

## Serendipity Arts Festival 2024: Theatre Highlights

This year's edition will witness an array of theatre performances curated by **Sankar Venkateswaran & Quasar Thakore Padamsee**. Sankar Venkateswaran and Quasar Thakore Padamsee are influential figures in Indian theatre, known for their innovative work in performance and direction. Both curators are known for pushing boundaries, engaging audiences with socially relevant and thought-provoking themes, and using theatre as a tool for reflection and change. Their collaboration brings together their unique styles, resulting in innovative and meaningful performances.

### Performances curated by Sankar Venkateswaran & Quasar Thakore Padamsee:

- **Item:**

"Item", curated by Sankar Venkateswaran & Quasar Thakore Padamsee, examines the profound impact of societal conditioning on women's mental health. This play delves into the dichotomy between the idealised portrayal of women and their actual lived experiences. It explores the pressures of middle-class girls to fulfil traditionally masculine roles, leading to burnout, as well as the unrealistic beauty standards that objectify women.

Through storytelling and popular imagery, the play challenges patriarchal expectations, highlighting how women are often denied self-love and forced to conform to societal norms. The narrative critically examines the roles imposed on women by society and how these contribute to mental health issues like anxiety and depression, offering a powerful commentary on identity, self-worth, and the struggle to balance societal expectations with personal fulfilment.

#### Address

C-340, Defence Colony,  
New Delhi-110024

#### Phone

011 4554 6121

#### Email

info@serendipityarts.org  
media@serendipityarts.org

#### Website

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The major objective is to explore and highlight how societal conditioning shapes an individual's psyche which can potentially lead to mental health issues like anxiety or depression through the development of inferiority or superiority complexes.

- **Glitch in the Myth:**

"Glitch in the Myth" challenges grand narratives and reveals the fascinating, subversive ways in which women might work to support and inspire one another—how they communicate, pass on traditions, create microhistories of their own, and overturn the system. While set in a mythical, fantastical world, it reflects on our current reality and exposes the dangers of privileging a single figure or narrative while forgetting what or who is left behind in the process.

This multidisciplinary departure from the oft-told Ramayana takes you on a journey from Mithila to Lanka with Sita, Sakhi, and a slew of characters both strange and familiar.

- **Do You Know This Song?:**

This theatre play, led by performer Mallika Taneja, explores themes of loss, grief, and the rediscovery of a forgotten voice. Over the course of a year, Mallika gathered interviews to piece together the story of a once-beautiful voice, now lost to time, and confined by domestic life. Through a combination of narration, song, and memory, the performer embarks on a journey to revive this voice—one that was loved but silenced.

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- **Mattiah 22:39:**

“Mattiah 22:39” is a powerful exploration of themes of love, loss, and betrayal. Two friends survive a terrible drought. As the drought worsens, their friendship is tested, and they begin to turn against each other. The play examines the transformative power of survival, how the desperate struggle to stay alive can radically alter a person's perspective, forcing them to confront life through a completely new lens, is explored in the play.

- **Table and Stools:**

“Table and Stools” focus on creating a space for people to feel listened to without offering any judgments or opinions. It gets a varied crowd that involves people of different socio-economic strata and across various ages. The stories narrated to the listeners are very different from each other, involving emotions of happiness, sadness, grief, guilt, excitement, and hope.

- **Gabriel's Trial:**

“Gabriel’s Trial” seeks to touch upon issues concerning history and identity, examining the excesses of colonialism through the perspective of an enslaved Gabriel who oscillates between multiple identities and regimes of surveillance. The story of Gabriel's life, enriched by those he met along the way, showcases the challenges of identity, the harsh realities of slavery and colonialism, and the enduring human spirit's fight for freedom and self-identity.

- **The House Blue:**

“The House Blue” is a narrative theatre performance that explores the multifaceted themes of home, migration, and the complex relationship between people and places.

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- **Shahi-Tukra:**

Inspired by countless maternal figures telling bedtime stories across generations “Shahi Tukra” explores themes of tenderness, caregiving, sacrifice and wellbeing. Through simple and raw stories of the earth, this is an invitation to be imaginative, curious and empathetic about the planet. Through a one-to-one experience, it focuses on the value of direct human interaction and touch in an accelerating world. Playful objects, smells, tactile materials and human touch are paired with an audio narrative to open doors for a sensory adventure.

- **Buried Treasures:**

Buried Treasures is a 1-hour musical retelling of a few renowned folk fables from India & Europe. This play features 4 short stories, including 'Harisarman' from the Panchatantra, Hans Christian Andersen's, 'The Little Match Girl', a confluence of an Indian folk tale - 'The Snake and the Golden Coin' and its European counterpart, 'The Goose & The Golden Egg', and Rabindranath Tagore's epic, 'Hidden Treasures'.

The play includes elements of theatre, live music, puppetry, shadow-puppetry, video projection & animation, all coming together to create an engaging live spectacle and was inspired by the similarities between fables from the Indian and European traditions. The show's soundscape includes Hindustani Classical Music, Western Classical Music, European Baroque songs, English, Italian and Spanish melodies, Indian and French Folk Music, and contemporary music. A few of our original songs are based on the poetry of Rabindranath Tagore.

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- **Zig Zags to Earth:**

“Zig Zags to Earth” is a shadow puppet play that came alive as the result of a lab accident. It combines the use of traditional-style shadow puppets with the use of an overhead projector. The play is a fascinating interplay of several experimental elements on all fronts, from narrative logic, visual language, to sound design.

- **Relief Camp:**

“Relief Camp” sheds light on the ongoing political and social crisis in Manipur, India, where the people have been caught in violent conflict since May 2023.

Featuring renowned Manipuri actor Heisnam Sabitri and a talented ensemble of artists from Kalakshetra, Manipur, the play focuses on the plight of displaced individuals living in relief camps within their own state.

Through a psychophysical theatre process, the play delves into the deep emotional and psychological trauma faced by the victims of this orchestrated violence. Based on real testimonies, it aims to portray the nuances of homelessness, highlighting the experiences of those who are now refugees in their own land.

This experimental work was developed through improvisation and reflects on the absurdity of violence while addressing the political economy of the crisis. The play seeks not only to document the victims' suffering but also to offer a healing process for both the warring communities and the audience, exploring the vital role theatre can play in times of turmoil.

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- **Be-Loved:**

“Be-Loved” is a kaleidoscopic exploration of queer love through an enthralling evening of theatre, music, poetry and movement. The piece draws from powerful writings from history and literature. It weaves a rich tapestry of the dynamic and evolving conversations the community is currently engaging with, in the form of songs, satire, musical storytelling, and more.

The play comprises writings of eminent queer writers, exploring the canvas of queerness across locations and diverse people in India. You can look forward to a delightful, vibrant, quick-paced evening, funny and moving, personal and political.

- **Sakunthalam:**

"Sakunthalam" is a groundbreaking production of the classical Sanskrit play by Kalidasa. This adaptation marks a historic moment in Indian theatre, as it is the first full-length production of a Sanskrit drama in Koodiyattom in over two centuries.

The play remains faithful to Kalidasa's original vision, recounting the story of Shakuntala, a young woman abandoned in the forest and raised by sages, who falls in love with King Dushyanta. Their love story, entangled with divine interventions, societal expectations, and emotional upheavals, explores themes of love, duty, and destiny.

- **Mudiyettu:**

Mudiyettu is a traditional ritual-theatre form of Kerala, performed in temples dedicated to Bhadrakali, symbolising the battle between good and evil.

Recognized by UNESCO, it has been preserved and revitalised by Keezhillam Unnikrishnan, who has performed Bhadrakali over 1,600 times. The

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performance, which dates back to before the 7th century, blends spirituality with social satire, as the demon Darika represents bad governance.

## Other Performances:

- **Stand Up Comedy Evening:**

Curated by Comedy Wagon, featuring artists Urooj Asfaq, Biswa Kalyan Rath, Shreeja Chaturvedi.

- **“The Bells” by 5 Angry Men:**

A multi-disciplinary show that has toured the globe for across three decades. A unique outdoor theatre extravaganza combining acrobatics, public installation, street performance, dance and music. The ‘bell ropes’ on which the ensemble perform are midi-witched and play the sounds of actual bells tuned to different pitches. All this allows the performers to alternate between intricate choreography, chamber music and aerial chaos - a physically arduous task, requiring enormous discipline from the performers.

- **Sa Pa Re Sa Pa Sa:**

Curated by Sananda Mukhopadhyaya, this is a story that explores the deep connection between humans and animals. It follows a family's chaotic reaction when a cobra suddenly appears in their home. As fear and confusion take over, an unexpected snake ally arrives to assist the cobra, adding a mystical layer to the narrative. This tale not only highlights the relationship between humans and wildlife but also evokes themes of coexistence, trust, and respect for nature's creatures.

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- **Departed Dawn:**

Featuring the work of artist Victor Thoudham, is a poignant performance that delves into the struggles of refugees, particularly inspired by the displaced Nepali-speaking Bhutanese community, the Lhotsampas. The play begins with a journey in search of a place called home, gradually exploring the hardships of building a new life amidst adversity. Just as a home is established, external forces threaten its very existence, leading to its destruction. At the crossroads of life, with memories overwhelming, the possibility of returning home fades, as everything is left in ruins.

- **Night Market of Stories:**

Curated by Preethi Athreya, transforms Panjim Market into a vibrant storytelling space, celebrating the lives of working women from various walks of life in the city. The project blends films and live interactions, where women traders and performers share their personal stories through objects from their everyday lives. Each item carries with it a unique memory, song, dance, or anecdote, creating intimate one-on-one encounters between the storyteller and the audience. Spoken in diverse languages such as Konkani, Marathi, English, and Hindi, the event creates a deeply personal narrative exchange, highlighting women who rarely have the opportunity to be unburdened or free during nighttime.

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There will also be a 3-day workshop led by Jean-Guy Lecat workshop called **Future Spaces for Theatre: A Journey Through Theatre and Architecture**, focusing on the exploration of space in theatrical performances. Participants will engage in practical exercises, improvisations, and discussions to deepen their understanding of spatial dynamics and its impact on performance. They will also explore the principles of set design, spatial storytelling, and the integration of architecture into theatrical productions through practical demonstrations and collaborative exercises. On the third day, an intimate work sharing session (open to the public) will take place, where workshop participants will share their work in small, unconventional spaces. This platform allows participants to experiment with spatial constraints and innovative staging techniques under Lecat's guidance.

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