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‘I Do Plays That People Enjoy’

Theatre veteran Aamir Raza Husain on what works on stage, Delhi and the need to revive the city’s soul

by Veenu Singh

Theatre director Aamir Raza Husain is famous for his mega outdoor productions, such as *The Fifty Day War* (2000), based on the Kargil War and *The Legend of Ram* (2004), based on *Ramayan*. The 58-year-old is still living large, but working on a smaller scale – directing closed-door productions, writing and travelling. Husain, who recently presented Agatha Christie’s *The Mousetrap* in the Capital, met us over a sumptuous spread of paapdi chaat, sushi, dal palak, chicken do pyaza and aloo palak ki gujiya at Tamra, the all-day dining restaurant at Shangri-La’s – Eros hotel, New Delhi to discuss theatre, Delhi and the Capital’s soul.

You’re known for shows like *The Fifty Day War*. Yet for the past few years, you’ve only put up closed-door, invitation-only performances. Why? In 2005, we stopped selling tickets and began selling full shows to people who would buy them. This was because publicity is so expensive. Even if we got concessions on ads for shows, the amount we had to spend on publicity still made no financial sense against the prices of the tickets we sold. Secondly, our big shows have come to a halt due to the bad economy. Dance, music and theatre performances are the first victims as they are at the bottom of any sponsor’s priority list. Since what goes down tends to come up too, we are hoping for things to change soon.

Your most recent play was *The Mousetrap* by Agatha Christie. What attracts you to a play? *The Mousetrap* is an interesting murder mystery with an interesting ending. It has been running in London for the last 63 years. I pick anything that attracts me. My only way of judging a play



Photo: VIPIN KUMAR

is to see how it will be appreciated by the audience. I can’t do something like *Julius Caesar* – great lines, but who is going to understand them?

You’ve been associated with Delhi culture for a long time. How have the city and its culture changed?

I came to Delhi from Lucknow when I was six years old. This city has always been in a flux. The people who’ve been migrating or living here from the time of Nehru made this city vibrant and immersed themselves in its soul. But in the last few years, there have been people who have deliberately contributed towards destroying that soul. Today, it’s a city filled with people who are gnawing at each other’s throats to rise up in society so they can compare their houses to those in the latest saas-bahu serial.

People today are hosting festivals to bring alive the old Delhi magic. You did that too. How did that happen?

In 1998, I had organised a performance in Chandni Chowk, when Vijay Goel, a minister in the Atal Bihari Vajpayee government, asked me to do something. Chandni Chowk has history

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Besides theatre, Husain enjoys talking about food and the history behind it

and culture. It has a Gauri Shankar Mandir, a Jain mandir, a gurudwara, church and three mosques, including the Fatehpuri mosque. And there are havelis like the Chunamal ki haveli. Every lane has a name and history. So we recreated the story of 27 galis with performers from Benares, and did 27 consecutive performances in one gall after another.

We were expecting 50,000 people. The show was to start at 8, and by 7pm, we realised we already had about 2.5 lakh people. At 10 pm, we were all tired and hungry as there was no food left. We asked a paanwala to provide us with a paan each. But when my man tried to pay him, he refused. ‘Because of you,’ he told us, ‘I have earned ₹1 lakh and now I will return to my native town.’

Delhi had a vibrant culture then. Iss shehar ka ek dhadakta hua dil tha. People like Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi could sit down and discuss world theatre and do it intelligently. Perhaps only LK Advani or a few people in the

Congress can do that today.

Can’t the old glory be revived?

Go to London, Rome, Amsterdam or even beleaguered Damascus, you’ll find preservation, not destruction like in Delhi. Move away from Lutyens’ city and you will actually see things being destroyed. Monuments need to have magic. But they are falling apart. People are scribbling on them; there is not even one chowkidar at most places. Go to Old Fort and see the vandalism. All over the world, monuments are brought alive. During the day, they are filled with people in costume; in evenings they are lit up, there is dance, music. But in Delhi, we are not preserving anything.

Does doing plays only in English restrict your audience?

I was initiated into theatre at school at Mayo College by my English teacher, Rajinder Sibal. I am comfortable in any language. In *The Fifty Day War* play, the officers talked in English and the jawans in Hindi. Since we perform all over the country, English is the only common language.

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