

[**DISCLAIMER:** The transcript honors the spoken word—however it has been modified in parts for readability. It is intended for extensive sharing for academic, research, and artistic purposes under the creative common licensing scheme BY-SA.]

Day 2 | 19th December 2019 | A CONVERSATION ON MAKING FESTIVALS: SHARING JOURNEYS AND EXPERIENCES | Smriti Rajgarhia | Björn Ketels | Moderators: Anuja Ghosalkar and Kai Tuchmann

Anuja Ghosalkar: Kai and me are working on this symposium for a long time now, and it is due to these two people that we are actually here today. So, just to put this in context, Smriti is the director of the Serendipity Arts Festival, and Björn is the director of Goethe Institute/ Max Mueller Bhavan, Bombay. Just to give you a bit of a background: Kai and me have been running a series of workshops for the last year at Goethe Institute Bombay and a lot of the people who came to these workshops will show their works over the next two days. And, Serendipity Arts Festival invited me last year to do a site specific work and that collaboration was one of the most joyous collaborations for me, and I hope for them as well. And it was totally out of an intuition and instinct that we went and met them with this crazy idea of a symposium on Theater of the Real. Without hesitation they supported us and that's why we're here. So, what we want to talk with you about in the next half an hour is your experiences of running festivals. What are the challenges? What are the hopes involved? Because, we hope in 2020 we can curate Asia's first festival of documentary theater. So we want to learn and share the journeys with you. So, Smriti, we would like you to begin.

Smriti Rajgarhia: Thank you very much for that very kind introduction. I don't think that was needed, but Anuja, your project was fabulous! It went through its own struggles and problems because of issues related to venues. Anyway, I am going to show you a small clip, you can keep the volume low, so it gives you an idea of what we do at Serendipity Arts Festival. This is what we did last year. Just to give you a background, the Serendipity Arts Festival is one of the largest projects of what is called the Serendipity Arts Foundation. The foundation was started in 2016. The conception was in 2015. This is the fourth edition for the festival that we are conducting this year. The idea of starting the foundation was to facilitate and help artistic practices. It was mandated to help get more people involved with the arts in various ways and when we were running the foundation we had a bunch of projects that we did. We realized to get more and more audiences to get initiated into the arts, it was important for us to do something which was more inclusive, bigger and more accessible. Hence the germination of the Serendipity Arts Festival happened. 2015 October is when we started the office and 2016 is when the first festival took place in Goa. Within the foundation we do many other activities, we do Cinema340, we've done residencies, we've done talks, we have a small basement in Delhi and we have constantly hoped to create avenues for people to show what they are working on, work in progress. We also started a space where people could come and rehearse for free for theater. The intent was only to give people resources that we had, so that they could further their own artistic practice. Arushi is here and Anita is here they can tell you little more about *Projects and Processes*. It was an initiative started to support art writing. There was an absence in art writing so we've kind of, we wanted to negotiate that space. We have a project called *Right Art Connect* which is an online blog where a theme is given out. And all these things were done to support writing and when you come to the festival, we have researchers at the festival that

support writing. So we wanted to create an ecosystem which wasn't just showcasing, but also had a longer term impact. Why a festival?

So when we first decided to use the word festival, we were questioned about it, the connotation of a festival especially in India is very different. Festivals could be religious, they could be based on weather, they could be based on state, they can be based on tradition and so when you bring art into a festival what does that relationship really mean? We decided to go with the word festival, because it was celebratory. We are here to celebrate the arts and culture, the diversity of the region. The idea was to get together and bring arts back to where it really belongs. So we chanced upon Panjim in 2015, it was a beautiful city, it was so culturally layered, it was the first gridded town of Asia and when we walked into Panjim it felt like it was set out to host a festival. If you look at the urban planning of Panjim itself, it was meant to host a festival and we were very excited. The great thing about the city is that they have kept all the buildings the way they are. They use them for different events, like IFFI, they have the Kala Academy. From all the way from late eighteenth hundred to Charles Correa they made buildings that could support arts and culture. So we kind of start looking at venues that would work to host the festival. This map shows the various venues that we have actually used in the past and they keep shifting. Our basis is the kind of programming we create. Serendipity Arts Festival is only possible because of partnerships and collaborations, collaborations with the government, the artists, institutions. We feel we are a collaborative platform, we want to create an open platform where if you had an idea you could come to us and we can then help you navigate through presenting the idea. The intent was to see how this could be a cultural experiment and how could the city benefit and how we could benefit from the city. It's a symbiotic relationship. How does a city react to arts and culture and then how does arts and culture react to a city? I think there's a responsibility on both shoulders to take this collaboration forward.

So then the next question came: should we charge for the festival? And we've had this question, we've argued about it every year that we have gone back to the office. We have consciously decided to keep it completely free because to ascribe a value to the arts was problematic for us. So we felt that anything that is presented should be given for free which put a huge pressure on the institution to be able to raise the money to actually make these things happen, when there was no monetary exchange between the audience and the festival itself. And I think, we kind of stand by it, because when you see the kind of people who actually come to the festival, it makes us happy and it makes us feel that we've actually achieved what we set out to achieve, because they don't have to get into a transactional process to actually approach the arts. So further, our accessibility is the biggest point, we want the festival to be completely accessible and hence we have a big program around inclusivity, we've partnered with Siddhant Shah from *Access for All* where we hope that everyone can actually engage with the space in various ways. Then the questions came up, how do you define public? What is public? What is a festival? Is it public when you are out in the street or is it public when the building is deemed public? If it's a disused building does it still remain public? And those are the kind of questions Serendipity has been trying to grapple with an answer in the past three editions. I remember having this really nice conversation with Orijit when he was presenting *Mapping Mapusa Market* in 2017, and we said we wanted to do something which is public. He said, public doesn't mean that it has to be outside of a building, public means, that if you can bring public to the art, then it still is

public art. And, I think we've kind of stuck by that mandate on presenting projects that can actually bring public back into the spaces.

This is one of the projects that was done on the streets. We've kind of looked at what can be done on the street, off the street, because we also have culinary arts as a major part of the project. Then there is the issue of access for all. We have many workshops which are not just for the differently abled, but also for people to get sensitized to how they behave around people who might have, who might be slightly different and how do you actually react to them when they are around art. The other example, I wanted to talk to you about was *Children's Park*. In the first year we used a town square, called the Municipal Garden and that venue completely failed. Anyway, first it was kind of a disaster because of the first two days nobody came and we kept wondering. It's free and nobody is walking in, but everybody expected that there would be like a hidden charge. So they didn't walk in, it was only after much word of mouth that the people realized that it's actually free and they started walking in. The municipal garden, even though it's in the center of Panjim and it's surrounded by many urban outlets, nobody walked in and it became problematic. So we actually changed the venue for something that is called children's art park. The art park was deemed unsafe because at night there was less lighting, people didn't go there, you felt unsafe sending your kids there. And since 2017, since we activated it, you'll see that the art park has become, it thrives more. So that's the kind of collaboration with the city that we are proud of: the fact that we could look at spaces which once being used and that through an intervention of arts and culture actually were brought back to life. So how do we engage with the built from the city? And the reason I'm talking about this is because when we decided to start the festival, the idea was to understand this relationship between built, public, private, and art. I mean there has to be a relationship between all of them.

When we opened the Adil Shah Palace, it was full with history: it was the first center of power during Adil Shah, which was then taken over by the Portuguese, then it became the old secretariat. How do you kind of respond to a space like that? When arts come into it, what happens? What happens to the history? And, I think all buildings have their own interesting history, like the building we are sitting in: It was the hospital for the poor started by the Portuguese, which then became the Goa Institute Of Management (G.I.M). And after that now they are thinking of building maybe an infirmary again here. So the typology keeps changing and we are just trying to intervene into the typology for eight days to see what it can do to the space. That's the Adil Shah's palace from 2018. This is G.I.M the way we got it before. This was last year beginning. These are just examples. Anuja asked me to talk about the struggles and the problems, so I thought I would just present a little bit of the impact study that we did last year. So we commissioned Art X to do an impact study, because everybody kept asking do you think you're creating an impact. If you think you're creating an impact, how do you measure it? So we had to go into that entire conversation about how are you measuring impact, what is the impact that we think we're creating, are we creating an impact? I'm sitting in an office and trying to make a program is very easy, but what happens when you put it out there? So we've kind of listed down what impact we wanted to measure. We wanted to measure how collaborative we were, we wanted to measure what we are doing to create new cultural venues, the development of new arts practices and our capacity building. I show you some basic charts now. I mean you can read them and they are available, they are going to be uploaded online. The entire report lists the kind of interventions we've had. We've been rated four out of five for programming, we did a 2000

people sample, we've had 74%, who thought we were already good, overall experience was 81% and the artists give us a 77%, which was very high after what we do to them. That is a very high number. Capacity building is what we've always looked at as a festival and as a foundation because we have many compliances, we had to go through extensive paper work for the festival which we feel is in a way capacity building. How to maintain budgets? How to manage your own projects are things that we've had to take the artists through so that we don't fault with our compliances? If you look at the programming we've never gone with a theme, we don't have a theme for the festival. We welcome projects that have a meaning and fit a mandate that we set out to each curator. Theater for early years was started by Arundhati Naag at the festival because she felt that theater affected people at a very, very young age and it was important for us to bring that to them. It's actually going on right now as you speak at the G.M.C. This was Orijit Sen's *Mapping Mapusa Market*. It looked like a market. Adil Shah looked like a market with this project throughout. That's the *Children's Park* again and that's the project called *Urban Re-imagined* by Ravi Agarwal on the promenade and that's what it looked like. Thank you.

Anuja Ghosalkar: Björn, would you like to share your journey of a festival that you started and produced in Sri Lanka. The dance festival?

Björn Ketels: Basically, only one part of it is a festival. The festival is only the visible part for the public, but what we actually created is a dance forum, which first of all, created an understanding of what contemporary dance practice is in Sri Lanka. The festival format of *Colombo Dance Platform* was the audience part. But maybe I explain a little bit how we started. So when I arrived in Sri Lanka in 2010, I found out that within the region of South Asia there is a focus on contemporary dance in the region and I've also figured out that Sri Lanka is not a part of it. So all the activities were centered around Attakalari in Bangalore and Gati in Delhi, and when I've asked why is Sri Lanka left out, I was told there is no contemporary dance scene in Sri Lanka. This is why they are not a part of it. I was fresh in Sri Lanka and I thought, okay maybe, but when I looked around dance was all over, every single event starts with a dance performance. Dance is taught in schools. Dance is a really popular and a very visible art form in Sri Lanka. So I've asked my colleagues what's happening, contemporary dance is just not a thing here or what's the situation? And then I've learned there is dance, there is a wide spectrum of dance in Sri Lanka practiced, but it's more clustered, it's not one scene. There's not the feel of one scene. There are the people doing Kandyan dance. There is the traditional Kandyan dance. There are the people around the Chitrasena Dance Company, who are using dance material from the Sri Lanka tradition but who are telling stories which are not religiously or connected to rituals. There are people who use traditional dance material and combine it with modern dance elements, western modern dance elements. And there is also few people who are doing more performance based experimental stuff, but this is mainly funded by foreign organizations, like the Goethe Institute and the British Council, and this is not in the focus of the funding structures which exist in Sri Lanka for the traditional dance forms. And the first thing after we had a little gathering with a few people from the dance scene, one is sitting over there, Venuri Perera, was that we felt the need to do a kind of mapping. We have to see what's happening here and we have to bring all the people together around one table and start a discussion what dance in Sri Lanka was. Where does it come from? Where are we now? What we want to do in the future? And probably, how can we collaborate and breakthrough these little cluster-borders and start common projects, doing stuff together, and since we at the Goethe

Institute we always try to connect all activities to the German cultural scene, but in this case we thought the German contemporary dance scene is too far away. But, since we organized in regions, we had a lot of experience in our neighbor region, region South-East Asia, who did a big dance project called *Dance Connections* the years before. And so we decided to invite a curator who was involved in this South-East Asian context, which is much closer to South-Asia than the German scene and in the first edition we had Tang FU Kuen, who is based in Bangkok and Singapore, and is a curator at the Taipei Festival of the Arts currently. We invited him to do a mapping first of all to meet all the various groups, single performers which exist in and around Colombo. We started in Colombo, later we extended to all of Sri Lanka and he made a selection and he invited several companies, several solo performers to display their work in the framework of the small festival just to show the entire spectrum of dance which is there in Sri Lanka.

This was connected with discussions of what's being showcased there and also the potentials of working with what's existing already. So the first platform was about existing productions which were showcased and this part was essential, because if contemporary dance is not known as a concept, we also don't get an audience for it. So we thought, okay, when we start talking about contemporary dance we also have to create a platform for the audience, where basically people can build expectations when they read in the newspaper there is something happening carrying the title "contemporary dance". This was the starting point anybody can see there is some of the productions which we showcased in the first edition and the response was really, really good and also the conversations among the various dance practitioners went to a stage where we decided, okay, we will continue with it. And, since it's not that many people who are involved in the scene, we decided to do the next edition in two years. For the second edition we invited again a curator who did a lot of work in South-East Asia. That was Ong Keng Sen, who did the Singapore Arts Festival for quite a long time, and in this second edition we tried to focus more on broadening approaches of contemporary dance by involving artists from other art forms. We commissioned works for the second edition. We had our restrictions of course, and thus we were not able to fund eight big productions, rather it were eight small productions, which involved three dancers, I think, and another one or two artists from different fields. Video makers, theater people, musicians, and an architect were involved. Through the second edition of Colombo Dance Platform, I think, we achieved also within the audience more acceptance for experiments on stage and that was quite an important step also for what we did later. Before the third platform, six years after we started, we felt ready to open it up to Germany finally and we invited Anna Wagner as the curator for the third edition who is at Mousonturm in Frankfurt, which is one of the spots for contemporary dance and performance in Germany. In this third edition we reflected on the human body as a tool for performers and we also opened it up to people who are not in a common sense part of the dance scene. So we had visual artists who had some experience with performance, using their body as an artist to express whatever they wanted to express. And, we had in the third edition also an enormous increase of the audience. That was really nice to see.

From there we started also to build bridges to festivals, residencies and all the other resources not only in Asia but also in Europe. So already, after the second edition, some of the artists got invited for residency programs, they got invited to other festivals within the region. With the third edition we build a bridge to Europe and some artists were invited to festivals of Europe. It was a great exposure for them and of course they came back with new

ideas of how to take forward their journey of dance making. Then we had a fourth edition which happened after I left Sri Lanka and that was then curated by Venuri Perera, who's sitting right over there. The topic of this edition was *Shakti - A place for the single body* and that was all about solo performances and the female body in dance. Probably Venuri can later say a few words about this fourth edition, because I didn't attend it. I followed it of course, but I didn't attend it. After this fourth edition my successor transformed the festival into a different format which happened the two years after, namely in 2017 and 2018. We organised choreographer's camps, where young people, young dance makers were invited to present their approaches, to present work in progress. We invited mentors who had a look at these productions in the state they were. This was another format to basically empower the Sri Lankan dance scene to get more visible and to get the opportunity to perform not only in Sri Lanka with an audience which is now interested in contemporary dance and who has now an expectation of it, but also to get the exposure abroad. It's quite nice to see for me that with this activity, which spread over a time of eight years, we are now in a stage in Sri Lanka where contemporary dance is there: people are talking about it, people are going for performances and the festival part of this entire endeavor helped a lot in the sense of audience building mostly.

Kai Tuchmann: My first question relates to audience building. When you began your festivals was there a difference between your target audience and the actual audience, between the audience that you intended to attract and the audience for which you then actually curated. Was there a difference between it and if so how? Was there a process of matching it or of readjusting the ideal understanding of the audience?

Smriti Rajharhia: Actually in our case it wasn't that. From the first day we were very sure that there wasn't a particular kind of audience we target. It was a very large demographic we were catering to, we wanted to cater to everyone. There was no decision on a target group, there was no decision on, oh this is the kind of person that I want in my audience. It was never that and the audience has built up over the years and it's surprising that the art world has noticed us later. Who noticed us first was the people of Goa and I think that was really how we wanted to start. Not that we didn't want our peers to come and visit the festival. But our biggest patrons are the people of Goa who have actually visited the festival again and again. So if you look at the impact study, you'll see that last year there were over forty percent who were repeat visitors to the festival, because they were hoping for Serendipity to put out new content for them to see. So I think in our case we never adjusted any of it. What we did do again, because we were so obsessed with place and creative place making, was we rearranged the way each venue operates. We tried to have workshops, performances, talks, exhibitions in a specific venue, so that it attracts crowds from different interests. And I think that has been a little more successful this year: to have just venue dedicated to only visual arts and one to only theater would never get the theater goer to the visual arts, so with programming we've tried to get every venue to kind of accommodate the many disciplines that we have.

Björn Ketels: I think with the Colombo Dance Platform we were lucky to get some big names involved like the Chitrasena Dance Company, who are known to have their audiences and so we got people in who would probably never come for a more experimental dance piece. But they came because Chitrasena was also doing one part of the evening and I remember, I think in the second platform, we had a person when we opened the Q & A after the show,

who was really, really angry that what we presented there was definitely not dance. And it's also very nice to get these reactions, because we managed to merge various audiences within the festival, and of course you create frictions, because people come to see a certain thing and when they don't see that, they get angry probably. Others might appreciate it and I think most of the people appreciate that they had the chance to see something different, but some people got angry about it. And basically for us it was a compliment that this person freaked out, because we achieved exactly what we wanted: we brought various audiences together.

Anuja Ghosalkar: I mean running these festivals is massive. What are some of the challenges you've both faced in running a festival of this magnitude?

Björn Ketels: So, Colombo Dance Platform was always very, very small, was not a big festival. But dance productions take a lot of time and especially when you are commissioning dance pieces. It's a very long process which goes over months. When you are having a curator, the curator doesn't only come once for the beginning and then for the festival, he or she has to come several times and follow the productions. And in all three cases, I was in charge of, we had dramaturgs, who had a very close look at the state of the productions and who helped a lot with the adjustments. To follow this approach, we have to invite the people a couple of times. So, although the festival was rather small, it took a lot of resources. This is also why we said, okay we only do it every second year. First of all, because of the resources and secondly, the dance scene is not that big and we don't want to keep the entire dance scene busy all the time with preparing the next piece for the Colombo Dance Platform. They should also do other stuff. But working on a dance festival takes a lot of resources and getting resources together takes a lot of effort.

Smriti Rajharhia: In our case I feel that working with older buildings is a problem in terms of technology, in terms of organization. I think when a venue is not set up to be an arts venue, that conversion has been one of the biggest challenges we've faced. Whether it comes to getting the right tech, working in a region which is not, say Delhi or Bombay, where the tech is generally available. I mean just to put the productions together especially in performances. With visual arts it's slightly easier, I would say, but given the magnitude that we've reached, which wasn't intentional, I think operationally has been our biggest challenge. Getting all the artists to kind of understand the need for the paper work has been challenging. Things like that. Just to put so: on paper it looks fabulous, but when you actually go on ground that's when the problems really start for us.

Kai Tuchmann: So my next question would point to the decision making. So because you are also private persons, right, you have an individual taste. You might have your own political commitment. How do you reconcile, taste, commitments, personal tastes and commitments with the guidelines of the organizations for which you work or that you represent?

Smriti Rajharhia: This is an interesting question. I think a lot about it and reflect about it on a holiday after this festival.

Björn Ketels: In the end, since we always set an external curation, we had a clear separation of tasks. I was providing the framework, but my personal taste was totally left out the programming and I think it's good like that, because I'm not a dance expert.

Smriti Rajharhia: I agree, I mean I'm not a theater, or a music or a dance expert. I worked in an archive. I love archives. So the parts of the exhibitions which are archives are the closest to my heart and I find them easier to work with. But we have external curators, and you know, it's really, what they feel, works. And then there is the fact that we believe in them.

Kai Tuchmann: Smriti, you shared forty minutes now of your very, very precious time and you have to run to another venue. So we take this then as the end. Thank you both for being with us.