable. And it's only in the recent years that they have been able to come out of, and express themselves- their identity, and their issues through art. And theatre, I think, is a powerful space to reach out to the public and give a one-on-one experience with the world, with the public. So I think such awareness should happen more in theatres and forums like drama schools and other art educational institutions should actually pave the way for more interactions like that.

Interviewer: And you had your higher studies at Hull University, England. How do you feel that the theatre can be associated with the film, television, etc.?

Shyamaprasad: Well, my studies was a kind of hybrid one. It was course on Theatre & Media studies. Understanding the dynamic of theatre works and their adaptations to other media was actually the focus of it. The department was headed by a former BBC producer turned director named Michael Boyle. And it was designed in such a way that different kinds of narrative forms and different kinds of cinematic or representational formats could be experimented with each other. We had orientations in theatre, literature, broadcast media and film studies, all that put together. I believe this is an age of great assimilation of so many forms and several medium, and today we are more conscious about those possibilities, but way back in 1989 it was all a new exposure for me.

Interviewer: We are looking at the new media productions, like incorporating social media platforms, film, television, and all slowly infiltrating into what we call pure theatre and all.

Shyamaprasad: Well, I do have several reservations about it though. I am pretty confused now about what pure theatre art is anymore. Once upon a time, while we were students, the consciousness of visual pre-eminence in theatre was slowly emerging in our theatre, you know. Of course, we have had that in our traditional forms. But in the context of modern narrative theatre, as in written texts and so on, it was always the ideas and the text and the spoken word that had the predominance. So during the late seventies and eighties, the importance of imagery was kind of forced into theatre at that point in time. But I think it has come a long way, and it has merged into so many other forms of technology as well. Now we are hovering on the other extreme, I feel. It is mostly the visual or experiential aspect of theatre rather than the intellectual/ thought aspect of Drama. I must confess that I'm not very up to date with the contemporary theatre in Kerala and elsewhere. I do keep a tab on what is happening and who the new theatrical talents are, but not as much as an academic would. To put it simply, we have travelled so much further away from the power of text, and I personally kind of miss it in theatre. The textual dynamic, in terms of psychology, interplay of characters, ideas, are vastly missing. It is more experiential and more purely spectacle oriented, and they focus on drawing resources from traditional forms. I think there was a lot of use and abuse of it in many productions, as we all know. Such forms were used rather as crutches to prop up an otherwise shallow dramatic content, which is a sad state of affairs. Ultimately, theatre also should be experienced for the characters in the play and the exchange of ideas and emotions. The very idea of drama has to regain its original context and value in the present day theatre. That's my general view about it, on a critical angle.

Interviewer: What happens is when this devising theatre project stands up in major practice, language gets the least importance in the production, which is the first cultural icon of an ethnic people.

Shyamaprasad: Exactly. And it's not just language per se. It is what language does to our ability to communicate, the challenges in articulating what one has in mind, and the kind of dramas that can occur by miscommunicating. All those things are getting lost in the process.

Interviewer: Regarding your school production, Glass Menagerie and all, we have heard a lot about it. It's a wonderful production. Everybody used to tell. And later,

you staged Camus 'Le Juste' as Mosco 1906, in Malayalam with the CULT repertory theatre. Your latest production is Maratha Cafe, I think. How does this transition?

Shyamaprasad: Maratha Cafe is not really my production. I was associated with it as a team member as my friends were putting it together. But definitely, Tennessee Williams was one of my major crushes during my student days, even afterwards, even till today. I do dig into the Internet and look for his much lesser-known short plays and stories. His life and ideas have always inspired me. So have Chekhov and Eugene O'Neill. I have this big thing for playwrights, especially the Russian playwrights of the nineteenth century and the British playwrights. My love for them is very deep. And I'm sad that such level of intense love is not there anymore among theatre student for playwrights. But, that's part of the times that are changing, but I am unable to change anyway.

Interviewer: What are your thoughts on that?

Shyamaprasad: Well, in my film & TV productions I have adapted materials from different narrative forms- short stories, novels, and also plays. And each time, it is very different. For a short story, it's pretty straightforward because you are looking at a thirty-minute long format for which many stories really fit in right very well. For novels, we may have to expand into a feature film, wherein we have to add on to the narrative, sometimes reduce, and make a different plotline. But with plays, especially with the kind of plays that I have adapted, like The Glass Menagerie or Albert Camus' The Just, there is always the conflict between a playwright's strategy of using time and space. The unity of time and space used in a play, is entirely different o what is required in the film form. So one has to strike a balance wherein you are not compromising the theme or the characters or the situations, yet utilising the freedom of the a cinematic form. Well, the novels are very akin to film scripts, you know. They have a plasticity about time and space, which the play doesn't have. I mean here the conventional, well-made play structure. So that had been a challenge, but it had worked out quite well for me. For instance, in The Glass Menagerie, when it was produced on stage as 'Laura' with the Cult Repertory theatre and then when it was made as Akale for the film medium, I could use that ability to transcend time and space to actually enhance the theme. The very theme of The Glass Menagerie is time and space, how those are interrelated. So mostly, it had been exciting. There is no fool-proof method to how to deal with it. I think it varies very much on each case. When I did the Electra, which is actually a kind of collage of Euripides, Sophocles, Eugene O'Neill, and the Czech filmmaker Mikalos Jansco's version of the myth, it was so dynamic, the whole process of evolving the script and evolving the film form. So it is always an exciting thing that you have something great to stand on, you know. I believe that having a great foundation, especially that of a play text, is a wonderful opportunity to do that.

Interviewer: In some of your films, you're trying to make a sort of stylization, which is usually when the film treats a photographic realism. Why are you doing that ?

Shyamaprasad: I wouldn't call it 'stylisation'. Right from the invention of the film technology, filmmakers have been experimenting with the form. It's no more just photographic documentation but great filmmakers have pondered as what does it represent? So one can cite any number of filmmakers who have gone out of the realistic format. I think the pure realism in cinema was there only for a very short span of time. The kind of realism that a conventional mainstream movie, would claims to be' realistic' is really not what can be called realism. We both know that. So filmmakers have always made attempts to transcend that limitation.

Interviewer: And how do you look at the School of Drama and its contribution to Malayalam theatre?

Shyamaprasad: Oh, I think it's immense. It's much higher than what I had imagined it would be when we were part of it. School of Drama, Trissur's influence is not just on the theatre arts but the entire audio-visual media: movies, television, and other kinds of performative productions have been visible. A new way of thinking, a new visual language has emerged. All thanks to the School of

Drama, I believe.

Interviewer: And, any possible additions you could suggest to make the School of Drama perform even better?

Shyamaprasad: I think the institiution is growing in a very exciting way. For instance, holding something like an international festival for theatre schools right in our own school was unimaginable then. So, I wouldn't venture to advise you anymore. As I said I'm not very much in touch with the contemporary theatre practices in Kerala now. But I guess I can feel a certain energy, vibration and creative excitement, which was probably missing at certain points of the school's history. I'm very glad that we are able to regain that.

Interviewer: Can you remember the earlier teachers of this institute?

Shyamaprasad: Of course. I mean, how can we ever forget G. Sankara Pillai , Ramanujan and Krishnan Namboodiri, who are not with us anymore, and then Nambiar, Venu G. and a lot of brilliant teachers who had their own unique version and ideas of theatre and of how to teach theatre. I think Ramanujan sir's early classes about the fundamentals of visual design are still what motivates me when I think about a film's design. The fundamental elements of it like line, movement, action, harmony and so on were so thoroughly etched onto our brains and minds and still enrich our work. Also, my classmates, like P. Balachandran or Jose Chirammel, were already outstanding theatre practitioners then. An academic programme in theatre was unheard of in Kerala at that time. There were no reference points. All we could see were pictures of the productions of Ibrahim Alkazi, Peter Brook, Grotowsky etc. in the books. So from that rudimentary level, we were able to move forward, and the school reached the place where it is now, which is remarkable.

Interviewer: What about the actors' training system that we had? Does it help in modern acting?

Shyamaprasad: Well, again, there are elements that could help like, being conscious about one's body, the potential of the body's movements, responding to rhythms, and responding to other physical, audio visual impulses. Those are certainly helpful as a fundamental to any actor at any point. But the modern actor is supposed to deliver a lot more complex ideas today on stage. He also has to be able to perform on a television screen, film screen, open-air stage, street corner and so on. Hence his expressiveness has to be multifaceted, more than what was envisaged in the traditional Stanislavski method and so on.. But I'm sure we can make use of the traditional elements in terms of its expressive energy in a unique way.

Interviewer: Once a foreigner comes and learns Koodiyattam and Kathakali, actually what happens then?

Shyamaprasad: For a foreigner, there is a lot of novelty involved in the experience. It is totally different from what his life is and what he's used to watching in theatre and so on. So he might get super excited, but for a local, he has grown up experiencing all that. So our response to it should be more logical, functional and less euphoric. I think we should be more balanced about it.

Interviewer: And what about the cultural roots?

Shyamaprasad: Again, for the foreign eye, it is just a form basically. He doesn't have a connection to those roots. Of course, he might learn about it academically, but it's unlike any of us who are grown up with that. The stories, the music, the ragas, the rhythm patterns, everything we have grown up with, right from the lullabies that we heard our mothers sang. For us, it is more internal and deep. Our response is certainly different from what a foreigner would be.

Interviewer: There are a lot of collaborative projects that happen. And they're sort of attending a cultural hegemony. Does that make an active theatre very passive? We had a very active political and research theatre.

Shyamaprasad: Did we? I'm not sure about that. I think the idea of our political theatre was always very preachy, dogmatic and melodramatic, It just carried certain melodramatic values in theatre as well as in the ideology they preached. It was never political in the sense like the Agit-prop theatre in the West was. So, the collaboration

provoked certain thoughts. I know of some people trying to find different paths. Later theatrical ideas proposed by Grotowski and Barba was fashionable for aa while. I agree It had its value for the time being, but, as with everything else, no artistic fashion trends lasts forever.

Interviewer: Especially, a media like film is considered to be more modern. How can we keep all these cultural values while making a film?

Shyamaprasad: It depends on what you mean by culture. If you mean the culture brought in by our heritage or the contemporary culture that is relevant and healthy yet very transient?

Interviewer: I conceived culture as a cumulative, scientific knowledge that we have kept for the coming generation.

Shyamaprasad: Well, that continues regardless; nothing can destroy that, as people has to have a lived social experience. People need to communicate. People need to have artistic expression. Those are all fundamental needs as part of living. So those will continue. It may not go in a clearly, theoretically conceived way, but it evolves into various forms. Look at the way our cinema has changed over the years. I think theatre has changed much more in terms of such urgent needs. So that will go on.

Interviewer: How do you look at our societies, which have become a societal spectacle, meaning everybody is giving hands to spectacle?

Shyamaprasad: That problem is also there with the advent of technology and the new media and so on. The spectacle is at once rampant and sometimes inane because of its overuse. So that's the danger we are facing now. That's why filmmakers or theatre practitioners will have to reinvent the power of images and language each time, afresh because everything has become so mundane quickly.

Interviewer: Okay. To close the interview, how do you look at the future of film making?

Shyamaprasad: The future of film making is looking bright as ever because we have so many modes of avenues for expression like-film media, via the phone, television, the Internet, and what not! I think the possibilities are getting wider day by day.

Interviewer: What is your concept of a pure cinema?

Shyamaprasad: I don't know what this pure cinema is, because it is always a response to the present day's concerns and narrative fashions and so on. So that goes on. At one point, Hitchcock and Carl Dreyer were said to make pure cinema. And then Bergman in the eighties. During the nineties, it was Andrei Tarkovsky who reinvented the pure image. So that goes on. I don't think there is a clear, definite answer for that. It gets redefines as time passes.

Interviewer: Okay. Thank you sir.

Shyamaprasad: Thank you!

Interviewer: It is happy moment for the School of Drama that one of our alumni has come to inaugurate the festival. We are excited. Thank you.

Shyamaprasad: I'm excited too by the opportunity. Thank you, guys.

Theatre as Resistance and Refuge

A Conversation with Srijith Sundaram

For theatre activist and director Srijith Sundaram, performance is an artistic and ethical practice rooted in lived experience, creating space for marginalized, queer, and transgender voices through inclusive theatre making. In this conversation, he reflects on his work with the collective Kattiyakkari, addressing representation, safety, pedagogy, and institutional responsibility while emphasizing listening, trust, and improvisation as pathways toward genuine inclusion and change.

Interviewer: What motivates you to voice out for the marginalized and queer community?

Srijith Sundaram: In 2008, the group Kattiyakkari was formed in Tamil Nadu. This group consisted of people from marginalized communities, including transgenders, sex workers, Dalits and others. I used to observe a stark contrast between people working in IT companies and people like transgenders and sex workers, who are often seen begging as part of their work. Yes, it is their work, and we should not defame or disrespect it. This made me wonder—where can such diverse individuals come together? I found theatre to be the best space for this, and that's how Kattiyakkari was born.

I always had a question in mind: can marginalized communities and the queer community work together? In Tamil Nadu, everyone seemed to have their own separate groups—cisgender people, transgender people, and others. I wanted to see if they could all come together, and Kattiyakkari was formed to make this possible. In theatre activist and artist Mangai's group, I witnessed queer and other marginalized people working together. Working with Mangai gave me clarity on forming a group that includes people from all walks of life.

The name Kattiyakkari is inspired by the character Katiyakaran in traditional Koothu performances—a storyteller who is typically male. But in Kattiyakkari, anyone can tell their story—male, female, transgender, anyone. The space is meant to be inclusive and gender-neutral.

The story I took was by the famous Dalit woman writer, Bhama. It was her short story called Molagappodi. Bhama used to say that the most powerful tool of a Dalit woman is cussing—using bad words. It's a tool for protecting oneself, so it should not be seen as a negative thing. In every Bhama's story, Dalit women cuss using harsh language.

In the play Molagappodi, there are two main characters—Pachayamma and Gangamma. Mostly transgenders acted in the play, along with some women IT employees. Pachayamma is a Dalit woman, and Gangamma is an upper-caste woman. The narrative revolves around the conflict between these two caste groups.

In Uttar Pradesh, Dalit women once protested by openly defecating in front of a police station. They didn't physically fight or cause harm, but about 20–30 women defecated publicly as a form of protest. A similar act is performed at the end of Molagappodi.

In 2010, the play travelled to many places, and most of the actors were transgenders. When working on such plays, we should focus on the performance itself—we shouldn't think about what the audience might say or try to view it from their perspective. When we watch a play, we should see the actors as characters, not label them as transgenders or sex workers. The goal should be to bring a change in the audience's perspective.

I'll share an incident. In 2010, we came for the ITFOK festival. It was a pilot festival. I still remember that in one of the districts we visited for a performance, a newspaper published an article the day before the show, stating that a play was happening and that the people acting in it were sex workers and transgenders. That night, when we returned to our hotel, we saw around 30–40 men gathered there. To them,

the people who had come weren't artists, they were just sex workers and transgenders, and they believed they could offer money and approach them.

Now, festivals have more responsible volunteers, but at that time, the program's volunteers and coordinators did not take responsibility for the safety of the team from outsiders. So, travelling with a team of people from marginalized or queer communities was extremely difficult.

Another incident happened when we went to Kerala to perform Parayan Marana Kathakal. The play had already been performed over 45 times. We went to Kozhikode Medical College for a show, but a technician refused to work on the lights and sound. He said, "Why should I work for these people? Why are these kinds of people even coming here?" To him, transgenders were bad people. But it was his job to handle the technical aspects.

This doesn't happen only to transgenders,it happens to women too. There is a structure created by men in society where women who are soft spoken and homely are considered "good" women. But women who are independent and live life on their own terms are seen as bad. If this is the reality for women, then the situation for transgenders is even worse.

The issue with the technician didn't end there. During the play, there were constant technical issues with the sound. At one point, Renju Amma protested on the spot by suddenly improvising a dialogue and saying, "We face problems everywhere—even now, the technician of the play itself doesn't like us." Immediately after she said this, he cut the lights and sound, and walked out. This is the kind of issue faced by the marginalized and queer communities when they engage in theatre. The truth is, art can be used as a powerful tool—whether you're a singer, dancer, actor, or any kind of artist. That's why we chose to use this tool to share our untold stories with the world.

Interviewer: Talki was a play that showcased the dreams of transgender and queer community people who were above the age of 50. In the play Puranangal Punarjenikumbol, you addressed the concerns of youngsters too. What teaching methodologies did you use while working with people of different age groups?

Srijith Sundaram: I didn't study in any university or theatre school—I just studied humans. So, I don't think I have a formal teaching methodology; I simply believe in improvisation. There should always be hope given to people, a belief that someone is ready to listen to their problems.

There is an NGO for transgenders in Karnataka called PAYANA. They did a photo exhibit called Truth Dream. The objective was to explore the unfulfilled dreams of 50–60 year old transgender individuals and conduct a photo shoot related to those dreams. The photo shoot lasted for around two years and from those photographs and stories, I devised a play.

There were around seven actors, aged between 60–65. They were the first generation of transgenders who gave up everything to fight for their rights. The difference I see between young transgender people and the older generation is striking—today's young transgender individuals often give up on life and choose suicide when they face issues from society or family. But if you look at the older generation, they have lived through even harsher realities, carried deeper scars, and are still standing strong.

That's how their theatre began, each scar has a story to tell. In Talki, each of them shares the story of their scars.

Having spent a significant amount of time with transgender and queer communities, I now understand how to talk to them, what to say, and when to say it. In this kind of theatre, we can't be directors who focus only on sets, properties, or design. This is not the space to showcase those kinds of skills. What truly matters is how we create a play with the actors and give them a stage to tell their stories. It's about building a space for the actors and not for the director. This is their space, and I am just traveling alongside them as a director.

Interviewer: Do you see any change in attitude towards the community over the years?

Srijith Sundaram: There are many, even here, in this school. When we first came to perform a play here, for the first four days, no student came forward to support us. But while doing Puranangal Punarjenikumbol, it was completely the opposite. I think those were the best moments I had at the School of Drama. Every student and the whole campus was there to support us—even the senior batches were actively involved.

But before that, when I first came here, I still remember how disgusted people looked when they saw the transgender artists—like they had stepped on something filthy. A few days later, when some media personnel and YouTubers came to cover the event, it was because Dhwaya, the transgender theatre group, had been formed for the first time. Only then did the students begin to understand and gradually start supporting us.

Two years after Parayan Marana Kathakal, I saw a group of students who came and apologized to me. They said that at that time, they couldn't understand transgender people, and that's why they didn't offer any help. I think that was a really important thing to hear, because it shows how questionable the education around transgender and queer people still is.

Now, when I came here again, I saw a truly amazing change. Students are now asking very thoughtful questions like, "How should we address you?" That was a remarkable shift in attitude. I might appear to be a man from the outside, but I may identify as a woman and vice versa. So, instead of just judging us by our outer appearance and calling us by any pronoun, it's better to ask, "What should I call you?" Change does happen—but for that, we need to keep educating people consistently.

Interviewer: Do you suggest appointing a queer person as faculty in this institution?

Srijith Sundaram: I suggest that an institution doesn't necessarily need to appoint a queer or transgender person as a faculty member, but it must ensure that students—especially actors—are properly educated about queer and transgender people. When a queer or transgender person watches a play, they should not feel that they are being misrepresented. So, when a play includes a queer or transgender character being portrayed by a cisgender actor, it's essential to have a meaningful interaction or consultation with someone from the queer or transgender community.

In the Tamil anthology film Paava Kadhaigal, the character Thangam was loved by many, but I didn't like it. Many people liked it, but I did not. In an interview, the film's crew made a statement saying, "training transgender actors were a waste of time". That is a completely wrong and problematic statement, implying that transgender people can't act. In most places, portrayals of queer or transgender people are often inaccurate or stereotyped. That's why, when a student is being trained in theatre, even a few dedicated sessions on queer and transgender representation would help. So, when they are cast in such roles later on, they don't end up misrepresenting the community.

Academic institutions and campuses should also provide a safe and welcoming space for queer and transgender individuals. Today, many transgender people are enrolling to study, but how many of them are able to study freely after revealing their identity publicly? Many people wrongly assume that a gay or lesbian person is constantly thinking about sex with anyone they meet. It's not like that. They've come to study and pursue their goals, just like anyone else. These kinds of changes must be implemented in academic spaces so that they become truly inclusive environments.

Interviewer: If you want to leave one key message for the students or the educators, what would that be?

Srijith Sundaram: There is only one thing I want to say—students here are really updated, but it's the faculty who need to be updated. There are many outdated methods and approaches that require revision from the faculty's side. I'm not saying these methods are wrong, but there should be a continuous effort to gain more knowledge in these subjects. Professors should constantly stay updated.

Interviewer: Thank you so much, master.

Srijith Sundaram: Thank you.

Embodied Truths: Body, Pedagogy, and Ethics in Theatre

A Conversation with Steina Ohman

In this conversation, theatre practitioner and pedagogue Steina Ohman reflects on her journey through dance, physical theatre, pedagogy, and embodied knowledge. Trained across diverse movement traditions and performance forms, Steina's practice places the body at the centre of creative expression, learning, and ethical responsibility. Speaking from her experiences as an actor, director, and teacher, she traces how physical theatre became a space where narrative, emotion, and bodily awareness could coexist. She discusses the slow formation of her pedagogical approach, rooted not in fixed systems but in lived experience, bodily memory, and what she describes as truthful knowledge gained through practice. Set against the backdrop of the International Festival of Theatre Schools and the School of Drama, this conversation also touches on long-term training, the relevance of rigorous physical disciplines such as Kalaripayattu, the ethics of the teacher student relationship, and the personal choices artists make while balancing life, care, and creative work. At its core, the dialogue offers an honest reflection on theatre as a way of living, learning, and remaining open to transformation.

Steina: Hi!

Interviewer: Welcome to IFTS.

Steina: Thank you, I'm happy to be here.

Interviewer: So, you have been doing theatre for some time, in the capacity of an actor, teacher and director. Also, your specialisation is in body, body training and creative expression. I wanted to ask you, from where did all this start? At what moment did you find out that you have to do theatre?

Steina: In my teens, I used to study dance. I was very interested in dance. I thought maybe this is my way. At some point I realised that dance as mobility is not enough for me as it doesn't express me fully. So I thought,"Okay, I need to explore more". And then I got into theatre. At some point or so what happened was that I saw a performance by a group called Deviate. They had a performance in Finland and they did a very physical, dramatic dance and they were telling a very strong story.

And I saw it and I was like "Wow, this is the greatest thing that you can do with your body". They were expressing all the time -their own story and story together, so there was nothing concrete about it, which to me was what dance was lacking: a concrete story. So I thought "Okay, this is what I want to do". And there was also a performance I saw in France. A group from New Castle. I can't remember which group it was. But it was 1984 by George Orwell. And I remember it took a hold on me and when the play ended, I went to the bathroom and Istarted crying because I was so struck by the emotion of the actor.

And I thought- Wow! if somebody can just tell a story like that, and all through someone's consciousness in the text, I want to be able to do that. So, these things got me into deciding that I want to do theatre. And it needs to incorporate the body somehow.

When I was studying at a preparatory school for theatre, it was a one-year study imparting a general knowledge of theatre like how you create a play, basics of acting, stage set-up, ensemble work and son on. There was a lady who workshopped for two weeks in physical theatre. And she's called Maya Thunberg and she was teaching us something that was a little bit mystical to me and I was like "What is this! There is some magic about this! I want to know more". That's where my journey into physical theatre started.

Interviewer: So, at that point of time when you found out that you needed this, did you begin the formal training? I just want to know where this academic training started.

Steina: No, not actually.I didn't have the knowledge of the possibility of academic studies in the field that I was interested in. So I was pursuing either dancing or traditional acting. But then I found a way in between before I actually got into either one, which was really lucky for me as it was exactly what I wanted to do.

Host: Can you speak about the pedagogical system that you developed? How did you develop it and how did you see that system of knowledge?

Steina: Well, everybody gathers their own kind of silent knowledge. By doing bodily exercises one learns how to root the knowledge in the body. So, it's not only the knowledge per say that I know that it is like this, but I have experienced that it is like that. So, I try to always go back to that kind of a base knowledge that I have. Let's say it's a bank of knowledge where I gather things to know this is true because I experienced it and from there, I think the pedagogy comes.

Interviewer: So, we were speaking about the knowledge system an artist need. Can you speak about your system that you have developed from all these years, as a performer and teacher?

Steina: Let's take how I experienced knowledge, that is my experience of what I have done and then how I tried to base things on that. If I'm teaching, I would try to base everything on a reality that I experienced, or let's say exercises that I saw helpful. Of course, there is a big amount of read knowledge that we have or experienced that we didn't really take as our own.

As a director, I don't really have a system of knowledge because I build my directions through experienced atmospheres, visuals landscapes, musical inputs that wake something in me and emotionally resonate with me, and then I will try to recreate those. What I do is, I try to memorise what is specially in that moment that I want to recreate and I just try in different ways. As an actor, I will try to simplify things enough so that I don't stop myself from trying out different ways and I think as actors, one is very used to self-sabotage because everything is shit. So, trying to overcome that and having the joy of making mistakes and just trying out and being inspired, finding something that is inspirational, whether it be like a specific director or colleagues you want to work with or it is a thing that you are interested in. It all leads to resonate with some kind of truth and I think that knowledge translates as truth for me. So, that's why everything is kind of made for me in theatre because I just want to do what feels truthful and inspiring to me and that's what life is generally. I just do stuff in life and it happens to be theatre as well.

Interviewer : You spoke about the workshop that you are going to do and the idea of body and how it connects to the other areas of acting.

Steina: Yea, now when I have a group of new people, we will do basic physical theatre exercises like the use of space, body as space, extending the body, working together as a group, reactions etc. Then we slowly get into more expressive body and while doing this kind of work, I read people. How they are, what they are showing and what might be behind what they are showing! And what I'm interested in is what they are trying to hide and I would like to break free of those obstacles and create something that is generally true for themselves in their expression. And we do this through the body. The mind will always set all obstacles possible. So, I'm interested in the personal expression because everyone has a different kind of body, our abilities are different, the year is different and that makes us unique and special and interesting. And what makes any theatre piece interesting is because you as a spectator are drawn to something and you don't necessarily know why but you are drawn to something, and that special magic is there to be explored. I think it's glorious to be able to work with people who have the courage of trying out and let someone else rule them a little bit so that they can extend their boundaries in that.

Interviewer: Please speak about your experience at IFTS ans School of Drama. Of

course, this is the first day, but you came here before as well.

Steina: Well, I just visited here shortly seven years ago. I came to Thrissur the first time in 2003. I was an exchange student then and I was studying different modalities like Kutchipudi and Kalaripayattu. You have a cultural mix of everything, and it's really nice to see your peers and people from all around the world. I'm really happy to be here because my child also has some roots here.

Interviewer: You have told that you are trained in different forms.

Steina: Yes

Interviewer: Can you share more about that? What are the forms? How long did you train for? What did you gain from there?

Steina: Are you interested specifically in the Indian forms?

Interviewer: No

Steina: No, okay! Well, since my teens I have been doing different kinds of dance. In physical theatre, which was a four-year subject in school, we had plenty of different forms. To name a few, we had different forms of dance again- like Ballet, Bharatanatyam, Acrobatics etc. We also had mime, pantomime, mask clowning, Bhuto and other various forms. We had Kung fu throughout the four years. Then when I came to India, I was studying Kuchipudi and Kalaripayattu .I did some Yoga and Carnatic singing as well. And I really liked it here so I came back. I had the greatest teachers here. So I continued doing Kuchipudi and then I ended up doing some Mohiniyattam as well.

Interviewer: So sometimes students ask- why are we learning Kalaripayattu? As a person trained in this for so long, what do you think? I mean, what we should tell the students or how should we guide them? Why this much training? Because nowadays I think people don't have much time.

Steina: Well, you have a full life, you have so many years, what are you going to fill them with? Yes, physical training is strenuous. Kalaripayattu is not for everybody because it's very tough. What I got from Kalaripayattu is lifelong learning about life itself. Not just as an actor or a theatre person, but as a human being as well. Let's say in Kalaripayyatu, my life is concentrated to the pit alone and whatever happens there, it reflects on my full life as well. So, the pit is a full reflection of my actual life. What it gives to an actor is of course, flexibility at the outset. It gives you an awareness of yourself. It gives all basic knowledge of physical theatre, movement, reaction, space understanding of space, collaboration, understanding of speed, energy levels, how to break down, how to manage your body when you actually can't, how to spare your energy so that you will have energy when you still need to go on for another twenty minutes in full swing! It reveals your true essence in a way that you can't act anymore. You are so exhausted that it strips you down to your bone and then you are there. But that's a good thing because then you stop pretending. You accept yourself for who you are, and only from there can you work forward and develop into something. And this moment of emptiness is actually a really good place to be for an actor because from there you can create because you've gotten rid of all the baggage. Even your emotional distress is gone because you don't have the energy to carry it with you as you are meant to be totally present there. So, it's like a full-on training for anyone.

Unfortunately, you have to work a lot. You have to seek help from colleagues and teachers who will lead you on your way. You should hold on to them and just work hard because you never know what you can achieve, and you will achieve much more than you thought. So, what if we're panting and tired? Next day we'll do it again, and the bliss is amazing. You just go on.

Interviewer: So, you have to forget certain things. But there are certain things you should remember like the lines, choreography and so on. So, do you line it up?

Steina:Yes

Interviewer: Sometimes, we can't get rid of certain things, it will be there for years.

Steina: Yes, that's an ongoing process. I mean we all have our ways of learning text and movement. We all have our challenges in everything.

So ,we just have to understand that this is my

way of learning text, I need to go and do the text or I need to find out the choreography to do with the text.

Interviewer: You know, by working through training you find out that there is a kind of ethics behind all this. So what should be an artist, in your opinion? How ethical should that person be? Because, tirelessly we are working tirelessly,training from morning four o'clock, breaking our bodies to make something else. What is the inspiration for all these things? Because through theatre, we don't make much money in India. It is very difficult to survive .So, what inspires you to do continuous work? What is your inspiration?

Steina: India is quite a big inspiration for me. The energy that we get out of doing those things here is quite pure. It has been created, together with some teachers who knew what they were doing to me. It inspires me that there are people who want to help me in getting into a state of gratitude, peace and creativity. I would say, that feeling is enough in life. If I have this,I don't need the money. I don't need the fame. Of course, ifnancial constraints will show up. But for me, doing the practice and feeling that I have achieved more of myself today than yesterday is a good feeling. It inspires. And of course, meeting people and talking to them also is an incentive. I really love people, so having people around me and sharing ideas is really nice.

Interviewer: This year, our topic is “ethics and theatre”. Did you ever feel an ethical dilemma as an artist?

Steina: In pedagogical situations, yes! , Those are very delicate situations because there are usually more people involved and it really demands a kind of a subtle approach, where you have to make some introspection on your stand in this question? How should I put it forward? So, yes, I did. There is no solution per se, but I guess by just communicating about the situation and the wrongdoings, the general rules can be laid down and things can be decided together. Then everyone would feel respected. It's very important. We should not use anyone for any reason.

Everyone should be able to put in whatever they want to put in. I don't know as an artist whether I would come across any situation like that. I mean, there can be misunderstandings, people may have different views, different temperaments etc. Also, as a Westerner coming to India, there are these invisible rules that I don’t know. I slowly learn how they work. Should I go along? Should I be on my own, and why? Yeah, as an artist you need to adjust a lot, not just to wrongdoings but to situations, and figure out what is actually happening there and try to deal with it through communication.

Interviewer: There is ethics involved in the teacher- student relationship. Because, there is a responsibility especially when training is involved. Yeah, so how do you look at that?

Steina: There needs to be absolute respect between the parties- the teacher and the student. As a pedagogue, you have to be super delicate about whatever you're teaching because we don't know what a person has gone through. So, we need to give the best support possible. Also, the best push possible. We have a big responsibility and that's why I think teaching is one of the toughest jobs in the world. Still teachers get nothing as payment.

Interviewer: What are your ongoing projects?

Steina: Well, at the moment I am working on a mask theatre with my colleague Maya. She is directing, I'm acting, and we also have a musician on stage. It’s a yearlong process. We are slowly working on it. It's very inspiring to work with her again. Otherwise, I’m trying to be as open as possible, to ideas to emerge. My daughter is only two years old. I've been very engaged in her life right now. Also, coming back to Finland after the pandemic has been very hard, especially to get into work life again. So, I'm just trying to keep my practice going, trusting that the ideas and collaborators will come in due course. I want to act more. I want to teach and direct as well but I am not courageous enough to have concrete plans now because I'm alone with my daughter. So, I need to prioritize that, but surely, I will do a lot of theatre in the future. I'm not in a hurry though.

Interviewer: Thank you very much for coming here and giving us this time.

Steina: Thank you

Making with Responsibility: Ethics, Empathy, and Theatre Pedagogy

A Conversation with Suzanne Osmond

In this deeply reflective conversation at IFTS 2025, Suzanne Osmond speaks about a life shaped by fabric, theatre, pedagogy, and care. Beginning her journey as a fashion designer and gradually moving into theatre, Suzanne carved a distinctive path that eventually led her to create Australia's first dedicated costume-making program at National Institute of Dramatic Art. Drawing from decades of practice as a costume designer, educator, curriculum builder, and collaborator, she reflects on practice-based learning, empathy in collaboration, sustainability, and the rhythm of theatre as a pedagogical tool. Influenced by collective learning models such as the Bauhaus and socially engaged theatre practices, Suzanne articulates an educational philosophy rooted in doing, listening, failing bravely, and learning together. This conversation offers valuable insights into costume as an ethical practice, education as a space for courage, and theatre as a transformative force that extends far beyond the stage.

Interviewer: Hello Suzanne, how are you?

Suzanne: I'm fine, thank you.

Interviewer: We are here to know more about you as an artist and educator. So, could you share with us how you got into this?

Suzanne: Yeah, I'd love to. I began my career as a fashion designer. So I studied fashion design. I was always much more interested in costume. Every time I did design, they said it's too theatrical. So, I was drawn out of fashion into theatre. I've always loved theatre. So, when I finished my training in fashion, which taught me how to do sewing and textiles, I worked as a costume designer. I got some work as a costume designer. Then, in the the newspaper, I saw someone doing amateur productions, rang them up, and took part in that. And at that stage there was no training in Australia for costume designers. You had to do set design, which I didn't want to do. I started as a practitioner designing for theatre for no money, just volunteering, and eventually got some really major shows. My first big show was the Rocky Horror Show, which was one of the original ones, and a lot of the key creators in that are Australians. I don't know if anyone knows that. So I did not redesign the costumes for that, and that was fantastic. And I remember one day I was working on that, and somebody came to me and said, I work at the National Theatre Drama School all night, and we're looking for a costume person. Are you interested? And I was 23 then. I went and worked there; this was a very long time ago, and I loved it. I loved working with students. I loved working on theatre all the time.I was working on four shows at once, and I loved the energy of being in a drama school, and I fell in love with it. So, while at NIDA, which is the National Drama School of Australia, I went to my boss one day and said, I think we could start a course for costume makers, right? Not just designers, but makers! Because I get a phone call every day wanting to make a costume, a hat or alter something. So I said, I think we could make a course for this. I did a survey all across Australia of what the industry would need, and I created the course, a costume course. And at that stage it was a two-year course. And it was preparing people to enter the industry in theatre, film, events, and all sorts of things. And that course is now thirty years old, and has got 150 graduates. And those graduates work all over the world as costume makers, costume supervisors, and costume designers. When I created the course, it was about making sure that those people were good collaborators and knew they had skills. Skill was the center of it and they had good skills in making, tailoring, and fitting. I also prioritized being able to work

with actors respectfully. Because a lot of costume people and costume designers in the West treat actors like puppets. I wanted to instil that you might design the costume, but the actor has to keep wearing it every nigh on stage, not you. So, that's how I got started.

Interviewer: Great. Do you feel you could have gotten to costume design without your training in fashion?

Suzanne: Probably not because it gave me the skills I had. I knew about fabric. I knew about the cut. I knew where to buy things. It gave me the tools and the vocabulary to work with.

Interviewer: But you use it in your own way.

Suzanne: Yeah! I worked in fashion for a week, and I hated it.

Interviewer: So what do you hate about fashion?

Suzanne: I just found that sometimes it's not very creative. It's about making money, of course. A lot of it is just replicating the same unit over and over again. I like fashion as an idea, but working in it is just another business, you know. I like being part of the storytelling of theatre, and I like working as a team, you know. In fashion, I think you do one thing over and over again. I like the rhythm of theatre. I like the rehearsal. Before the rehearsal, I like the design period and the design conceptualization. I love rehearsals, the technical rehearsals, dress rehearsals, and performance. So I love that rhythm. I've worked in film as well, but I didn't like film as such. It is about money, and it also doesn't have that same rhythm as theatre.

Interviewer: So, you created the first costume design program in Australia.

So how did you get to the unique pedagogy and methodology?

Suzanne: I think, one of the first things is that I didn't have any assumptions. I went to the industry, to all the heads of all the theatre companies and asked, “What do you need for a start?" . When I started it, I didn't know much about education theory. I didn't know anything about education, but I knew what I needed to know. So I think I started with what student graduates need. And then I built on it, and at the heart of it was a lot of making, tailoring and repetitive learning. And then on top of that, I really prioritized empathy, understanding, and communication. I used to say to the students that every problem you have, you can track back to a problem with communication, you know. I talked a lot about being very clear with your communication, whether it was in drawings, emails, letters or technical drawings So that everybody in the team—the designer, the actors, the makers, and the other stage managers, all knew what they had to do or how to work with you. So, there's no surprise. I think building empathy was always really important to me, and making sure that students were working in a way that they were agile and adaptable, because things change all the time. As you know from your show last night, things change all the time, and you can't be saying, but I wanted it to be green, when it just doesn't work anymore.

Interviewer: Makes sense! So, how do you bring this rhythm of theatre that you talked about into the classroom?

Suzanne: I think one of the only ways you can do that is by doing it. That's, there are very few schools in the world where all of the disciplines that would make a theatre production like directing, writing, acting, stage management, costume making, scenery making, prop making and lighting design, are taught. So, the notion that you would learn by doing, is obvious. Making productions become the laboratory in which everybody learns their craft together, you know. So often you're working as an actor with a professional director and a professional designer. When everybody's a student, it's a different experience, you know? I think, there's something magical that happens when everyone's a student, is learning and on that same journey, you can start to instil in people involved, a kind of sense of that collaborative creative process. Respect for each other, respect for ideas and respect for one of the hardest things, is sitting in that space of not being sure what's going to happen, and being okay with that. I think that in itself is one of the really important parts of the creative process.

Interviewer: So you have a very distinctive philosophy that you've developed. Has any educators, philosophers or artistic movements inspired you?

Suzanne: Yeah. Yeah. I love it. Do you know the Bauhaus?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Suzanne: So I love that model of learning where everyone works together to make a show. Also, they spent the first year learning their craft in their bodies, the second year working on projects, and then the third year working collaboratively. I used to study the Bauhaus curriculum. I love that. I'm also interested in theatre of the oppressed and like the notion that theatre is for a reason. It has got a purpose that's more than making money or entertaining. I'm involved in a disabled theatre company in Sydney. So, we've got the people in the company who are bound to wheelchairs, people with Down syndrome, and they work with abled actors as well. I've designed for them a few times. I think that has had a huge influence on me. It's not that you can have a career that isn't just working for an opera company or a theatre company. But that there's theatre that transforms lives. There are people in that company whose ability to communicate have changed because of their involvement in the theatre company. . It is incredibly humbling to watch the power of theatre. So, I think that influences me. As an educator, I think I've done a lot of study since I started in education. The notion of student-led inquiry which is about having that knowledge that grows from the inside of the student and is driven by what is fascinating and interesting to them.

Interviewer: Does NIDA have the potential in that structure to just throw the curriculum out?

Suzanne: We've got a thing called the portfolio year, which is the whole of the third year. In one or two of the disciplines, students can just chart their own course. They can say, I want to be a lighting designer, so I'm going to do this. For the acting course, it's harder because we have to do productions, and we can't do 25 productions; we have to do two, so that's harder. But, within that, things like the history of theatre which we used to teach like the history of Greeks, Romans, Shakespeare, Brecht etc. Now we've sort of wiped that out. We ask the students now: What are you interested in? Then we allow the student to research things We're not teaching facts. I'm sometimes conflicted by that because I think somebody could get through and not know who Brecht or Auguste Boul is. But who cares! Does it matter? I Is it about knowing things, or is it about being engaged, interested and creative? Yeah!

Interviewer: So, this is a very different way compared to traditional pedagogies of education. You've chosen a more unconventional approach. What do you think are the perks and cons?

Suzanne: The difficulties are that the school system there has two things.The school system doesn't always teach people to be self-organized and critical. The school system in Australia is very old-fashioned and doesn't teach students to be free or have a passion for education. The second thing is, there's just so much to teach. It's so crowded. The curriculum's so crowded that you think we want to give students the freedom of self-discovery and to learn how to learn, but we've got to teach them about these new computer things, film, gaming,interactive theatre and site-specific theatre. What are we going to do? So my role now is to strike a balance those two things. Some courses are just pouring information into students, and they're exhausted, depressed, and they leave saying they need two years off as it's exhausting. The most precious commodity we have as educators is student time and attention. Sometimes it's hard to evaluate students if they're not self-motivated.

Interviewer: Interesting! So, could you outline how you teach? What is your teaching process?

Suzanne: The first thing we begin with is what is it that we want the students to get out of this? I mean, I think I'm talking very broadly because I teach a lot of different things now, and I'm in charge of overseeing the curriculum for the whole of NIDA, so for all the disciplines. So in all disciplines, we just start with what it is that we want the students to know, experience and learn at the end of the semester, subject and unit. So, we start with that. And, then we go into how we will create a project where they will have that experience. This is called backwards design. This way

you're a bit more in charge of what's being learned. You then create the criteria for which you're going to measure. Did that person rig the light creatively, artistically, technically, or brilliantly or not? So, yes, it's just lots and lots of those iterations. And then, you layer onto that, how closely are we involved in that as educators? Are we just a guide on the side? Like a big brother or big sister? Are we a co-collaborator? You know, are we in there with them collaborating? Are we not involved at all, or we just look at the end result? So, there's sort of always these different levers that you pull to create educational experiences, and it's always contingent on keeping true to the product of what it is that we want the outcome to be.

Interviewer: So, it's very practical based.

Suzanne: Yeah! I'm very passionate about practice-based education and research. That's my other kind of interest, where both the question and the answer come out of practice. It's not just a thought experiment. It's never just doing research, r reading or writing; it's about doing. I think that's one of the things I'm excited about at the moment, creating a culture of practice-based research in creative arts.

Interviewer: How do you include interdisciplinary learning?

Suzanne: That's so interesting. There are two ways in which all of the disciplines in my institution work together. One is in the productions, which I've talked about. We do about 12 productions a year, big and small, in which all the different disciplines come together and work. So that's is interdisciplinary, but we have other subjects where disciplines come together. But in that they're all doing their same role. In another group of subjects, we have created projects where people have to go outside of their role. So if you're an actor, you have to do costume design. If you're a designer, you have to write. And that builds empathy. It also builds a sort of lifelong learning. Like someone might want to be a designer but have a go at acting and think. I always say a career takes a very long time. So, the two or three years that you're at university training should give you some skills, discipline and a way to enter the industry. It should also give you about a hundred other little pearls or seeds that you can plant for the rest of your life. That's something I keep in mind. Education is more than just learning about one skill or one discipline. I think that notion of sitting outside of your disciplinary space is really important. So, we do productions where people work together, but outside of that, I think it's important to push outside of your disciplinary space and find things out about each other. I've seen you guys here do everything, and that's wonderful. As colleges get bigger and more structured, you might never walk into the costume department. You might never touch a light. L earning and being with the physicality of those things is really important.

Interviewer: What about the research? How do you take it?

Suzanne: That's interesting too! I think, by its nature, theatre research is interdisciplinary, because it crosses through psychology, sociology, film, theatre studies and design. Any research question you might have about theatre practice, you can reach into all these other disciplines in order to answer the question in an original way. We can't teach all those different disciplines, but we can teach people to be curious and to start with an open question like for example, if I want to learn contemporary Noh theatre and its application in circus, I'm going to learn about that by doing it. I'm not going to learn about that by reading about it, but I'm going to bring into that some dynamics. I'm going to bring in some psychology, a bit of history, a bit of an openness to knowledge and connecting different nodes of knowledge in a transdisciplinary way. The notion of transdisciplinary is really important. There's no hierarchy. There are just different nodes of knowledge and expertise that you're pulling in and putting together in different ways.

Interviewer: What role does ethics have here?

Suzanne: I think in the last few years for example, in the area of costume, there are two ways in which ethics affects our world every day.The first one is the ethics of collaboration and respect, and making sure that you're caring for everyone. Not leaving actors vulnerable, not having people stay up

all night making costumes when they don't need to. Being respectful of each other's time is a really important aspect of the practice. But the other really major way in which costume and ethics intersect is in sustainability. The ethics of what we're doing to the planet. Because, the fashion industry has a huge lot to do with dye waste, fabric waste and mass production. It's quite sickening. Australia is one of the worst consumers of fast fashion per capita. So, I think we should be rethinking the way we reuse costumes. Back in Shakespeare's day they reused costumes all the time. And that was part of the rhythm of theatre, that costumes had a life cycle that went through fashion and nobility back to costume and then down to minor players. I think changing our attitude to the way we consume everything, the way that we make costumes, are really major things. Although costumes are quite a small part of the world, they actually can be quite big. I've worked on big shows like the Olympic opening ceremony where there are thousands of costumes, and you've got to make decisions about price, quality etc. For the last big show the budget was huge. I don't even think there was a budget. We had things produced all around the world. There was a lot of waste. There was a lot of dyeing and printing that might not have had to happen. I mean, it was a successful show though. So, I think there are two parts to the ethics namely, the care for the planet and the ethics of collaboration.

Interviewer: So, you keep working as a practitioner, but you're also teaching. How do you multitask?

Suzanne: Third thing, also a parent. So, that was hard. I always say my students have learned more from me telling them stories than they do from textbooks. I've got some good stories about things that have happened, which illustrate certain points. I think balancing being a practitioner and being a teaching artist, is really important. It's a really precious thing to be because you're fresh, you're engaged with the industry, and you're relevant to the students. So they see that you're bringing every day your experience into the classroom. Most of the teachers that we have at NIDA are also practitioners. My current role is very much about making sure that all the teachers are in some way engaged in practice.

Interviewer: Do you think it's hard to educate somebody else without engaging in practice yourself?

Suzanne: I do! I think there are a lot of high school drama teachers who've never been actors or directors, but once you get into tertiary education, specialized education, I do think you need to do it. I do think you need to have trod the boards, been back stage, been behind a camera and so on. I think you need to have done something to bring to the students. Education is expensive It's exhausting, and students want to know that they are being taught by someone who has got runs on the board and who has got the knowledge of what the industry, is that's not academic.

Interviewer: At the IFTS 2025, we emphasize the poise of peace as a framework for fostering empathy and nonviolence. How does your pedagogy contribute to this issue?

Suzanne: That's a hard question. I think if we have empathy with each other, good practice follows. It's not always peaceful. Shouldn't be peaceful. Your show last night was not peaceful. Sometimes peace is not what we need to prioritize, but maybe the outcome of the act of making art should be peace. I think if we can instil in students, empathy for each other's perspective, point of view and discipline, it will go a long way towards that. I also think we need to teach students not to be afraid. We should give them a space to be brave. And once you start working, being brave is harder because the mistakes have a bigger impact. When you're a student, it's the one space you can make mistakes. I think creating a space where people can be brave and find the edges of their capacity is really important.

Interviewer: In this very practice-based education, where do you find space for criticism?

Suzanne: I think creating a culture where colleagues can say to you that you could be better, is important. Not to take it defensively, I think, is also important. So that's probably what I'm trying to foster in my teaching peers. We 're into observing each other's

teaching, which is weird and spooky because someone's teaching and there's somebody in the background watching them. But it's about being critical, and having the bravery to say that was great. That's difficult, and we're not at that yet, but I think a really healthy educational institution would have that, you know. It's hard, but I'm trying. That's part of my job, to try and do that.

Interviewer: What about instilling critical thinking in the students?

Suzanne: Very important as well! I think that can be difficult. I think particularly with the kind of internet generation where there's sometimes no critical thinking around messages that have been given. I think that is one of the things that we try and instil in them. The tools to discuss work beyond "I liked it" and "I didn't like it", you know. So getting into a kind of, "why did you not like it? What? What about it?" kind of queries. It's sort of stepping them through the evidence you've got, their opinion that. If it's just your embodied reaction, say that. So we try and teach critical analysis, and then we try and instil it in the way we talk about things. I think one of the hardest things as a theatre maker is being able to talk about the work. Some of the works I've seen here at the festival, like the bird show we saw last night, I was trying to talk about to my students who didn't see it last night, and it was just all coming tumbling out of me. So trying to walk the talk, and model all the time describing the thing, talking about how it felt, and then talking about what it meant rather than just going straight into that, is kind of the strategy we use.

Interviewer: Interesting! Finally, what advice do you have for emerging educators and artists in developing their own pedagogical approach?

Suzanne: Oh, great. I think, one of my big insights is that I've learned that I came to learning about education quite late. I was a teacher for a long time before I learned about what education theory was. And one of the things that struck me was we already do all of that. We already do all of the kinds of paying attention to students, letting students take the lead, and working by the sides, you know. As art educators, we're quite knowledgeable about those things. I think my greatest bit of advice would be to know that your role is to create spaces for brave actions. That's your only role, really. You can teach people about Brecht; you can teach them about Alexander Technique or Meyerhold or whatever, and they're skills that those people will take into their lives. But those three or two years, are so precious and it should create space for a laboratory for the person to grow and find themselves. It is not the be-all and end-all, but it will influence them as they go into their careers. It will influence the industry and the world.

Interviewer: Thank you for coming to IFTS.

Suzanne: Pleasure! Thank you!

The Discipline of Struggle: Reflections on Intercultural Theatre, Pedagogy, and the Actor

A Conversation with T. Sasitharan

This conversation with T. Sasitharan, fondly known as Shashi, is both a professional dialogue and a moment of deep personal gratitude. A distinguished theatre scholar, educator, and practitioner, Sasitharan has been a central figure in Singapore theatre for over three decades and a formative influence on theatre makers across Asia and beyond. As the co founder and long time director of the Intercultural Theatre Institute, earlier known as the Theatre Training and Research Programme, he has developed a rigorous intercultural pedagogy rooted in traditional Asian performance forms and contemporary theatre practice. His approach places the actor at the centre, emphasizing discipline, imagination, and ethical responsibility. Set in the context of the International Festival of Theatre Schools, this conversation reflects on theatre education, the value of struggle in training, and the continued relevance of live performance in a rapidly changing world. More than an account of an institution or a method, it offers insight into a philosophy of theatre that understands learning as a lifelong, transformative process shaped by commitment, listening, and trust.

Interviewer: Today is a truly special day. It's not every day that one gets the opportunity to sit down with a true luminary of the theatre world, someone whose influence extends far beyond the stage into the very heart and soul of theatre education, performance, and artistic philosophy. But for me, this is more than just an interview; it's a moment of gratitude and deep respect because the person I am speaking to today is not just a legendary theatre scholar, educator, and practitioner but also my teacher, my mentor, and someone who has shaped my understanding of theatre in ways I never imagined. T. Sasitharan, Shashi, as he is fondly known, has been a cornerstone of the Singapore theatre scene for over three decades. As the co-founder and director of the Intercultural Theatre Institute, ITI, he has dedicated his life to training actors and theatre makers with a rigorous intercultural approach that has influenced artists across the world. From acting and directing to producing and shaping theatre discourse, his contributions are immeasurable. But beyond all the accolades, Shashi is someone who lives and breathes theatre—not just as an art form, but as a way of thinking, a way of being, a way of engaging with the world. And if you have ever had the privilege of learning from him, you will know that his words have the power to challenge, inspire and transform. So, Shashi, welcome!It's truly an honour to have this conversation with you today. Thank you for making the time, though I must say it feels a little unusual to be on this side of the conversation. So, let's begin.We have a strong association with your institution. It started with Mohammed Kunju Noushad, Shankar Venketeshwaran, myself, Pooja Mohanraj, Jyothirmayi, and the list continues. How do you feel now that you are finally hearing about our institution?

Sasitharan: It's a privilege and an honour for me to be here because the work that I do is nothing compared to the work that the graduates of ITI are doing, including you. People like Noushad, Shankar, and Pooja—the range of work that you're involved in when it comes to teaching, theatre, film, and in influencing young people working in theatre. It makes me so happy and proud. And, as I have always said, the first student in ITI is me. Yes. I've learned more about theatre by watching students learn than anything else I could have done. So it is really my privilege to

be here. Thank you. Thank you for inviting me.

Interviewer: Thank you so much for accepting our invitation. We heard, sir, that it's ITI now, earlier it was TTRP. We always wanted to call it TTRP, but later on, it became ITI. Before starting this unique institution, we understand that you, after thorough research, visited different parts of the world and studied the curricula and training happening there. Then you took the essence of these global approaches and started this institution. What motivated you to pursue this idea?

Sasitharan: Twenty-seven years ago, when we started, there was no theatre education in Singapore. If you wanted to learn theatre, you had two options. One, you went abroad—to New York, Paris, or London—and only the wealthy could afford that. Most Singaporeans couldn't. The other option was to learn from people in Singapore, and that's what I had to do. I learned from directors in Singapore like Kuo Pao Kun, Chandran Lingam, , William Teo and Max Leblond We learned the basics of theatre by watching, observing, being in rehearsals, and attending workshops. We had workshops on lighting, design, sound etc. It was piecemeal, unconnected, and we did everything ourselves. We handled design, production, ticketing, everything. In a way, it was a very solid theatre education, but it was a very long, haphazard process. We made many mistakes.

So, when Kuo Pao Kun said he was going to stop teaching to focus on creative work, I told him, "You can't do this. If you stop teaching, where will we go and learn?" This was in 1998–1999. I said, "I will give ten years of my life. I will join you, and we can start a program together. We will design the curriculum and run this program, and we'll call it TTRP." My exchange was: "I will help you run the program; you teach me to be a director". He agreed. We started in January 2000 ; in less than two years he passed away. Then I had to ask myself: Should I continue? For me, my heart told me this is worthwhile. I remember his words: "Don't continue TTRP for me. Do it for yourself. Run the program if you want to, not for me." I never forgot that.

But his principles, vision, and philosophy—the spirit of the program—I try to honour them as best I can, understanding his ideas about contemporary theatre practice in Singapore, a practice that involves four languages, multiple cultures, being on the fringe, never mainstream, always prepared to struggle. He made it clear: when you become too comfortable, you're doing something wrong. Struggle is essential. Keep questioning, keep challenging, keep asking what you can do better. That is what TTRP was.

Then, after your batch left in 2007, our funding was pulled. We closed for one and a half years. We didn't take new students but continued working on other projects to keep the program alive. We didn't take salaries; we worked independently to sustain it. By chance, a new CEO at the National Arts Council supported the program, and we revived it in 2011, starting again with students. By then, regulations for private education in Singapore required a proper name, so TTRP became ITI, the Intercultural Theatre Institute. The word "institute" confirmed it as a school. And that has been our journey.

As for philosophy, we studied all the Western canons of acting: Grotowski, Peter Brook, Brecht, Stanislavski, Eugenio Barba and Artaud. Reading these, you realize that, fundamentally, theatre has its roots in Asia.

Interviewer: Absolutely.

Sasitharan: Asian theatre! You know, Brecht was influenced—he even misunderstood Beijing opera. Artaud was influenced by Balinese dance. Grotowski was influenced by Kathakali. And if you read Stanislavski, you can see the theory of prana and yoga is in his practice. So, when we think about all of this practice, all of this comes from Asia. Yet, in Asia, we don't seem to understand this. Yes, we don't seem to appreciate it. We are so eager to take whatever the West has to give us, which is fine—we can learn from the West, of course, we can. We can learn from anyone. But let us not forget our sources. Let us not forget our roots.

So, we decided to focus on the main traditional theatre forms—forms with a developed aesthetics, established pedagogy-with teachers who can still transfer that knowledge, and who are willing to work with us , mainly contemporary actors and

practitioners. Many times we faced resistance. When I first approached Venu ji, he said, "Why should I come? Why should I waste my time teaching contemporary actors? They don't even respect the form". That was his initial response. I said, "Please come, teach for two weeks. If you don't like it, you can stop and go back. But come". He came, observed for two weeks, and then said, "Okay, I think this work is possible". Later, he was asked if students could make a presentation. He said, "No, they will never be ready, not even after ten weeks". About five weeks later, he said, "I think they can do a short play. They can do a short presentation". This is how we started. We had to convince the masters that this work was worthwhile. And, these people have been with us for twenty-five years.

Interviewer: Kuwata sensei is there.

Sasitharan: Kuwata is there. Yoshi is there. They have been with us for twenty-five years. We've built trust and shown that we are serious and rigorous. We are not a big school. We are a very small school, with limited funds. We are on charity, and I know that the teachers who come could earn much more elsewhere. Yet they reduce their salaries to teach us. That is a great privilege.

Interviewer: I always remember that from the beginning of your audition, I heard the term "struggle". It seems like a never-ending process, especially for a unique intercultural theatre program. Every time, new challenges arise, combining all these differences in one place. How do you cope with this? I've seen it myself, experienced moments with you, but you have gone through this throughout the years.

Sasitharan: I know the struggle is always there. I see it in every student as well. I remind myself that if I feel the burden, imagine what they must be feeling. Ten times more! And yet, they are here. They've given three years of their lives, committing themselves to learning. They could have done anything else, but they chose ITI. That is trust we cannot break. We never take students unless we have enough funds to see them through three years. If we lack resources, we stop.

When we began, there were twelve students. We didn't know if we'd have funds after that. The question was: do we continue? I said, "Even if twelve students graduate and we close, it's alright. Better to start than not start at all". Today, after twenty-five years, we've trained over hundred students, working in theatre worldwide. Not all do grand work; some small, some important, some teaching in institutions like this. That's inspiring. It's why we continue.

Interviewer: This is beyond the acting program. I think your vision transforms us because it goes beyond just learning a form. You teach the discipline, the vital qualities of the form, shaping new theatre pedagogy, helping us work with students. Can you elaborate?

Sasitharan: See, when we look at traditional forms like Mohiniyattam, Kathakali and Noh, we see another world and time. When students commit to these forms freely, they begin to experience a completely different universe. For a few minutes as an actor, you experience something unique, something no textbook, classroom, workshop, or training can give. The question is: what do you do with that experience? What do you do with that treasure? I always say, it's a gift. Teachers give this as a gift. You accept the gift, and do what you can with it.

Those few minutes when your body and mind become something else, that is transformative. It will change you. It will give you a sense of identity as an actor. That is what it's about.

Interviewer: It's not only as an actor, but also as a true professional theatre maker. After the ITI experience, what I felt was that it's not just about being a trained actor. You can also work as a professional theatre maker. That's another advantage of ITI.

Sasitharan: Absolutely! We call ours an acting program, but I think we teach more than acting. You know, I always tell people this: when you want to become a doctor, you can't start by being a brain surgeon. You start by learning medicines and anatomy first, and then later you can specialize in whatever you want. Yes, but that basic skill of acting is defined by the performance of the actor on stage and the audience watching. Of course, hundreds of other people are involved, but that is the defining moment in theatre. That's where it starts. You started as an actor. You are

a director, teacher etc. But the basic core is acting. You started as an actor. That's what we try to teach.

Interviewer: After more than twenty two years, how do you feel about the present situation, the training, and the students, especially in this advanced technological world? How do you see the new generation?

Sasitharan: The most difficult time for us was the pandemic. When it happened, I had a real crisis of confidence. I didn't know if ITI would survive. I didn't know how long it would last, and I kept thinking about the world. People were dying from this disease. This was before vaccines. For six or seven months, we didn't know what would happen. There was no training; people couldn't even go into the studio. Everyone was locked at home. We tried teaching online with Zoom. It didn't work. People were living in flats in Singapore. They coudn't stamp or move freely as the would neighbours complain. Students became depressed, anxious, unsure about their families and about us. What is theatre in that context? What does it mean to be a theatre practitioner? During those two and a half years, delivering masks and food felt more important than theatre. We had to stop everything.

Then everyone rushed to digital work because that's where funding was. People who had never done digital work suddenly became digital directors. I found it insulting to actual film directors and digital artists who had trained their lives for this. I said that we would not do digital performances. We did one hybrid performance, and after regulations normalized, we returned to live performance. That's when I realized how important theatre was. Not being in the theatre, not rehearsing and collaborating. That made me value it even more. Being back, I felt alive, breathing fresh air, seeing the world with new eyes. Even the worst play, I would applaud. Being with human beings, laughing, crying together and experiencing theatre, is what it's about. We survived, and it reaffirmed my belief that theatre will not die. Technology, disruptions might come, but theatre will survive. We need the immediacy and directness. Watching on a screen is not equivalent. That was a defining moment.

Interviewer: You also helped us go deeper into the theoretical aspect. You have your own methodology, pedagogy, to train actors differently. Could you explain?

Sasitharan: Sure. You know this already, Sreejith. Basically, if there's one universal aspect in theatre, it's the body. You cannot escape it. The body is universal. It's mortal, yes, but it's universal. Every time you watch theatre, you watch the body. Now, what is the body? Not just physical—muscle, bone, nerve. Also mind, brain, heart. It's a complex organism—physical, mental, psychological, emotional—that transmits emotions to the audience. Not only in theatre—we experience this in religion, politics, sports, society. This is human. This is performance theory. So, training the body is fundamental: movement, voice, balance, coordination, but most importantly, imagination. Feed the imagination. This is what's most lacking in theatre and arts.

Yesterday, a keynote speaker said, "What makes you an artist? You must take risks, do something new, not copy what's already successful." In film, music, even popular theatre, everyone does what sells. But an artist doesn't seek popularity or money. They focus on the art form, pushing boundaries, speaking to people, changing people. Theatre cannot change the world, but it can change people. And people can change the world. This is the principle.

Interviewer: It helps us change ourselves. Every play, every rehearsal, every training process is helping us change.

Sasitharan: Exactly. It's learning—every day. This morning, I was in a workshop with students. I learned from their performance. Sometimes they spoke a language I didn't understand; I needed a translator. You watch, listen, learn, then guide. You hope they pick it up and advance. They did terrific work, Sreejith. Commitment, focus, honesty, genuineness, trust—this is what happens in rehearsal. You know this.

Interviewer: Right. I'm curious—you've been to many international seminars and theatres. What do you think of IFTS?

Sasitharan: Sreejith, this is a remarkable

conference. I've attended Western international conferences, and honestly, I feel we are too subservient to Western thinking. Not that we don't learn from the West, but they are also colonial in perspective. We've become too dependent on Western knowledge. Here, there's great knowledge, understanding, wisdom. I see it in IFTS, in the students, in practitioners, in Abhilash, in you, in the teachers. They do something unique. We know what the West offers, but we do it our way. We'll make mistakes, fail, but find our way. IFTS is about exchanging ideas sown and harvested in India. I visited Kalamandalam recently. What an institution, started in 1930! Imagine the imagination to sustain it all these years. It's inspiring. I'm truly happy to be here. I'm learning every day, Sreejith. Every day.

Interviewer: We are fortunate to have you. Several times over the years we tried to bring you here, but…

Sasitharan: You see, I'm retiring.

Interviewer: Oh, really?

Sasitharan: Yes. I'm retiring from ITI. I've started, moving out of running the school and will be out completely by the end of 2026..

Interviewer: Okay.

Sasitharan: Koh Wan Ching has taken over as Head of Acting. She manages the program and pedagogy. Now I have more time for research, writing, and conferences.

Interviewer: You are most welcome. I wish you the very best for your retirement. I know you won't rest.

Sasitharan: I think there will be more work.

Interviewer: Endless work waiting for you. Yeah. It's time to wrap up. I want to express our gratitude on behalf of Indian theatre to Singapore ITI. You provided so much, without taking a penny. We are deeply moved. It has helped create a new theatre scenario here. Indian theatre expresses its great gratitude to you, especially for initiating this, bringing us together, and creating meaningful theatre. Thank you for being here and creating this wonderful moment.

Sasitharan: Thank you. Thank you, ***Interviewer:*** Thank you so much.

Spirit, Tradition, and Peace: Noh Theatre, Ethics, and Pedagogy

A Conversation with Tsumura Reijiro

At the inauguration of IFTS 2025, the presence of master Noh actor Tsumura Reijiro marked a deeply significant moment for the School of Drama and Fine Arts. Visiting India and Kerala for the first time, Tsumura Reijiro brought with him more than seven centuries of Noh tradition, embodied through lived practice, spiritual depth, and pedagogical generosity. Honoured with the title of Living Human National Treasure, his performance and interactions resonated profoundly with students, scholars, and artists alike. In this conversation, he reflects on Noh theatre as a living ethical practice, its openness to contemporary collaboration, its role in education and peace-building, and his commitment to sharing tradition with younger and global generations.

Interviewer: Tsumura-san, we are really grateful that you took so much time to come for the International Festival of Theatre Schools. We feel not only privileged but also honoured to have you here. We truly believe this is one of the greatest moments in the School of Drama and Fine Arts. Having you as our guest and watching your performance yesterday at the inauguration ceremony deeply moved all of us.

Tsumura Rijiro: This is my first time visiting India and Kerala. It is a great honour for me to be invited to such a wonderful gathering. Thank you so much!

Interviewer: Thank you. Now, I would like to begin with my first question to you. You are a very renowned actor and a holder of the title "Human National Treasure." Can you share with us what Noh theatre means to you personally and how it has shaped your approach to the performing arts?

Tsumura Rijiro: Yes, Noh theatre has a history of more than seven hundred years. It evolved and adapted to each generation—during the Samurai era, the Meiji period, and now in the modern world of Japan. So Noh has gradually changed its attitude. I decided to become a professional actor when I was a college student. I was not born into a traditional Noh family, so deep in my heart, I have always carried a very new and fresh perspective—not completely bound by the old traditional world. After forty years, I still strive to keep my heart open and adaptable to new influences, respecting both tradition and modern society.

Interviewer: Thank you. Now, I would like to ask you something related to Noh and ethics. Noh theatre, as you mentioned, is over 700 years old and has been preserved through generations. How do you perceive the role of Noh in the context of modern ethical education, especially in fostering empathy and understanding through the arts?

Tsumura Rijiro: Mr. Zeami, the creator of modern Noh theatre, developed a unique style that we have continued to preserve even today. His innovative method, Mugen Noh, involves dreams and spirits. In ordinary (realistic) plays, actors portray living characters on stage. But in Noh, the actors represent the souls of the deceased, who revisit the stage to reflect upon their past lives. This depends both on Zeami's ideas and the interpretation of each Noh actor. Now, as we live in the modern era, my mind and heart are also very modernized while being connected with the ancient spirit. Life, therefore, is not solely defined by my thoughts but deeply intertwined with my spirit.

Interviewer: Okay, thank you so much for sharing that! Now, Noh performances often involve spiritual and moral dimensions. As you mentioned, they connect deeply with the self. Could you share how you incorporate ethical reflections into your performances? And do you believe Noh theatre can offer insights into

contemporary ethical dilemmas, considering the many we face today?

Tsumura Rijiro: Yes, yes. I try to collaborate with contemporary dancers and actors. However, essentially, Noh has deeply religious aspects. In Japan, within a single family, there can be many religions—sometimes Shinto, but mainly Buddhism. Yet, during the Christmas season, we also become Christian. It's quite confusing. But Noh theatre is primarily based on Buddhist philosophy. Buddhism itself has many schools, and this variety shapes our expression. This reflects the Japanese mentality—spiritually rich, yet adaptable. Nowadays, I collaborate with many actors and dancers, but I never ask them first. They approach me and request collaboration. Fifty years ago, the Noh world was closed to outsiders, but today, we have become more open-minded, and artists from other fields can join our world freely.

Interviewer: That's interesting to know! Can I ask, does Hiroshi-San approach you because of this openness?

Tsumura Rijiro: Yes, yes. Hiroshi-San, Mr. Koike, is a very famous theatre director.

Interviewer: He's a good friend of mine.

Tsumura Rijiro: We graduated from the same university. I'm older than him, but he invited me to his company to assist and give advice. So now, our work together is a form of collaboration. He was the one who recommended me for this festival.

Interviewer: That's wonderful. Now, moving on to pedagogy. At IFTS 2025, we are exploring a "Carnival of Pedagogy." Given your background in teaching and as the head of—if I pronounce it correctly—Ruskin Kois, what pedagogical principles do you prioritize when passing on the art of Noh theatre to the next generation of performers? How do you teach and share your knowledge?

Tsumura Rijiro: That's a very important and difficult question. Today, I conducted my first workshop with twenty students. I felt the same emotions I feel while teaching in Japan. For them, Noh is very unfamiliar and even strange. So I try to speak their language and bring myself down to their level. I do not pressure them. Each student interprets my movements in their own way. I simply guide them gently without imposing strictness.

Interviewer: Right, yes. That's a wonderful approach. Now, since our festival emphasizes interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary methods in theatre education—where different disciplines collaborate and transform each other—how does Noh theatre, with its structured and ritualistic nature, engage with such ideas?

Tsumura Rijiro: The structure of Noh theatre is very simple, even simpler than Kabuki or modern Japanese theatre. The stories are simple, and the movements are minimal. Because of that simplicity, Noh can easily welcome other elements and techniques. This openness makes collaboration easier.

Interviewer: Yes, I've seen that. I also believe Noh theatre's openness allows many disciplines to draw inspiration from it. The way Noh training integrates ecology, science, and movement is in itself interdisciplinary. That's what makes it unique. Now, moving to the next theme of our festival—the "Poise of Peace" –since the world is facing conflicts such as those in Palestine and Ukraine, we want to explore how education can promote peace. Education often gives power, but not always peace. Historically, education was limited to the elite, and when it spread widely, it also led to world wars. So how can creative expressions like Noh theatre promote peace in today's world?

Tsumura Rijiro: In Japan, we are fortunate to have a very equal education system. Most people have a similar level of education. Noh theatre has five categories. The first is the story of gods—performed to pray for peace and good health. The second is warrior plays—depicting battles. The third tells love stories about elegant ladies. Through masks, I transform into such characters. The fourth portrays modern, everyday lives—mothers, children, fishermen, and workers. There are many such human stories.

Interviewer: Would you like to show one?

Tsumura Rijiro: Yes, this is a fisherman's mask, and this one represents love. The fifth and last category is ghost or demon plays. The demon is not evil by nature—she was once a beautiful

woman who became jealous after losing her lover. Her horns symbolize her inner pain and anger. These masks express the demons within our own hearts.

Interviewer: Right. In today's divided world, what lessons from Noh theatre can help with peace, empathy, and ethical care? India, too, is becoming more divided—rich versus poor, religion versus religion, ideology versus ideology. This is happening worldwide. What can Noh theatre teach us?

Tsumura Rijiro: Yes, that's true. The main characters in Noh theatre often pray for peace and health for all people. That is the foundation of Noh's message. In Japan, we don't face severe religious conflicts like in other parts of the world. Shinto and Buddhism coexist peacefully. Historically, Japan has avoided religious wars. So, I can say Japanese people are not strictly religious, but rather spiritually open.

Interviewer: Yes, I noticed that when I visited Japan. Even when I asked my friends about their religion, many were unsure, because faith is a personal and fluid matter.

Tsumura Rijiro: Yes, it depends on the family. There's no strict division.

Interviewer: Now, I'd like to ask about artistic legacy and the future. As a Living Human National Treasure, how do you see the future of Noh theatre evolving, especially for younger generations and global audiences?

Tsumura Rijiro: That's a very important point. You invited me here, and I came with the thought of meeting young people. I love connecting with youth, especially in India. This is my first experience here, and I see it as my mission to introduce Noh theatre and Japanese culture to the world. At my age, this is my purpose.

Interviewer: That's wonderful. Do you believe artists, especially traditional ones like Noh performers, have ethical responsibilities beyond the stage? How can artists contribute to a more compassionate and ethical world?

Tsumura Rijiro: Yes, that's a very important question. Yesterday, professors and artists also discussed this. We often need government support, especially for international collaborations. I strive to create new productions with modern artists, but we also need economic and cultural support. Young people should cultivate an appreciation for culture in their hearts. I try to guide them and offer advice whenever I can.

Interviewer: That's insightful. Now, this generation is deeply into technology and multitasking—texting, watching and talking, simultaneously. Audiences are changing. How do you see this transformation?

Tsumura Rijiro: Noh theatre doesn't depend on technology, electronics, or graphics. We express everything through our bodies and live music. We don't rely on fiction or digital effects. However, I personally am not skilled with technology, so I ask younger technicians and dancers for help. I welcome their ideas and support.

Interviewer: That's wonderful. It's rare to see such openness toward technology in a traditional form like Noh. That's truly revolutionary. Now, coming to a personal note—after decades in Noh theatre, what life lessons have you learned that you'd like to share with aspiring artists and educators?

Tsumura Rijiro: This is a little secret. My teacher was my mother-in-law. I am her son-in-law. She was an exceptional woman who founded the Women's Noh Theatre, Owenor Theatre. Though I am a man, I now carry forward her legacy by training women performers. Some begin as hobbyists, while others aspire to be professionals. They are also more skilled with modern technologies like AI, which I'm still learning. So, I work together with them, learning and teaching at the same time.

Interviewer: It's wonderful to know that you collaborate across generations! Finally, what are your hopes for IFTS 2025?

Listening, Embodying, Becoming: On Music, Theatre, Gender, and Pedagogy

A Conversation with Vidya Rao

On the fourth day of the International Festival of Theatre Schools, the Pedagogues' Interview series featured Vidya Rao, a leading exponent of Hindustani classical music and Thumri, whose work moves fluidly between music, theatre, pedagogy, and research. Known for her deep engagement with embodied performance and the histories of gendered art forms, she brings to the stage a rare integration of voice, imagination, and ethical inquiry. In this conversation, Vidya Rao reflects on her early encounters with music and dance, the lasting influence of Shambhu Maharaj Ji and her guru Naina Devi, and the interdisciplinary explorations that led to the formation of the Vivadi collective. Moving between music and theatre, she speaks about embodiment, displacement of text, pedagogy as exchange, and the evolving challenges of teaching, learning, and artistic practice in a rapidly changing world.

Sandeep: Good afternoon. Welcome to the fourth day of the International Festival of Theatre Schools. Today, we have with us the renowned Hindustani classical singer and exponent, Vidya Rao Ji. Welcome, ma'am, to the Pedagogues' Interview. We are truly happy and blessed that you could attend the festival this year. We tried to have you last year, but unfortunately, it didn't work out. This year, however, my students are really happy and excited to have you with us.

Vidya Rao: Thank you so much.

Sandeep: We know that you are a Hindustani classical singer, but you did not limit yourself to that field. You ventured into theatre as well. Before I ask you about that, could you briefly tell us how you began your journey in Hindustani music? Who introduced you to this world?

Vidya Rao:. In my case, my mother was the one who loved music. She was not a professional singer, but she enjoyed listening to music, and I would accompany her to listen. While listening to various singers and performers, I developed a strong desire to learn. I wanted to learn music, dance—everything that was presented to me. As a child, I had the opportunity to study both music and dance.. Later, I realized how essential these art forms were to my life. But as a child, I simply loved them and wanted to immerse myself in them.

Sandeep: Was there any particular gharana or guru-shishya tradition under which you were trained?

Vidya Rao:Thumri was not very well known when I was a child. I grew up in Hyderabad with my parents, and at that time, Thumri belonged more to the North Indian style. Even within North India, it was not widely heard, and it remains relatively rare even today. I once had the opportunity to watch ShambhuMaharaj Ji perform. He was singing and dancing, demonstrating bhaavbatana—the art of expressing emotions. That was when I knew I wanted to do this. It combined dance, music, and theatre. What fascinated me most was the power of imagination—he wore a simple white pyjama and kurta, yet he transformed completely, becoming a nayika (heroine).

Sandeep: When you began working as an educator, did you follow any particular methodology or pedagogy? Did you adopt someone else's approach, or did you develop your own?

Vidya Rao: I studied at Rishi Valley for some

time, and that experience taught me that every moment offers an opportunity to learn. I was encouraged to ask questions and to connect what I learned with broader aspects of life, including social interactions. I feel the same about music. People often think of it as something solitary—sitting quietly and practicing sargams, for instance. In Thumri, the themes are usually about a loved one who is far away or has found someone else. But beyond that, there is life itself within the music. I continue to learn both formally and informally. I view every interaction as a moment of sharing. I hesitate to use the word "teaching," because it sometimes implies hierarchy. I prefer to see it as an exchange—when you discuss something, you are learning as much as you are sharing.

Sandeep: You mentioned Maharaj Ji earlier, and how you saw his performance. Was that the moment you decided that theatre was something you wanted to explore? And could you also tell us about Vivadi?

Vidya Rao: Yes, though I was very young when I saw ShambhuMaharaj Ji perform. That experience left a deep impression on me, even if I couldn't consciously articulate it at the time. I have always been drawn to the performing arts, but I also loved handlooms and handicrafts as they enrich our lives, even if we don't fully understand them. Vivadi came into my life quite interestingly. It was a time when many women's movements and civil rights movements were active, and theatre was being used as a medium for expression—street theatre, proscenium theatre, and formal theatre. I used to watch and participate in these performances.

Then, at one point, AnuradhaKapur had just returned from her Ph.D. work and decided to organize a theatre arts workshop at the Kasauli Art Centre. She invited a diverse group of artists, and we were thrilled to join. The environment was very open—some of us had small children who were also welcome. We bought our own tickets, travelled together, and shared a beautiful creative experience. We improvised with music, movement, and other art forms. Maya Rao's mother was there, performing Kathakali; there was a Kalarippayattu artist, and others like AnamikaHaksar, NeelimaSheikh , DadiPadamjee, and RustomBharucha. We collaborated freely, creating together, and the evenings were delightful—the children performed skits, and there was a spirit of joy and discovery.

From that experience emerged the idea of forming a repertory—a collective that would bring together different art forms. That was how Vivadi was born. From the late 1980s until quite recently, we continued to work together, staging many plays and projects. Although we are now scattered across different places, I hope we will continue to collaborate in the future

Sandeep: How did the interaction between classical music and theatre evolve for you? When you began, you already had your own theatre background. Did you feel that you had a specific product in mind, or were you simply exploring the possibilities?

Vidya Rao: I think, in the beginning, during the workshop phase, we were mostly exploring. Later, when we actually started doing theatre, a few years had passed. I remember watching Anuradha direct someone. She would give instructionsand then demonstrate her distinctive style of blocking. For instance, she might be speaking to me but looking elsewhere, creating a kind of layered expression. That struck me profoundly. It felt like a moment of revelation because it reminded me of something similar in music. In Thumri, it often appears as if I am addressing someone directly through the song, but in truth, I may be expressing something entirely different.

That realization made me deeply aware of the subtle complexities in performance like how meaning is conveyed, displaced, and interpreted. It encouraged me to explore these dimensions consciously, especially through embodiment. During rehearsals, I reminded myself that I didn't need to move like a trained Koodiyattam performer or a professional actor. I lacked that specific training, but I could still understand what it meant to embody an emotion or a narrative.

Anuradha also had a fascinating way of working. She often displaced text. For example, in King Lear, a line originally spoken by Lear might be reassigned to another character. On one level,

this seems perplexing. You might ask, "Why? That line belongs to him". But on another level, it reveals how speech, meaning and emotion can flow through different bodies, voices and minds. A spoken word is not only heard by others but also reshaped by their perception. It becomes a shared experience.

This approach opened many questions that cannot be neatly answered, but it made me realize how every speech, act, gesture or silence contributes to a living, breathing performance. I found this incredibly exciting and relevant to Thumri, because we constantly "displace" text there as well. We may not use that term traditionally, instead, we speak of bhaavbatana or say, "How will this sakhi express it?", but the principle is similar.

Working with theatre, especially with the Vivadi group, was transformative. We were all on the same page, experimenting, learning, and creating together. The process of constant workshop-ing, exploration, and collaboration was as valuable as the final performance itself. Those experiences have been deeply precious to me.

Sandeep: You have also been a researcher, particularly studying the connection between gender and music. Could you tell us more about that?

Vidya Rao: Certainly. When I was young, I didn't know yet what Thumri was called, but I knew I loved it. Every time I heard it, I would think, "I like that". ShambhuMaharaj Ji was also performing bhaav for a Thumri. However, when I was growing upin the mid to late 1950s and early 1960s, even up to the 1980s, these forms were not held in high regard. They were associated with courtesan traditions: tawaifs or baijis in the North, and devadasis in the South.

As a child, I couldn't understand why that was seen as problematic. But as I grew older, I began to hear comments and recognize the social stigma attached to these performers and their art. The women who sang Thumri were considered "not- respectable". The form itself was viewed as overtly emotional and intimate. It involves direct communication with the audience. Thus, my guru, Naina Devi, would, in sharp contravention to the general instruction about how one should be on stage, instruct me to look directly at the audience express longing or affection or any other emotion through the gaze. This creates immediacy and emotional vulnerability.

For a middleclass woman like me who is not from a tawaif lineage, this raised a complex dilemma. How was I to navigate the legacy of this form while confronting its social baggage? Even before the women's movement began questioning such biases, I found myself wondering, "Why is this criticism only directed at women? Why not at men?"

I remember once being told, "You can sing, but not on stage. And if you sing on stage, you must not be paid for it." That baffled me. First, I thought, "No one is even offering me a stage!" and second, "Why shouldn't I be paid?" But that comment stayed with me. It demanded an answer. I could have ignored it, grown angry, or simply conformed. Instead, I chose to investigate: "Why was it said? Where did it come from?"

That curiosity led me to research. I spoke with older women who had been traditional Thumri singers. Many of them were former tawaifs. Some were living in red-light areas, others had moved out. One woman I knew had relocated with her son to a modest middle-class neighborhood in Delhi. When I visited her there, she said, "I can't sing here; the neighbors and my son will object". Sometimes she would come to my house to sing.

This conflict between respectability and artistic expression fascinated me. In Thumri, the performer's body is present. She must look at the audience, use gestures, and embody emotion. Unlike devotional or abstract classical forms, she cannot withdraw inwardly. This visibility and the embodied presence of the woman performer, made society anxious. While that anxiety has lessened today, it was palpable then. These tensions led me to deeper research into performance, gender, and representation.

Sandeep: Do you think Bollywood helped to sanctify or, conversely, stigmatize Thumri? Considering that LataMangeshkar sang many Thumriinspired songs, did that elevate the genre in any way?

Vidya Rao: That's an interesting question. I

haven't researched that aspect in great depth, though others have. Particularly in the case of LataMangeshkar, scholars have examined how her voice transformed perceptions of femininity—the idealized "voice" of the heroine. Before Lata Ji, female voices in film were typically lower-pitched, fuller, and more earthy—think of ShamshadBegum and others. Lata Ji's high, ethereal tone shifted cultural expectations of what a woman's voice should sound like.

It's also important to remember that almost every woman who entered the early film industryas an actor, singer, or even producer, came from professional performing communities. Nargis's mother, for example, was a well-known singer and also a film producer. When royal patronage declined, these women sought new avenues for their art. Some moved between princely courts like Rampur, Hyderabad, or Mysore. Many found a place in Parsi theatre, and later, in cinema.

Thus, the early film world was deeply influenced by these traditions. The musicians who played tabla and sarangi, the women who danced and sang, all brought their cultural legacy into film music.

I also recall readingTheTwice Born Fiction by Meenakshi Mukherjee, which explores early Indian literature's anxiety about women's roles. In novels and films alike, women were expected to be educated and assertive, yet also pure and morally contained. To resolve this tension, narratives often included a counter-figure,thetawaif.

In many early films, the tawaif became central to the plot: sometimes nobleat heart, or tragic, or scheming, but always significant. She was a vessel through which social and emotional conflicts were expressed. The music associated with her likeThumri, Dadraand Ghazalwere integral to that emotional world.

And, of course, that music remains beautiful, deeply expressive, nuanced, and full of life.

Sandeep: How do you think, since you have worked in theatre and are also a classical musician, theatre practitioners in general should approach interdisciplinarity and intersectionality? Particularly since there are classical musicians in South India who can be somewhat rigid about going beyond structure, how do you think theatre practitioners and Carnatic musicians should handle this intersectionality?

Vidya Rao: First of all, I think there will always be people who are, purist about their tradition,and that's not a bad thing. It is also important to maintain tradition so that we know where it comes from. At the same time, we must recognize that tradition changes every day. You never sing the same way you did yesterday. Change is inevitable. At my age, I am not the person I was twenty years ago. My voice has changed, my mind has also evolved, and I think differently. Everything is changing, ourselves included, and the music changestoo , in the world and in our own understanding.. How can one say it doesn't get influenced? Every moment we are being influenced. So, the first thing I would say is that we must use the term "unchanging" very carefully because even when you think it's not changing, it is. One must be conscious and aware of the direction in which one wants it to change, what kind of change one is willing to commit to, and how to engage with that transformation.

Secondly, I believe it is very important for all of us—not just performance artists, but all artists and scholars, indeed all people, to learn from one another. A space like this, gives us that opportunity. We must learn across generations and cultures. And then we must exercise good sense, to know what we want to do and what we do not want to do. I can't suddenly start performing Noh theatre. It's not possible. I realized very quickly that what Anuradha was doing, for instance, is something I can't do. I have my riyaz, and I must stay committed to it. But what's crucial for me is that I am learning from you, the riyaz of theatre. It feeds into my own discipline, and I hope what I am doing feeds into yours. Otherwise, it becomes oneway traffic, and that's not good. It has to be mutual. We must interact reciprocally. That is what makes sense. That's how our disciplines grow,and how we grow as artists.

Therefore, I am not one to worry too much about the world at large, except in a different way. If someone doesn't want to collaborate with a blues musician, that's fine. But if you

do want to engage, learn from each other and reflect: “What did I understand, and how can I apply it to my music without fundamentally altering it?” You may also choose to create a wellthoughtout fusion, and some of those can be brilliant. For me, the most important factor is the intention you bring into the work. You must constantly ask yourself, “Why am I here?”, and “Why am I doing what I am doing?”

Sandeep: Today we are surrounded by AI-generated content. There are websites that produce music when you simply enter a few keywords. Where do you think music stands amidst all this? What is the future of classical music in this context?

Vidya Rao: I don’t know, honestly. I can’t say because I don’t understand these things very well. I’m just very grateful that I can go online, search for a musician, and listen to their work. I’m happy about that because, otherwise, where would I have had access? How else could I have listened to an opera singer or a jazz musicianor even a thumri singer who may have passed away before I was born? So yes, I am very grateful for the ways we can now access music, and for the archives that allow us to explore and learn.

I think the real challenge lies not in the barrage of information itself, but in our ability to sift through it and remain centered. If you are confident in your practice, you may occasionally be thrown off balance, but you will eventually regain your focus. It’s about knowing where you want to go, what you want to listen to, and why. The most important thing is to always want to learn and understand. Everything in the world is a learning process. Sometimes I may say, “I’m unable to understand this”. Maybe not today, but perhaps tomorrow I will. Life is short; sometimes I tell people, “I’ll listen to what I truly want to”. That too is a choice. The choice is still oursbut we must know why we make that choice.

Sandeep: True, the choice is ours, for now.

Vidya Rao: I hope so, and we must keep it that way. These are choices that neither offend nor harm anyone. You may choose to listen to one kind of music and not another. It doesn’t matter. Who knows, though! Tomorrow, someone might tell you that you can’t listen to a particular song. There was a time when film songs we’re not allowed on All India Radio, so everyone tuned in to Radio Ceylon instead. So yes, this is a complicated matter, whether we truly have freedom of choice. But for now, we do.

Sandeep: You’ve also been engaged in educating young children. You were part of the Rishi Valley education system, where the psychology of children is quite different from todays, given that modern children often have attention spans of about fifteen seconds because of social media. How do you think pedagogy has changed? Have you experienced this shift yourself?

Vidya Rao: When I was learning music, we were taught sargam and paltas, the traditional way. You learned sargam, then paltas, then a song, and later how to improvise within it. It was a very traditional process, and I enjoyed it deeply. But today, I think teaching children requires a different approach.

In schools, where children come from diverse backgrounds and where anxiety around exams and performance is high. I believe we must keep subjects like music and theatre free from that anxiety. These should be spaces of joy and beauty. Perhaps I’m wrong, but I personally don’t like to make children perform publicly too early. I never single out any child, nor do I encourage teachers to send only their “best” students. I love every child equally because I believe it is every child’s birthright to singand experience that joy. Later in life, they may or may not become great performers, but as children, they deserve that happiness.

So, we don’t demand excellence or expertise, we just say, “Come and enjoy this beautiful thing”. For very young children, I use simple, playful methods, exploring high and low notes physically, maybe even walking up and down the steps of a house to feel pitch differences. Since I only teach vocal music, I also ask them to think about the meaning of songs—what the song describes. Does it mention a tree or a bird? Have they seen it? If the song is about a mango tree, I ask, “When does the mango tree flower?” That becomes a lesson in observation, in seasons, even in geography,

because the answers differ from place to place.

Rhythm can also be taught simply. For example, "We have this much space, how many notes can fit here? What happens if we slow it down?" The key is not to make them feel they are learning something. It should happen naturally. Mistakes are fine. So, what if a child misses a beat? There are far greater mistakes being made in the world! It doesn't matter; it can always be corrected.

Sandeep: Now, since we have moved on to a new education policy, even our curriculum, at least half of itis being pushed online. Theatre students also have to learn online. In your opinion, where do you think arts education in general is headed now?

Vidya Rao: I'm a little old-fashioned. I feel that if you truly want to learn an art form, you have to do it directly with a teacher. If I say "guru", it might sound overly traditional or serious, but the main idea is that anyone can serve as your guru. However, it has to be a one-on-one relationship, a close, personal exchange. I firmly believe that. In fact, I believe this is true for all kinds of study. You form a deep connection with your teacher, even if that relationship lasts only ten days. It doesn't matter. What's important to me is that art takes shape deeply within a relationship, both in the process of learning and in the act of sharing it with the world.

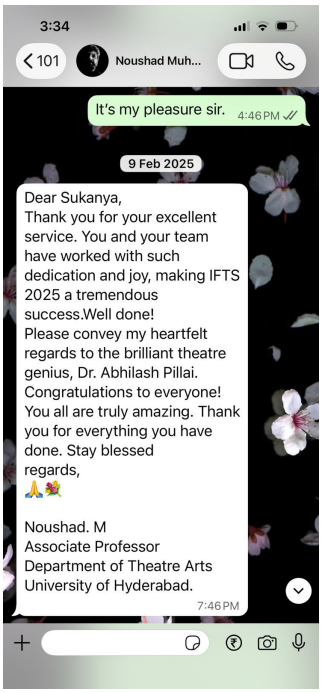
I can't sing unless I know that people are listening. Actors, too, can sense when there is good energy in the audience. We all feel that. Art is a deeply interpersonal experience, and I would be very unhappy to lose that. Having said that, I do have one or two students online, but I do it reluctantly. I only agree when there's absolutely no other way to meet in person, or when the student's interest extends beyond singing—say, a research scholar who wants to learn music to deepen their understanding. So, I think these are situational decisions we make. Now, if there's an educational policy requiring online teaching, what do we do as teachers? And I include myself in that category. We have to find our way around it. Zoom, for instance, has been very helpful. It has democratized learning and made access easier. But we also know how much is lost on Zoom like the subtle exchanges, the energyand the shared presence. We know that.

So, perhaps it means we will have to work harder to recreate that sense of intimacy in other ways. In Urdu, there is a phrase, "seenabaseena," which means "from my heart to your heart". That, for me, is the essence of art. And I would like to say that the love of learning and sharing are such wonderful forces. They are powerful enough to overcome obstacles. I truly want to believe that. I want to believe it because otherwise, I would lose hope, and I don't want to lose hope. If I hold on to the love of learning, the love of those who wish to learn, and the love of the art form itself, then perhaps I will find a way through the challenges and the changes of the world. Maybe I won't, but I won't give up hope.

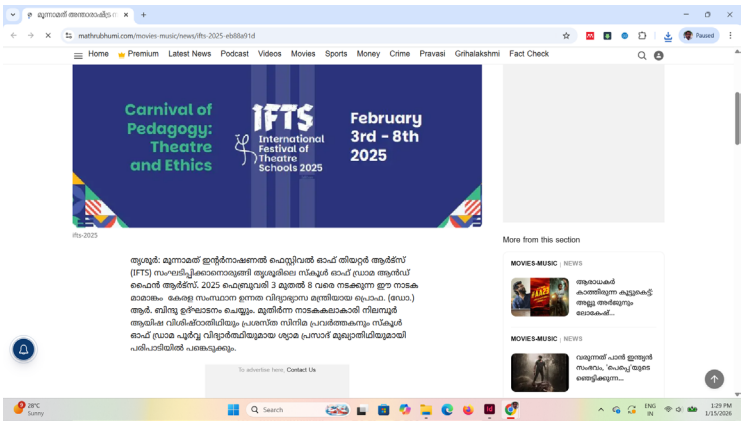
Sandeep: We hope so too. Thank you for being with us. This has been a truly enriching interview, and I'm sure our students who watch this will learn a great deal from your experience. Thank you so much for joining us.

Vidya Rao: Thank you so much. I just want to add one last thing. This is one of those moments I will always remember. There was the time I saw Shambhu Maharaj Ji when I was a child. There was that trip to the Kasauli Arts Centre, and then, there was my visit to Naina Devi, who accepted me as her student. These were life changing moments for me. This moment, being here at this school and at the festival are equally significant to me. It's a very special and memorable experience in my life. Thank you so much.

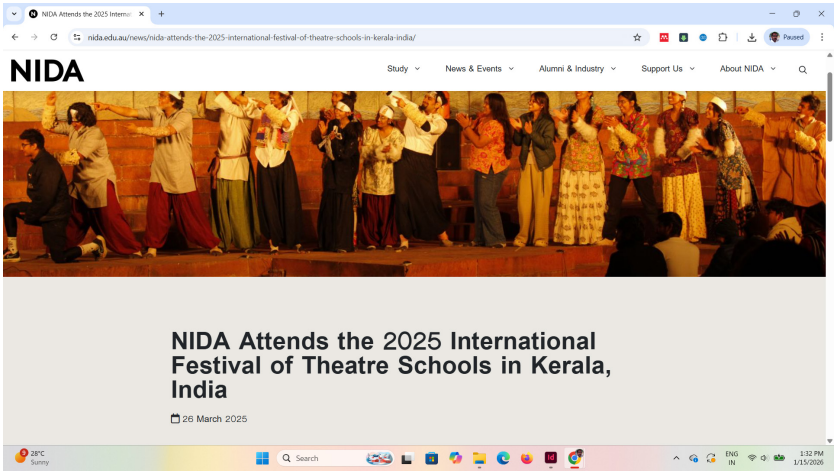
TESTIMONIALS


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101
Noushad Muh...
It's my pleasure sir.
4:46 PM
9 Feb 2025
Dear Sukanya,
Thank you for your excellent service. You and your team have worked with such dedication and joy, making IFTS 2025 a tremendous success.Well done!
Please convey my heartfelt regards to the brilliant theatre genius, Dr. Abhilash Pillai.
Congratulations to everyone!
You all are truly amazing. Thank you for everything you have done. Stay blessed
regards,
🙏💐
Noushad. M
Associate Professor
Department of Theatre Arts
University of Hyderabad.
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