

A captivating exhibition uncovers surprising links between theatre and nation building

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***Re:Public* explores Delhi's forgotten theatres, their connection to the city's architecture, and how they shaped the capital's cultural identity.**

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The First Republic Day Parade, January 26, 1950; Modern digital reprint from medium format negative | Photo Credit: Homai Vyarawalla

What unites the Republic Day parade with the history of Delhi theatre? No, that's not a trick question. It's an exciting thought experiment that formed the basis of a recent exhibition called *Re:Public*, a selection of visual and textual works from the Alkazi Theatre Archives and the Alkazi Collection of Photography, presented at Triveni Kala Sangam, Delhi, earlier in February.

Running parallel to the India Art Fair, *Re:Public* (January 27 to February 4), was a marvel of both thoughtful research and curatorial imagination. Like a good academic paper, it was filled with things one didn't know and had a serious subtitle—*Theatre and Architecture in Central Delhi: 1950s-1970s*. But unlike an academic paper, it had objects arranged for viewing on an actual stage, the Triveni Amphitheatre—and you could choose your own route through it.

Also, while most of the material presented by the show was archival, *Re:Public* seemed less interested in laying down a chronological timeline than in conjuring up an immersive sense of the past, a fine-grained sense of a “then” that might also illuminate the “now”. How did the newly-forged Indian republic imagine theatre, and how did theatre, in turn, imagine the new nation? Within the broad contours of history, then, what the exhibition concentrated on was spatial—mapping the geography of Delhi as a site of theatre, and conceptual—opening up the very idea of what theatre is.

Aerial View of the Republic Day Parade in Delhi taken from the top of India Gate, 1951. Modern digital reprint from medium format negative | Photo Credit: Homai Vyarawalla

“‘Theatre’ refers to both dramatic practice (performance) and the building (architecture) housing it,” said the curatorial description. On cue, the show had old photographs and brochures from theatrical performances in Delhi, as well as architectural drawings, miniature three-dimensional models, and old and new photographs of the city’s theatre spaces. But the image that really brought the exhibition together was a painted street map of central Delhi, blown up in size, with the roads drawn in black on a bright yellow background.

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The map was historically and spatially correct in all details, but it was a piece of art, not of the archive. Not just because it was a present-day reproduction of an old-style tourist map of the city, but also because (as Alan Joseph from the Alkazi Theatre Archive told me), the artist, Satinder Singh, had replaced the monuments that are common in such maps with tiny sketches of Delhi’s theatres, or buildings that functioned as theatres, in the early years after Independence.

Each of these buildings was given a number on the map. To discover their names and histories one had to walk around the exhibition: peering at photographs, poring over captions, and scrolling through old play booklets on iPad. The experience was akin to completing a jigsaw puzzle: slow, delightful, and revelatory.

Theatres past

There were theatres past that I had never heard of, and ones that have been replaced by other structures—like the Defence Pavilion on Mathura Road, apparently torn down when Pragati Maidan was created in 1972, and the New Delhi Municipal Council (NDMC) hall on Sansad Marg, which was demolished in the 1970s so that the new headquarters of the NDMC could be constructed.

There were buildings that had not been conceived as theatres—like the 1912-built Constantia Hall, part of the Young Women’s Christian Association building on Ashoka Road; the famous Sapru House on Barakhamba Road, formally called the Indian Council of World Affairs, “a non-official, non-political and non-profit think tank registered under the Societies Act of 1860”, that had been inaugurated by Jawaharlal Nehru in May 1955; the Regal Building in Connaught Place, constructed by Sir Sobha Singh, the builder of much of Lutyens’ Delhi, and designed by Walter Sykes George, who was also the architect of St. Stephen’s College, the Himachal Pradesh Legislative Assembly and premier Delhi residential neighbourhoods like Lodhi Colony and Sujjan Singh Park.

One of the many wonderful photographs in the exhibition showed a mixed-race audience watching a play—apparently “a Modern Experiment”—at what was then Regal Theatre, not Regal Cinema.

There were the well-known auditoria like Shri Ram Centre, Kamani, LTG, or Shriram Bharatiya Kala Kendra that still allow the Mandi House area to think of itself as Delhi’s theatre hub, and theatres intended to shift that centre of gravity, like the Rabindra Rangshala, which didn’t really take off. Designed by architect Ajoy Bhardwaj in 1961, Rabindranath Tagore’s centenary year, Rabindra Rangshala used a natural “bowl” or depression in the ridge to create an 8,000 seater space that was meant to be the “world’s largest open-air theatre.” It has lain unused for decades now.

Rabindra Rangshala, 2024. Architect: Ajoy Bhardwaj | Photo Credit: Vijay Kumar

Also in the Mandi House area is what is perhaps the most important of Delhi's theatre spaces: the National School of Drama (NSD). I had always known that the NSD building is called Bahawalpur House, but never really thought much about it. It turns out that Bahawalpur House had also been designed by Walter Sykes George as the official Delhi residence of the Nawab of Bahawalpur. Since Bahawalpur was among the princely states that acceded to Pakistan, the building opened up for other uses after 1947, functioning as the American Library from 1969 to February 1974 before becoming the NSD.

Brochure, National School of Drama: A Brief History (Year Unknown) | Photo Credit: Anand Gupt Collection/Alkazi Theatre Archives

The *Re:Public* show mentioned these facts, but didn't dwell on them. It could have. The fact that India's National School of Drama has operated, pretty much since its beginnings, from a building named after a region in the Pakistani part of Punjab is a marker of the way the subcontinent's history impinges on the making of modern theatre in Delhi.

There are many more such markers. Speaking at the opening of the show, theatre practitioner and performance studies scholar Gargi Bhardwaj pointed out that in Calcutta or Bombay, theatre, "equipped with melodrama as its form", had to solicit paying audiences. In post-1947 Delhi, in contrast, state support—even if limited—freed theatre from the market, allowing it to experiment with modernism as it reached out to and helped create a new urban cultural elite.

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This modern theatre was also meant to be national, drawing on tradition and history. The NSD was perhaps the exemplar of this experiment, and although it has often been criticised for using Hindi as the language of the national, as Bhardwaj reminded the audience, it also opened up the idea of an Indian theatre by translating plays from multiple languages into Hindi.

Linking the past and the present

The other thing that the NSD did, especially under its founder-director Ebrahim Alkazi, was to locate the theatre of the new nation in the urban milieu of its capital city. As *Re:Public* pointed out, this sometimes meant staging plays about the historical or mythical past among its architectural ruins in New Delhi.

In the 1960s, Dharamvir Bharti's anti-war Hindi play in verse, *Andha Yug*, written in the years after Partition and set during the Mahabharata war, was staged twice: Alkazi first set it in the 14th century Tughlaq citadel of Feroze Shah Kotla and later among the remains of the 16th century Purana Qila, which was constructed under Humayun but is associated in local lore with the ancient Pandava city of Indraprastha.

In the 1970s, performances of Girish Karnad's masterful historical-political play, *Tughlaq*, also took place against the grand backdrop of Purana Qila. These performances were pivotal in creating a sense of belonging, linking the past and the present, among theatre-goers of Delhi. It seems no accident that both these plays were deeply political, exploring how the failings and foibles of rulers have translated into more hardships for the people.

Tughlaq, 1972; Playwright: Girish Karnad; Designed and directed by E. Alkazi; Venue: Purana Quila | Photo Credit: Ebrahim Alkazi Collection/Alkazi Theatre Archives

The word *republic*—denoting a form of government in which supreme power rests with the people via representatives chosen by citizens through vote—comes from the Latin *res publica* meaning “the common weal, a commonwealth, state, republic,” formed by joining *res* (“affair, matter, thing”) with *publica* (feminine of *publicus*, “public”). *Public*, originally used as an adjective meaning “relating to the community as a whole”, came to be used as a noun meaning the “general body of people constituting a nation, state, or community” in the 1600s and later, as “people in general”.

Fertile connections

It is these fertile connections—linguistic, socio-cultural and historical—that *Re:Public* drew on to powerful effect. It juxtaposed photographs of unforgettable theatrical experiences like *Tughlaq* and *Andha Yug* conducted on the stage of Delhi's monumental past with Homai Vyarawalla's large images from the 1950s of another kind of theatre, also produced by the Indian state—the Republic Day parade. Since the show opened in Delhi on January 27, just after Republic Day, it was deeply affecting to see Vyarawalla's gorgeous black and white images of the parade and the public framed by monuments of empires past—the Red Fort, Purana Qila, and the old Viceroy's House, now reclaimed as Rashtrapati Bhavan.

Sri Ram Centre for Performing Arts, 1968; Modern digital reprint from Pigment Print; Architect: Shiv Nath Prasad | Photo Credit: Madan Mahatta

I remember watching with my family an NSD repertory play called *Khubsurat Bahu* (where Shekhar Kapur first saw the talented Seema Biswas, and asked her if she would act in his film, *Bandit Queen*), as a teenager in the early 1990s. It was staged in the open-air Meghdoot Theatre, which, I learnt later, had been built by NSD students with their own hands, under Alkazi's directions.

Just before the performance began, a quiet buzz ran through the audience—L.K. Advani had walked in and taken his seat amongst us. At that time, Advani must have been fresh from that potent piece of political theatre he had devised and executed across the country: the Rath Yatra. Theatre can have consequences, for publics and republics. One hopes that its more responsible practitioners harness its power.

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