

# PROJECTS / PROCESSES VOLUME V

Research and Writing from SAF 2017

commissioned by





## About **Projects/Processes**

**Projects / Processes** is a new initiative to publish commissioned research essays, longform writing, and in-depth criticism that explore the ideas and processes behind select curatorial projects at Serendipity Arts Festival. Over two years, the Festival has accumulated a rich database of creative energies and partnerships. As an eight-day long event, the Festival is a platform for multidisciplinary collaboration and cultural innovation, and has commissioned over 70 new works across the visual arts and performance since its inception in 2016. The **Projects / Processes** series offers an opportunity to give some of these works and the stories that they tell an afterlife, through a deeply engaged look at how they came together and their significance to the discourse of contemporary art in India moving forward. Each volume comprises essays covering distinct projects that stand in some dialogue with each other, through the questions they raise and the thematic landscape they cover.

## About Serendipity Arts Festival

**Serendipity Arts Festival** is a multi-disciplinary arts event set over a period of eight days in December in the vibrant settings of Panaji, Goa. Curated by a panel of eminent artists and institutional figures, this festival is a long-term cultural project that hopes to affect positive change in the arts in India on a large scale.

Serendipity Arts Festival 2017 experimented with site, form, scale, and display, featuring over 70 projects including more than 40 projects commissioned specifically for the Festival, alongside a line-up of scintillating programmes spanning music, dance, theatre, visual arts and culinary arts. In addition to the curated events, we believe in collaborations that can give the Festival varied perspectives. As a result, SAF 2017 saw an exciting array of Special Projects which highlight our institutional collaborations.

The Festival also attempts to address pressing issues such as arts education, patronage culture, interdisciplinary discourse and accessibility to the arts. This intensive programme of exhibitions and performances is accompanied by spaces for social and educational engagement.

## About Serendipity Arts Foundation

**Serendipity Arts Foundation** is an arts and cultural development Foundation created to encourage and support the arts as a significant contributor to civil society. It aims to promote new creative strategies, artistic interventions, and cultural partnerships that are responsive and seek to address the social, cultural and environmental milieu of South Asia. Committed to innovation, SAF intends to promote and create platforms for creativity, providing the wider public with a unique source of contemporary art and culture. SAF programmes are designed and initiated through collaborations with partners across a multitude of fields, each intervention created using the arts to impact education, create social initiatives, foster community development, and explore both interdisciplinarity and multidisciplinary in the arts, with a special focus on South Asia.



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**Quality Street**

***Performed and Directed***

***by*** Maya Krishna Rao

**Shikhandi**

***Directed by*** Faezeh Jalali

**Dumb Wait-err**

***Directed by*** Tushar Pandey

## Notes

### **Quality Street**

*Performed and Directed by* Maya Krishna Rao

*Quality Street*, based on the story by Nigerian writer Chimamanda Adichie, is about a mother and her daughter, set in Lagos, Nigeria, but with a few details changed can be transposed to several cities across the world. The entire story is a non-stop, verbal ‘boxing match’ between mother and daughter - funny, yet deeply moving. At a deeper level, the story looks at issues that lie at the core of people’s lives – of culture, values and relationships within a family.

This is a solo performance, where the events are seen through the eyes of the mother, Mrs. Njoku. The show is a salute to all mothers (and fathers) who strive to put up with their children against, sometimes, very heavy odds.

### **Shikhandi**

*Directed by* Faezeh Jalali

*Produced by* NCPA in association with FATS TheArts

A comic, tongue-in-cheek retelling of the story of Shikhandi from the Mahabharata, directed by Faezeh Jalali, mixes the traditional with the contemporary, questioning maleness, femaleness and everything in between. Shikhandi is perhaps one of the earliest trans-characters from Indian mythology. Shikhandi was meant to be born male to avenge an insult in

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her past life as Amba. But a bigger karmic game unfolds when she is reborn female, raised male, has a sex change (thanks to a *yaksha*) on her wedding night when she finally fulfils her destiny – to be the cause of Bhishma’s death.

### **Dumb Wait-err**

***Conceptualised and Directed by*** Tushar Pandey

***Collaborators*** Samagra Creations + Push and Pull Theatre

This production is an interpretation of Harold Pinter’s *The Dumb Waiter*, adapted to Hindustani and performed in a site responsive style. This show challenges the traditional notions of spectatorship in theatre and brings ideas such as voyeurism to the fore. Using multiple TV screens, CCTV cameras and the live performance, the space binds the situation, characters and the audience together in a unique experience.





# Theatrical Explorations of Contemporaneity

Gargi Bharadwaj

This essay is a reflection on three theatre productions staged at Serendipity Arts Festival, Goa, 2017: *Quality Street*, performed and directed by Maya Krishna Rao, Faezeh Jalali's *Shikhandi: The story of the In-Betweens*, and Harold Pinter's *Dumb Wait-err*, directed by Tushar Pandey. The essay segues from one performance to the next, paying attention to what each work makes intelligible and sensible and how that affects the spectator, calling upon her to think and act in particular ways. These performances offer a provocation to the senses. What is seen, heard, and felt forms the basis of the theatrical experience affected through the theatrical material—body/movement, space/stage, sound/voice. There is little in common between them in terms of aesthetics, organisation of space, processes of production, and specificities of reception. But from a curatorial perspective, reflecting on these performances collectively might alter the experience of these works and enable a conceptualisation of citizenship through performance that can be broached in the festival context.

## I. Between Text and Context: Exploring the Radical Potential of Comedy

Maya Rao's *Quality Street* is a single actor comic performance based on the short story by the Nigerian feminist writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. It takes stock of the relationship between a bourgeois Nigerian mother, Mrs. Njoku and her daughter, Sochienne, who has returned home after six years in America, radically transformed. The planning of her wedding in the village family home to a Kenyan becomes the rallying point for the differences of lifestyle and faith as Mrs. Njoku negotiates her young and stubborn daughter's desires to lead a life much different from her own. We see her go through a gamut of emotions, from being shocked, to mocking her daughter's choices, to feeling disappointed and even insulted by her—Sochienne calls her “a fat bourgeois, a dilettante dancing while Nigeria was failing, as though she could somehow solve the country's problems by depriving herself of a manicure!” Acutely aware of how notions of postcolonial modernity might translate across cultural contexts, Rao's witty and thoughtful performance uses gestures, movement and tonal inflections to contemporize Adichie's story for an urban Indian audience. The reference to faith as a box of multicoloured wrappers in a purple Quality Street chocolate box—the quintessential totem of the well-travelled Victorian taste—translates as diversity and difference in the Indian context, an idea deeply challenged by discourses of Indian-ness in the present. The politically dominant view that

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conflates modernisation with westernization and asserts atavistic sectarianism and majoritarian impulses at the cost of principles of inclusivity embedded in our liberal democratic constitution are immediately called into question. Sochienne's choice of the family country house over an "overpriced gilded hall" in the city for her wedding or ancestral gods over catholic rosary rings in nostalgia for older beliefs, negotiating the divide between African traditions and an alienated modernity.

*Quality Street* stands apart from the performance oeuvre of Maya Krishna Rao that spans over four decades of theatre making, performing, teaching, and activism. Maya's practice combines years of Kathakali training with the topicality of street theatre and the comic edginess of political cabaret and burlesque, inflected with innovative techniques of sound and camera. Her shows have developed from everyday images on the street and in newspapers (*Deep Fried Jam*, 2002), reinterpreting deeply complex epic and canonical literary characters (*Ravanama*, 2011 and *Lady Macbeth Revisited*, 2010), social tragedies and instances of violence against women (*Om Swaha*, 1979, *Heads are Meant for Walking Into*, 2005, and *Walk*, 2012). In all of these performances, Maya created performance texts rather than building on already-scripted material.

Performed as single actor shows, often staged in collaboration with media artists, sound designers, and musicians, her work has a deep, affective impact brought about by inducing the spectator at levels material, physical, and emotional. The characters in these pieces, their personal and social world, physical and psychological space, are reconstructed to speak to our political, social, and moral sensibilities, albeit never



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directly but obliquely. Maya weaves together a conundrum of sound, image, media, word, song, action, noise, silence, movement, and stillness. We are never allowed to settle into the humour or pathos she creates, but are required to constantly struggle to join the dots she splutters around. *Quality Street* departs from this repertoire that has in the recent years focused more on staging encounters with the audience on the street, in university campuses and protest marches, and marks a return to her earlier body of work, where written texts (mostly short stories) were the basis of performance, and interpersonal relationships took center stage (Brecht's *The Job* and Manto's *Khol do*).

A simple mise-en-scene anchors us into the world of *Quality Street*: a small wooden table and chair draped with a lace table cloth are placed squarely in a small room to elude to the comfortable security of the English tea-table. A shining tea urn, porcelain tea cups with saucer, a flower vase with lilies are atop the table, leaving the space ahead of it bare for movement. *Quality Street* has been performed previously on large proscenium stages where the set up remained roughly the same, but this prefabricated twin-room space in the erstwhile Public Works Department building in Panjim constricts the performance area even further, drawing the spectator physically closer to the actor, enabling a closer view of each facial, bodily, and vocal nuance. She enters the stage moving fervently to the tune of Prince Nico Mbarga's iconic highlife classic, "Sweet Mother," walking behind the traditional Kathakali curtain handheld by two stage attendants. Used in Kathakali to introduce the character's inner state or condition

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(*bhava*) before the details of the emotional state are worked out in movement and gesture, this interpolation of rigorous rhythmic movement of the feet and hands continues. As the curtain is lowered we see a bedecked woman, holding her gaze towards us, strutting about the stage in high heels, eventually settling down to sit well poised, sipping tea.

As our conversation after the show over rounds of Goan pav, prawn fry, and local beer unfolds, Maya recounts the making of *Quality Street*. The proposal by the Sangeet Natak Akademi to make a performance on African writing as part of Commonwealth Games in Delhi in 2010 led her to read Adichie and choose this story to perform. Her acquaintance with Sabaina Jurschewsky, a Ghanian expat in Delhi who had lived in Lagos, transformed into a friendship through the making as she introduced Maya to the unknown pockets of the city where African culture lived and breathed. Visits to inner lanes, unfathomable floors, and corners of INA market in Delhi, selling lengths of unstitched fabric of bold African prints in cotton and brocade became the exciting beginning of researching Nigerian culture. The traditional wrap-around skirt, called *iro*, in pistachio green and the matching loose-fitting blouse (*buba*) worn with the head wrap (*gele*) were stitched by Sabaina herself. The persona of the Nigerian matriarch was replete with the thick west African accent learnt from Sabaina. She carefully alternates this with the distinct tonality of the American “r” to differentiate the wealthy widow from her foreign-returned daughter.

“A new accent,” posits Maya, “is alien and constructed externally, much like Kathakali where meaning is made

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outside.” During the hour-long, non-stop battle between Mrs. Njoku’s settled ways of being and her daughter’s newfound understanding of an unequal world made even more unpalatable by her mother’s bourgeois tastes and mannerisms, Maya switches smoothly between the disconcerted mother and her disapproving daughter, following Brecht, reading “not into the role, but *out* of the role.” She never fully “becomes” the Nigerian matriarch but captures the “Nigerian-ness” of the character. She does not become but stands beside the character, empathising with her, demonstrating the complexity of her emotions, inviting the spectator to question what they see and hear. The costume accentuating her proportions to “appear” Nigerian, the acquired accent and body language, overdone gait and poise, are not perfected to impress real or authentic behaviour but layered onto the body of the actor. Maya circumvents falling into the precarious position of creating a stereotype in this material embodiment, a cardboard version of a Nigerian woman who acts in staple and predictable ways. She instead presents a three-dimensional character who behaves in unexpected, vulnerable, and nuanced ways. And since she keeps slipping in and out of the character, as audience, we never see her as the Nigerian mother but as the actor who plays the Nigerian mother and her daughter. The farcical and disjointed manner of the staging combines strategies of emotive explication borrowed from Kathakali where the physical propels the inner world of the character rather than the other way around. Maya’s use of codified gestures and movement from Kathakali break down the entire performance. Hers is a trained and compelling physical apparatus forestalling any

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collapse of the actor's identity into the character.

"I am terrorised by the text," Maya shares in a trepidatious tone as we meander from the show to discussing her process of developing a performance. She is not interested in playing the "message" embedded in the text but making the text reverberate with her own critical social stance as an artist in the present. Self-designed processes of improvisation in her studio permeated by sound, object, and text—with often the camera as her sole companion—set her on a journey of surprise and discovery of the characters she embodies. That the text is neither primary nor indispensable, but just one of the materials of performance is made amply clear as she declares the centrality of that other element one cannot miss noticing in her work; "there is no escape from music," she says. Equally compelling is her assertion about the need for comedy in the present unsettling and divisive political environment. "If I can't make comedy, then I am not doing anything," she declares. Distinguishing between laughter and comedy, we locate in the latter a recognisable quality of the everyday, which allows for a double-edgedness and ferocity with which a point can be made. Comedy propels a spontaneous combustion of audience laughter, theatre material, and performance to produce affinities between the actor and her audience and amongst audience members. The possibility of comedy to forge deep connections with others through the transformative potential of shared laughter make it a form of social activism carried out on stage. In *Quality Street*, Maya Rao uses this radical potential of comedy to propose acceptance and appreciation of diversity.

## Between Myth and Reality: Problematics of Representation, Agency, and Consumption

A lean young woman runs urgently on a spot on the dimly lit stage. A voice over loudly cries out: “I see no reason to live in humiliation. Neither as man nor as woman. What a terrible misery my life has been.” Running tirelessly looking around herself, yet not getting anywhere, she soon stumbles and falls down.

This is the opening and our introduction to Shikhandi, the central character in the eponymous production *Shikhandi: The story of the In-Betweens*, inspired by the epic Mahabharata. Staged at the proscenium theatre in Kala Academy, Panjim, *Shikhandi* begins promisingly enough on a frenetic note, expressing the inner turmoil of its protagonist, and soon enough transforms into a witty, woolly playground of seven actors who regale the muddled parody of Shikhandi/ Amba’s story. Performed in English by an ensemble of agile, transfixing, and hyper-fluent Bombay based performers, *Shikhandi* was first penned by its director Faezeh Jalali in 2010 and was developed over a year of making in 2014 with the actors. The play spans two lifetimes of Amba and Shikhandi, focusing on her second life of female to male transformation from Amba to Shikhandi in order to avenge Bhishma, the undefeatable warrior and teacher of the Kauravas who had abducted Amba and forced her to marry his brother, Vichitravirya. On her resistance to do so, not only was she rejected by the man she loved for having come in contact with another man (Bhishma), but also by Bhishma himself who

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refused to marry her owing to his oath of remaining celibate. Amba resolved to avenge her humiliation at the hands of Bhishma and sought Shiva's intervention to become the cause of his death in her next life as Shikhandi, herself a woman who is brought up like a man to fulfil Amba's unfulfilled pledge. By the account of its director and actors, the performance is a tongue-in-cheek retelling of Shikhandi's dilemma of who she is, by extension exploring the issue of identity broadly. As Faezeh further expounds in an interview, "The play is not only about gender and sexuality. It's about us, existing in the in-between. So we are talking about mortals and Gods and the Yakshas, who are also the in-betweens."

Several moments of first-person narration, codified movements from the classical dramatic form of Koodiyattam from Kerala—the oldest surviving Indian theatrical tradition—and Kalaripayattu, a martial art form also from Kerala, are interspersed with witty verbal retorts on contemporary political issues. References to Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, which criminalises homosexuality and brings forth questions of consent, sexual agency, and moral policing, along with punchy-raunchy jokes, abound as the story of Shikhandi unfolds. The eclectic live score played onstage by accompanying musicians frequently bounces from classical to the iconic title song of B. R. Chopra's popular 1988 teleseries *Mahabharat*. While the narrative and textual material is drawn from its voguish interpretation by the best-selling mythologist and management guru Devdutt Pattanaik, the added frisson comes from Faezeh's rhythmic English prose-writing, which is witty and sharp, yet frequently slips into the stand-up

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comic gab of hyperbole and humour. The proscenium stage is organised simply: two vertical wooden structures about six feet in height are placed upstage on either side of the stage decorated with an intricate Kolam-like bamboo mesh and coconut brooms. The actor-narrators occupy the space over these vertical levels and the floor space below, in front of them. Shiva, when evoked by the angry Amba seeking divine retribution for Bhishma descends from the skies using aerial silks and acrobatics. Actors keep slipping in and out of formal dance-like postures and movements into mundane walks and stances. The use of movement, music, and choreography from traditional performance genres grounds *Shikhandi* in an existing heritage of theatrical story telling traditions that regularly reinterpret epic texts.

The performance, however, fails to negotiate the tension between respectful appreciation and critical questioning that is the hallmark of this tradition. Ridicule, or a refusal to take canonical symbolic representations seriously can be an effective form of questioning, even resistance to existing oppressive structures, notwithstanding the challenge such a strategy poses. *Shikhandi: The story of the In-Betweens* re-presents the mythic characters in the same oppressive patriarchal and feudal conditions of the ancient and celebrated myth, while simultaneously consolidating the myth as an unquestionable source of wisdom. The tongue-in-cheek retelling is so loyal to the myth that it never departs from the resilient stereotypes it creates in the first place. The laughter that these complex mythic characters and their stereotypical behaviours evoke does not stem from any emotional or

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cultural identification with them, but from a flattening of these characters into cardboard versions of an imagined past, reinforcing gender stereotypes for a modern neoliberal audience. Moving methodically in neatly choreographed movement across the stage, poised and confident, they are all dressed in nondescript, androgynous, and identical costumes—single shoulder-strapped, waist-length bustiers, and knee length dhotis in solid black and white with the traditional amulet and lingam (the phallic representation of Shiva) in bold red and brocade tied around the waist. They are all the same, images of the composite androgynous, *Ardhanarishvara*, man-woman with no originality or difference. The in-betweenness of one is the same as that of the other, the position of neither corresponding to anything in the real world. Shikhandi, the first born to Dhrupada and elder sibling of Draupadi, is a woman brought up like a man. Her gender is not her choice but a given. The performance introduces us to Shikhandi and then leads us back into her past life as Amba, a woman who, following Shiva's blessing, kills herself so that she can be the cause of Bhishma's death in her next life. No revisions are made to the popular retelling of the myth, re-inscribing Shikhandi in a web of unknown circumstances, pre-destined fate, confusion, and self-denial. She does not know why she feels one way and has to act another, or why she looks like a woman and is not accepted as one. The persistent questioning of herself and her sexual identity is reflective of a heterosexual anxiety about sexual desire, identity, and social acceptability with regard to queer people. Shikhandi repeatedly asks, "*What did I do to deserve this?*" or "*Who am*



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I?” One cannot help but wonder whose questions these are and whose anxiety they represent; are they reflective of Shikhandi’s own self-questioning or of the heteronormative projection of doubt and fear onto the image of the “other”? Not only do these declamations undermine her ability to define herself outside of a heteronormative framework, but they also reduce her to a repertoire of stereotypical bodily behaviours. She is seen straining after masculine postures and gestures, which are often a source of humour: She flexes her muscles often, beats her chest and thighs, wears a wicked smile and flamboyance only to become uncomfortable and disown them moments later. She is mocked and harassed with a slew of abuses: “Goy,” “Birl,” “Girb,” and the more familiar “hijra,” “chakka,” and “sixer.” She evokes pity and laughter and is neither woman nor man enough—she is simply “it.” This heterosexual representation of the queer body is inadequate, inferior, and often humorous, appearing to normalise queer stereotypes and legitimize heteronormativity.

Shikhandi is positioned as one of the earliest transgender characters and is referenced in all publicity material of the production as such. The attempt to mythologise non-heteronormative identities in the present by tracing them all the way back to the Mahabharata loses sight of the complexity of the present. While the word “trans” implies movement and fluidity, a sense of crossing over and beyond, its gender aspects are embedded in the contemporary context—that of the visibility and representation of a broad category of sexual minorities. The problematic of the specific “crossing over” that Shikhandi undertakes is completely elided. The rarity of

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a woman magically transforming into a man, rather than the other way around by swapping her sexual organ with another marginalised character from the myth, Sthuna, who is neither god nor mortal but a *yaksha*, is made immaterial. Trans here stands not for a hybrid identity comprising the archetypal images of femininity and masculinity but more specifically a woman who is failed twice, first as Amba and then as Shikhandi, disparaged, inadequate as women to fulfil their desires within the patriarchal and feudal structures of the myth. Shikhandi is passive, unformed, and lacks character. Her undefined sexuality makes her an absence. She takes no decisions. Things happen to her and people struggle to make her what they want her to be. We never know if she desires to become a man or whether her venture into the forest where she finds the yearning *yaksha* is foreordained. The homoerotic moment between her and her newlywed wife in the previous scenes are never allowed to develop into an exploration of love and desire and are played to humour the audience into dis-believing that very possibility. In the struggle of control over the central female character, the lesbian must be defeated by her embodiment of male-ness. The problematic of re-telling or re-writing mythological narratives emerges when they are cast (again) into a patriarchal model and characters trapped within events not of their making, or even knowing, playing parts in struggles that are not theirs. Shikhandi has been re-inscribed into the mythic magical space where she will act in expected or preordained ways and will ultimately bequeath her personhood to fulfilling Amba's unfulfilled desire, who in turn is only crucial so that she can come back to haunt Bhishma and

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change the course of the great war of the Mahabharata. Amba too is, after all, only a cog in the wheel that stops or spins on the command of Krishna. The myth becomes a vehicle through which violence and execution of power are materialised and replayed in the public memory through physical manifestations on stage. Subversive political and sexual content on stage generally receives the least disapproval when couched within the larger affirmation of a hegemonic myth like the Mahabharata. The politics of unmasking women of ancient mythologies in contemporary performance must push beyond creating stereotypical images of sexuality to reveal how these, far from expressing timeless truths, are in fact heavily mediated by the values of the patriarchal and feudal structures that they are embedded in.

As the 500-seat capacity Kala Academy auditorium in Goa swells into a packed house pulsating with an entertained audience during the 90-minute long performance, one is compelled to think about sexual agency of the marginalised in a neoliberal capitalist culture embodied by the festival site and the forms of representation that free-market driven entertainment takes. The production, reception, and success of the production carries itself on the female body offered for public consumption through comfortable and predictable viewing experiences. While it is heartwarming to witness the rare site of serpentine queues of impatient audiences awaiting the performance outside theatre houses, the persisting discomfort from the raucous laughter, rounds of applause, and the ensuing standing ovation inside beg the question: What exactly affects audiences to such a display of approval

and appreciation? Who or what are we laughing at and what purpose does it serve?

### **III. Between Live and the Mediated: Exploring Spatial Experiments with Pinter's Dumb Waiter**

We sit in a small, freshly painted room. Three LCD screens hang on the wall in front. Two doors, one on the right to enter from. The same to exit. An adjoining room to the left, only partially visible through the wire mesh and a metal frame door, demarcating the performance space from us.

Screen 1: Frontal view of the adjoining room. Piles of cartons against the walls. Two men. One sits on a block reading a newspaper, the other lies carelessly on a sleek mattress on the floor.

Screen 2: Top-down view of the same room. A narrow corridor with two doors.

Screen 3: Top-down view of the audience as they occupy the room. It becomes suitably oppressive as 70-odd people are huddled inside.

Slow-paced, mundane actions unfold in front of us on the screens, each giving us a different view of the room captured by a slew of CCTV cameras. A compelling aesthetic of surveillance, complacency, and tedium surrounds us in this small windowless room that precludes the possibility of any other view. The room is neither fully operational nor entirely defunct—there is a lavatory that doesn't flush, a stove but no gas, it seems like the kitchen of a restaurant but without the wherewithal needed. It plays host to mundane

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conversations that lay bare the differences of class, age, and experience between the two men. The spatiality of this room, transformed from the ordinary into the exceptional, where unexpected events play out is defined by the movement of a contraption—a dumb waiter that obliterates any conventional notions of privacy, anonymity, and agency. We watch the action on the screen even as it plays out live right next to us, not entirely visible to everyone equally or entirely. There is no unmediated access to “the real” here, it is only through mediation that we access and know the world. We have been programmed into safety and complacency in a carefully crafted environment. We look at the screen to look into the room, while we are also continuously being looked at, being watched. The distance created between the audience, physically oriented not towards live action but the events playing out on the screens is a crucial aspect of the production’s scenography. There is no stage, no auditorium, no backstage—no leeway for any space other than this one.

In its fourth run in two years since its conception by Tushar Pandey, *Dumb Wait-err* is the Varhadi-Dakhini- Hindi adaptation of the well-known Harold Pinter play *The Dumb Waiter*. Performed by Nitin Bhajan and Purnanad Wandhekar, the performance has transformed from a site-specific work developed in the kitchen of a small bachelor pad in suburban Mumbai to being a “site-responsive” work that consciously dialogues with and complements the structural and historical aspects of the space where it is performed. A conversation with Tushar after the show reveals that the old PWD office building in Panjim, acquired recently by the festival, had to be massively

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reconditioned to create the performance space, designed by scenographer Asheish Nijhawan. One main wall had to be broken, wall cabinets and door frames removed, and the room painted afresh. Installing ten CCTV cameras in this bare space created a *mise-en-scene* of entrapment and alienation that advances the theme of surveillance. The use of LCD screens, the constructed frontality of the view, the makeshift wall, the smell of fresh paint, along with wire mesh and carton boxes, creates a palpable reality that disallows the audience from settling into habitual routines of spectatorship or responses that tend to otherwise pass into abstraction in the moment of experience. Written in 1957 and performed for the first time at the Hampstead Theatre Club in London in 1960, *The Dumb Waiter* is one of the British Nobel laureate Harold Pinter's best-known plays, one that embodies his unique blend of farce, absurdity, and realism. It achieved the rare distinction of being adapted for popular TV by ABC in 1987. Centered on the monstrosity of two hired assassins, Ben and Gus, who are in a room awaiting instructions of a new assignment from their mysterious employer, the play limps on with a foreboding atmosphere clouded by small talk and argumentativeness. Between Gus's unceasing questions and Ben's exasperated repartee, their meaningless babble is both comical and terrifying, hiding beneath it a growing sense of anxiety and vulnerability. They debate odd topics, read the newspaper, struggle to make tea, bully each other, discuss cricket, struggle to light a cigarette, guess who their next target might be, move back and forth to the lavatory, check their pistols, and violently disagree with each other. All this until some matchsticks arrive mysteriously from

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under the door, followed by random food orders carried down by the dumb waiter and eventually, instructions on the phone. Presented through an inventive use of sound and a hatch in the wall emanating light and reflecting it onto the actors faces, the dumb waiter suggests a movement of objects between this room and a place above it. The mechanism of the dumb waiter is itself analogous to the operations of surveillance, control, and self-regulation. It signals authority and power—faceless, all-pervasive and working, quite literally, from above Gus and Ben’s heads—present in the room despite the absence of the boss. As the frequency of the dumb waiter’s movements increases, the atmosphere of unpredictability of the next moment builds. The assassins recall and repeat the action score or a sequence of pre-rehearsed actions distilling the meaning of the text into action. Looking at the audience directly through the wire mesh, they mechanically replay the sequence of the killing succeeding the impending encounter, divesting the act of any moral or emotional baggage. They function in unison, co-dependent on each other, despite all differences that underlined their conversation so far. As Gus goes out to prepare for the encounter, the dumb waiter brings down instructions for Ben to carry out his task. He calls out to Gus and points his weapon at the entryway from which, without either of them knowing, Gus stumbles in. Pinter’s play ends ambiguously with the two men facing each other in extended silence. The capture of life by an unknown power, the reality of victimization of the individual stripped of his humanity, dominated by and subservient to mechanized systems of control is made complete.

## QUALITY STREET, SHIKHANDI, DUMB WAIT-ERR

Harold Pinter's plays have long served as grueling reminders of the human condition of the times in which they are read and performed. In the political climate of post-war Britain, Pinter's plays participated in the multi-vocal debates about insufferable human reality and its representation. They echoed a breakdown of the idyllic world view of relationships, meaning, and truth, giving way to a world where words belied meaning and actions were incomplete, defying any closure or resolution. The dominant critical lens put on Pinter's plays, along with those of Samuel Beckett and others, have been those of the absurd and the "comedy of menace," which philosophically and structurally depart from traditional realist and naturalist traditions with emphasis on explanation, plot, and deterministic action. In Pinter's theatre, there is no logical syllogism between words and action on stage; rather, a deliberate sundering of cause and effect, deafening silences, and long "Pinteresque" pauses that direct us to the performative power of language. Following Pinter, language is not only the carrier of meaning but also a mode of its obfuscation. To be able to use language and be heard is a question of power. It is almost impossible to separate what is being said from how it is being said, bringing us to the relationship between form and content in theatre. Reflecting on the two-year-long process of rehearsing and previewing *Dumb Wait-err*, Tushar rationalises the choice of working with a canonical dramatic text rather than devising one that accommodates a pre-figured form. He says in a personal interview that "it provides a ready, well-crafted ground on which to build. Form is not the driving force here. It



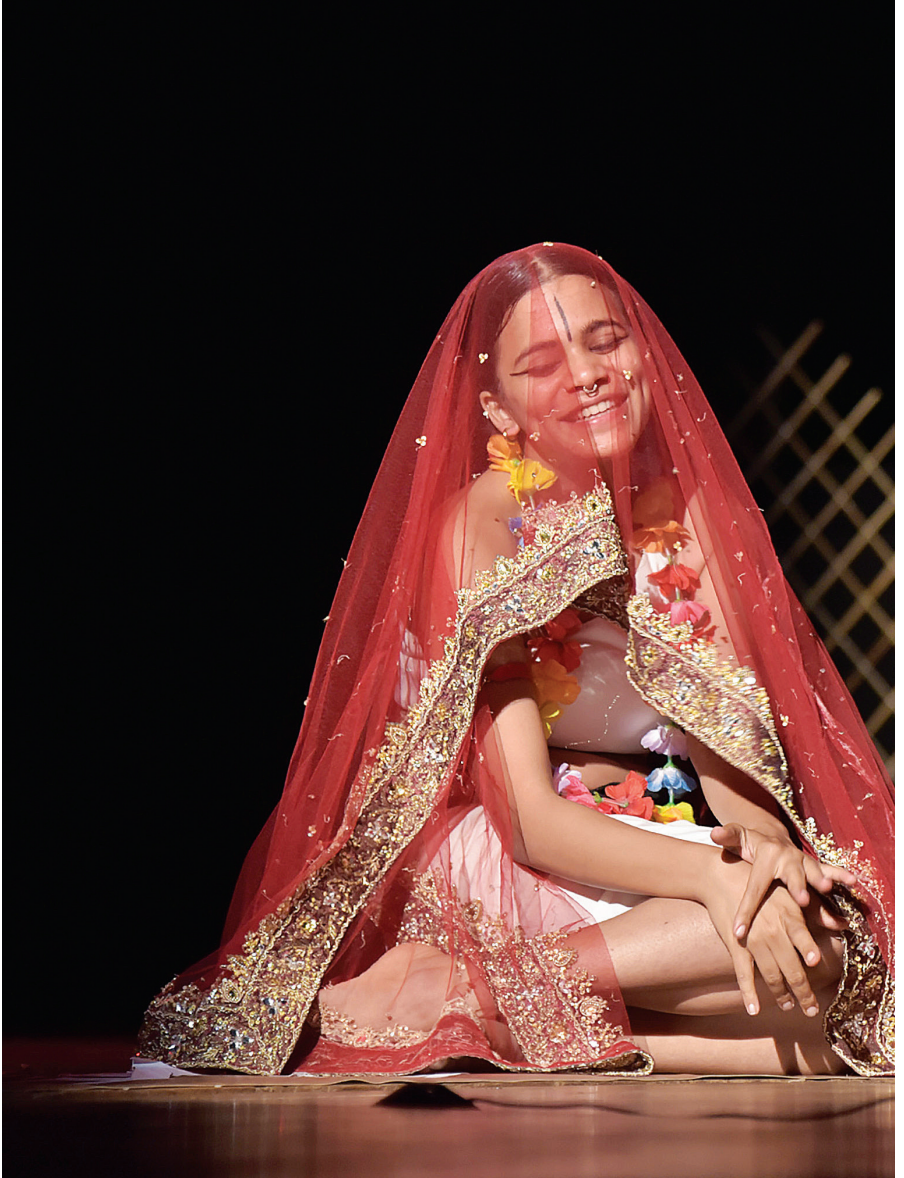
## PROJECTS / PROCESSES

is driven by the content of the play.” The relationship between form and content forged here is instructive, particularly from the point of view of reinterpreting canonical western plays in contemporary times. Not only does content drive form, but the non-textual aspects of space also drive the content, in turn affecting the form. Form and content are therefore intrinsically connected here with the site of performance and impacted by it in concrete terms. The site-responsive nature of this performance enabled it new interpretative possibilities. *Dumb Wait-err* reimagines the horror of the final encounter by doing away with the ambiguity of Pinter’s text. Ben packs his bag and pulls out his revolver before exiting through the audience area. Following his departure, we watch him on the LCD screen shooting Gus in the narrow corridor before leaving. Two stage hands enter the corridor and move Gus’s dead body against the wall, covering it with plastic and stacking cartons over it so that no trace of their final encounter remains. The spectator is no longer a passive observer or a voyeur but made part of the act, as witness and a potential victim who can be both touched and seen. The refurbished PWD office space is organised and used for an intimate experience of this menacing situation in which we are both culpable and vulnerable. The show derives from the social context of our complicity to propose a chilling aesthetic expression making it hard for us to respond to what we see, hear, and feel.



















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### Captions

**Pages 36 & 37 (top) -**

Images from *Quality Street* performed at the PWD Complex in Panaji, Goa on December 21st and 22nd at Serendipity Arts Festival 2017

**Page 37 (bottom) -**

Image from *Shikhandi* performed at the Dinanath Mangeshkar Auditorium in Panaji, Goa on December 21st at Serendipity Arts Festival 2017

**Pages 38 & 39:**

Image from *Shikhandi* performed at the Dinanath Mangeshkar Auditorium in Panaji, Goa on December 21st at Serendipity Arts Festival 2017

**Page 40 (top):**

Image from *Shikhandi* performed at the Dinanath Mangeshkar Auditorium in Panaji, Goa on December 21st at Serendipity Arts Festival 2017

**Page 40 (bottom) -**

Image from *Dumb Wait-err* performed at the PWD Complex in Panaji, Goa on December 21st at Serendipity Arts Festival 2017

**Page 41 -**

Images from *Dumb Wait-err* performed at the PWD Complex in Panaji, Goa on December 17th & 18th at Serendipity Arts Festival 2017

## Biographies

**Gargi Bharadwaj** is a theatre practitioner and a research scholar based in Delhi, India. She graduated from the National School of Drama, Delhi with a specialization in Theatre Techniques, Design and Direction (2007) and completed MAIPR (2008-2010) from University of Amsterdam and University of Warwick. As a theatre practitioner between her formal education she directs performances, conducts theatre workshops and curates theatre festivals. Her doctoral research focuses on state cultural policy and issues of cultural governance and citizenship in India. Other areas of interest are genealogies of contemporary theatre, performance curation, representation and self-articulations of women in public culture. She has presented research papers at conferences in University of Lisbon, University of Warwick, University of Cape Town and University of Hyderabad. She teaches courses on history/historiography of performance and practice based research methodology in Performance studies at SCGE, Ambedkar University, Delhi.

**Maya Krishna Rao** is a theatre artist who has worked on and off stage for the last thirty-five years. She is particularly known for her solo performances that have a distinctive form and style. She collaborates with other artists to create multimedia shows that she directs and performs in herself. She does stand-up comedy built on current political events and popular issues. Some of her celebrated performances are, *Khol Do*, *The Job*, *A Deeper Fried Jam*, *Heads Are Meant For Walking Into*, and *Ravanama*. The most recent was *Walk* - created in response to the horrific gang rape in a moving bus and eventual tragic death of Jyoti Singh in 2012. For several years Maya taught acting at the National School

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of Drama, Delhi. Maya has specially designed and taken theatre programmes to schools and conducted workshops for teachers on how to use drama as a teaching methodology in the classroom. Until recently, she was professor at Shiv Nadar University, where she designed a Diploma programme called TEST - Theatre for Education and Social Transformation, a first in any institution of higher education in India

**Faezeh Jalali** is the founder of the theatre collaborative FATS Thearts in Mumbai. She is an actor, director, producer, choreographer, teacher, runner, and an occasional writer and aerialist. She received her MFA in Performance, from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville's Clarence Brown Professional Actors' Training Programme and her Bachelor of Arts in Theatre Arts (Acting and Directing) from Beloit College, Wisconsin. Faezeh has been part of several plays in India and abroad including, *I Don't Like It, As You Like It* (directed by Rajat Kapoor) for which she won Best Supporting Actor (female) at the META 2017, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Tim Supple), *Arms and the Man* (Naseerudin Shah), and *Pericles* (Joe Haj), among others. She has directed *Jaal* (by Annie Zaidi) for Writer's Bloc 3, *All in the Timing* (by David Ives), *Re-Lay* (adapted by Abhishek Thakur), *Dream Catcher* (by Vijay Nair, co-directed with Trishla Patel), *Objects in the Mirror are Closer Than They Appear* (co-directed with Choiti Ghosh), and directed a monologue *I'm Every Woman*, for Rage's One on One 2, as well as *TAKE 35* (a solo by Anuradha Menon) for the Park New Festival 2017.

Her play *07/07/07* won Best Ensemble Cast at the Mahindra Excellence in Theatre Awards, 2016. Faezeh is the recipient of the Tanveer Natyadharme Puraskar 2017 for her contribution to the field, as well as the recipient of the Dubey-Tendulkar Theatre Fellowship, 2017.



## **Projects / Processes: Volume V**

Theatrical Explorations of Contemporaneity

by Gargi Bharadwaj

Purush

by Ranjana Dave

Towards New Beginnings

by Ranjana Dave

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