

19 TALK

ART, MUSIC, STYLE, FOOD



NOT ALL SONG AND DANCE
An opera performance on an artificial beach, in which swimsuited performers break from sunbathing to sing warnings of ecological disaster, won Lithuania the top prize at the Venice Art Biennale. Nearly 89 countries have participated in this event.

Like Our Own

Feisal Alkazi's adaptation of British playwright Andrew Keatley's *The Gathered Leaves* brings the familiar angst of family strife closer home



PALLAVI CHATTOPADHYAY

IT'S THE 75th birthday of the family patriarch Kaushal. Nine members of his family are gathering after 17 years at their home for a weekend. Set in Sunder Nagar, there's Rajasvi who has returned to the family house in Delhi with her French-speaking daughter. She was disowned by her father as a student at Jawaharal Nehru University, Delhi, when she got pregnant by an African "black man".

Moving his shoulders endlessly, much like the movements of a rocking horse, his eyes fixed to the ground, her autistic brother Gautam marks his arrival on the stage. He is dissed by his father, but has the support of his brother Gaurav. Gaurav, meanwhile, has to deal with his wife, Deepika, who tells him she has found someone else. What was meant to be a happy get-together turns into a battlefield of emotional discord. *The Gathered Leaves*, adapted from British playwright Andrew Keatley's play by the same name, staged last week in Delhi, found resonance with the audience, who could relate to the similarities of familial discord in their own lives. Old grievances, social sensitivities, unfulfilled parental expectations and the importance of forgiving and forgetting are the themes that run through the two-hour play.

While Kaushal (Yogesh Verma) reveals that he has been diagnosed with Alzheimer's, Gautam, skillfully and realistically played by Ashish Dhameja, accidentally spills tea on the floor. When he helplessly cries on the ground, and slaps his face non-stop, the audience get a closer look at the reality of those who suffer from this condition.

Meanwhile in her room next to her piano, Rajasvi (Gayatri Rattan) reminiscences a younger self, a moment everyone can relate to, of returning to ancestral homes and the memories of endless summers spent as children with siblings. The disappointed stares she receives from her father and brother for being absent from their lives for so many years is like a scene handpicked from many an Indian household.

"These dilemmas of acceptance and changing social norms are all around us, with friends who have homosexual children, or with children, including my own, who are in live-in relationships. How much do we accept them and how easy is it for us as parents? We say it's okay but do we really feel it is okay?" says Feisal Alkazi, director of the play, who has returned with the show after popular demand. The play was



The play presents dilemmas of acceptance and changing social norms

staged at India Habitat Centre and OddBird Theatre in Delhi last year, and in other cities, including at Gyan Manch in Kolkata, with almost the same cast.

In another scene, Gautam is accused by his brother's wife of watching her nude from a window in the washroom. Gaurav, essayed by Sanjiv Desai, comes to his rescue and tells Deepika, "He can't lie". Gautam later confides how he sometimes feels lonely, wishes

to marry someday and do various activities with his partner, but concludes "not everybody gets married", as if impressed upon him by elders. His performance brings flashbacks of Shah Rukh Khan's laudable performance in *My Name is Khan*, forcing viewers to draw comparisons. Dhameja, who has worked with the NGO Action for Autism, says, "I rarely see people who understand autism. Our curriculum in schools should have chapters dedicated to them, so that society is sensitive and does not pass comments without understanding their situation." In another moment, Kaushal wakes up in shock from his sleep, having flashbacks of the Partition and losing his sibling in the violence. It is Gautam, whom he has been mostly bitter towards, who comes and wraps him in a blanket, and says "sleep well".

This last scene strikes a chord with most adults present in the room, including the actors themselves, especially those who have the task of taking care of their aged parents. Feisal recalls his father, theatre doyen, Ebrahim Alkazi's episodes with Alzheimer's. He mentions how the transition of children becoming caretakers of their parents is a difficult one. "What does one do when they know about Alzheimer's? You know what is happening to you and you can't stop it. A person like my father was so much in control of his life and then there is none," says Feisal.

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'It's up to the artist to respond to a situation'

Artist Vivan Sundaram on his latest exhibition in Delhi, engaging with archival material and responding to crisis



(Clockwise from above) *Unearthed: day*, (2019), from the series, *Unearthed: Diagonal, I*, (2016), from the series, *Terraoptics*; *Figure, IV*, (2016); from the series, *Terraoptics* Courtesy: Vivan Sundaram / Photoink; Vivan Sundaram Abhinav Saha

VANDANA KALRA

Tell us about the discarded potshards from Pattanam, Kerala, in your series *Black Gold* and *Terraoptics*, which is part of your current exhibition?

The prehistoric site became the basis of this work. The potshards, dating around 500 BCE, are from the archaeological remains of the disappeared port town of Muziris. In my work at the Kochi-Muziris Biennale (2012), you looked down to see the 60 x 12 ft installation. Made up of innumerable terracotta fragments, it became the basis for the video *Black Gold* that has been projected on the floor of the gallery in the ongoing exhibition. A very large photograph becomes a pathway — playing on the idea of looking down and walking on the (photograph of) the material installation. *Terraoptics* are potshards photographed from above (which presents) a landscape, a habitation along the banks of a river, the surface glowing with heating coil and engine oil.

I have a long-time engagement with the idea of the archive, of constantly referring to a real or imagined past (including my own), and then montaging this with multiple materials to create disjunctures.

In the exhibition, you also experiment with light boxes. Can you talk about the genesis of the photographs that comprise the set *Unearthed*?

With a collagist aesthetics, I juxtapose potshard forms with linear fibreoptics. The potential of creating spatially complex and fantastical structures with the luminosity of fibreoptics could only be developed with digital intervention and presented as a back-lit image. The light box, as an object, further differentiates this from the conventional photograph.

The quartet titled *Unearthed* is based on a stretch of 'ground' made up of the terracotta shards, small sculptures, and miscellaneous objects, all adding up to bricoleur's stage-set for a series of large photographs. The photographed images speak of land devastated by the fury of nature, congested settlements set against a backdrop of modern design and demolished human dwellings.

You have had a deep relationship with found objects.

I have a particular attraction for urban trash, as well as a romantic affinity with the ragpicker/wastepicker, who maps the city looking down on a *objet trouve*. Collecting and sorting hundreds of familiar items of daily use, the 'illegal' worker creates a potential palette of a vast range of colours, textures and forms. This laboriously collected material culminated into making a large installation of a city built with material garbage and translated into a set for photographs titled *Trash*. The project offers three 'lenses' to frame this city: a perspectival view; top angle or plan format view; and views constructed through digital means, facilitating manipulation of the content, combining abstract and surreal forms, creating a kaleidoscopic encounter. The grubbiness of the substance is recycled into a beautiful form, for aesthetic pleasure but also, inversely, as an enticing means for confronting the gross over-production of surplus under neo-liberal capitalism.

Another encounter with the city was through a photograph of a man killed on the streets of Bombay during the riots of 1992-93. In *Memorial*, the archival data of the victim, a Muslim, resonates as an image of the status of the minority in contemporary India. Then, and even more, now, in a profoundly tragic sense.

There have also been experiments with the family archive. Could you talk about that?

The found object can also be located in a cupboard at home. Ancestral belongings and photographs are made into an artwork



If the work of termites produces 'destructive and corrosive' forms flowing over sensuously painted pictures, an accidental paradox is set up — between art and nature, the organic and the abstract, defacement and death

VIVAN SUNDARAM

In *The Sher-Gil Archive* (1995). The archive of photographs in a family album also turned into digital images in *Re-take of Amrita* (2001-02). These could be viewed as film stills of a feature film, where the members of the family enact multiple roles, from adolescents to aged parents. Foregrounded is a playful, sensuous and melancholic relationship of the father, Umrao Singh Sher-Gil with his daughter, Amrita.

Your new series *Work of Termites* is "suggestive of the inherently destructive and corrosive forces that exist in nature". Does that also mean acceptance of these forces?

I picked up a found object, a book in my library eaten by termites, and set up a dialogue — using a collage technique, employing photoshop tools and random encounter. If the work of termites produces 'destructive and corrosive' forms flowing over sensuously painted pictures, an accidental paradox is set up — between art and nature, the organic and the abstract, defacement and death.

Do you feel the role of an artist has changed over the years? Is it important for artists to address sociopolitical issues through their work?

My work constantly shifts. When the Emergency was declared, in 1976 I made these critiques of the Emergency rule, and could have been arrested for it. *Memorial* (1993) responded to the Babri Masjid demolition and what happened in Mumbai. My view of myself is dependent on how I am positioned at a certain moment and in a particular political situation. It is up to the artist to choose to respond or not to in any particular situation. If you don't, it does not mean that you are less of an artist. (Henri) Matisse, for instance, did not comment on the rise of fascism in his paintings. This relationship on how you respond, individual artists will do different things.

The exhibition is at Photoink, Delhi, till June 1, from 11 am to 7 pm

The Reluctant Schoolboy

Actor Tiger Shroff on being a student on the sets, being vulnerable and continuing as an action hero

PARTH KHATAU

STUDENT OF THE Year 2 (*SOTY2*) makes me feel more human. In this movie, I'm kind of stripped off my powers. If I'm punched, I'll bleed. If I'm bullied, I'll probably cry," says actor Tiger Shroff lounging in a chair in the Dharma Productions' Andheri office. Ever since the 29 year old made his debut with *Heropanti* (2014), he has earned the reputation of being an action hero. Movies that followed — *Baaghi*, *A Flying Jatt* and *Mumma Michael* — further consolidated his reputation of "a tough guy".

With *SOTY 2*, a teen romance and drama produced by Karan Johar, Shroff has pushed his boundaries at the cost of feeling "uncomfortable and alienated". By his own admission, Shroff felt like "an outsider" on the sets even though he has been part of the industry for five years and is born into a film family. "This is so unlike any of the films I have done before. I know all about the 2012 *Student of the Year* (featuring Alia Bhatt, Varun Dhawan and



Tiger Shroff plays a small town boy in *Student of the Year 2*; Shroff Nirmal Harindran

Sidharth Malhotra). I had big shoes to fill," says Shroff. Eventually, he got a hang of his *SOTY 2* character Rohan Sachdev. "After that, I started enjoying myself," he says.

SOTY 2 has a completely new storyline even though the school (St Teresa's) where the characters study, remains the same. While Shroff has five releases under his belt, his co-actors Tara Sutaria and Ananya Panday are making their big screen debuts. "The girls are amazing. They don't even come across as newcomers. They are so well prepared and focused that at times I have had to up my game on sets to keep up with them," says Shroff, who is also known for his dance moves.

"When I joined the film industry, I was desperate to impress people and do the



right thing. As a result, I often wasn't at ease. *SOTY 2* has taught me to loosen up a bit and be myself. I'm still anxious during action and dance sequences since I try to meet the audience expectations. However, I enjoyed shooting the scenes where I had to act as a normal student. I also loved the romantic scenes. My takeaway from the film is that I needn't be uptight all the time."

So, who is the real Tiger Shroff? "Someone who does not like doing film promotions and answering the same questions again and again. However, I know it is part of the job and I respect it," he says. When he is not working on a movie, the actor enjoys watching superhero films, being at the gym, playing football or practising

martial arts. "When I was four, I watched a Bruce Lee movie for the first time, I was fascinated. My parents enrolled me into a martial arts class. There has been no looking back," says Shroff, who mentions that the *Spiderman* series featuring Tobey Maguire is among his favourites.

Shroff affirms that he will continue doing action movies. "As long as my legs do not give up on me," he says. In his next movie, an action thriller produced by Yash Raj Films, Shroff will be seen alongside Hrithik Roshan. The *SOTY2* actor is thrilled. "I have always been a fan of Hrithik sir. It's a privilege working with him. His work ethic, focus and determination are second to none," says Shroff. Their yet-to-be titled movie is likely to release in October.

SNAP SHOTS



Small Screen Win

BASED ON Luke Jennings's *Codename Villanelle*, TV drama *Killing Eve* (pictured) has emerged as the biggest winner at BAFTA Television Awards, scooping the trophies of best drama series and best leading actress for Jodie Comer. It also took home the best supporting actress for Fiona Shaw. The award for best mini-series went to *Patrick Melrose*, while actor Benedict Cumberbatch bagged the best leading actor award for this five-part drama.

Cinematic Track

FORMER FORMULA One world champion Michael Schumacher will be the subject of a new documentary featuring unseen archive footage and rare interviews. The film, directed by German duo Michael Wech and Hanns-Bruno Kammertöns, will chart the life and times of the racing champion from his days as a hobby go-karter in Kerpen



Absent, Present

THE 72ND Cannes Film Festival kicked off with India missing from the official selection for the first time this decade. The last time it drew a blank was in 2009. The 2019 edition that opens today with the screening of Jim Jarmusch's *The Dead Don't Die* (pictured) is one of the 21 titles competing for the Palme d'Or. Actors Aishwarya Rai Bachchan, Sonam Kapoor Ahuja, Deepika Padukone and Huma Qureshi will, however, walk the red carpet.

near Cologne, to his legendary victories on the race track where he secured seven Formula One titles, and the near-fatal skiing accident five years ago that left him with devastating head injuries, from which he is still recovering. The film will release in German and Swiss cinemas on December 5, while the foreign license rights — including streaming service access — will be up for grabs at the Cannes Film Festival.