

A modest affair

A mixture of dance, music, theatre and puppets, the 13th Performing Arts Festival by Rafi Peer Theatre Workshop organised in Lahore creates immense goodwill in the cultural circuit of the world

Festivals
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By Sarwat Ali

It was the sheer determination of the Rafi Peer Theatre Workshop that made the 13th Performing Arts Festival possible. The fear of a break in continuity of festivals held since 1992 drove the organisation even harder this time round. It eventually succeeded in managing to put this festival together in a combination of music, dance, theatre and puppetry.

In theatre, *The Last Man in Europe*, on the life of George Orwell, was performed for the Portrait Production by Michael McEvoy. Portrait Production is a one-man theatre. McEvoy is now a familiar figure in this festival, having taken part in the previous four with his one-person theatre based on the various important personalities from history. In his portrayal, he strives to bring forth the apparent contradictions in the lives of these famous people and how they attempt to resolve it. Both the sharpening contradiction in the character and its portrayal holds the audience's attention.

Orwell was basically a reporter who kept his eyes wide open and saw with apprehension the drift in the movement of the Left that took a course contrary to its spirit. He brought the same qualities of calling the spade a spade to his fiction and did not let it be clouded by ideological loyalties. The contradiction between his own reading of the turn of events and the cause that he held dear to his heart remained unresolved in his person and resulted in the universally acknowledged veracity of his writings.

The Iranian Puppet show, *Rolling Pumpkin*, by Javad Zolfaghari, was based on a quaint

folk tale about the mother who is travelling through the jungle to

visit her newly-married daughter. She is attacked by a wolf, a lion and a tiger but is let off on the promise that they could eat her up on her return when she would be fat after being well fed by the daughter. Instead, on her return, she hoodwinks them by hiding in a pumpkin. The three women who worked the puppets also acted as

the characters in their narration of the story. The puppets were more like props that helped the narrative. It was a simple straightforward show not as innovative as some of the other puppet performances that have been staged by Iranian puppeteers in previous festivals.

Serenades by Teatrino Giullare from Italy was a delightful show of rod puppets. Drawing heavily from Italian folk tales and archetypes it was a sheer comic treat — very Italian with gay abandon, full of duels and batons. The convoluted love story was largely in Italian with a sprinkling of a few English words.

Sylvia Barth from Germany had a show which was a combination of shadow puppets and life-size puppets which she worked with her hands.

In music, the sole traditional instrument featuring at the festival was pipa, the oldest Chinese stringed instrument. It was initially played horizontally with a plectrum but later was played vertically with five fingers and artificial fingernails. Now it can be played in over 50 kinds of styles. Luo Chao Yun from Taiwan played five compositions from ancient and contemporary times.

Shadi Alashoush from Syria played the oud. This instrument figures prominently in our poetry under the influence of middle eastern tradition. Playing a very old instrument, Shadi Alashoush has innovated a lot and differs from the traditional style of playing. He has

been influenced by flamenco, jazz, ethnic and eastern maqam.

The other performances were more reflective of the contemporary musical trends. 1001 Ways Music from Switzerland combined a thousand-year-old tradition with modern avant garde elements. It explored the roots of folk music from all over Asia, Africa and Europe. The genial use of electronic sounds together with archaic acoustics instrument provided an interesting combination.

Steve Tallis from Australia (his ancestors migrated from Macedonia) has been influenced by some of the biggest names in music like Dylan Thomas. He fused his music with Hatian, Voodoo, Sufism, and Tantric. He was particularly influenced by the blues and gospel.

Djatayu Band from Indonesia was also a mixture of pop, rock, a combination of western Indonesian and subcontinental music. It employed the electric guitar and Indonesian tabla and drum.

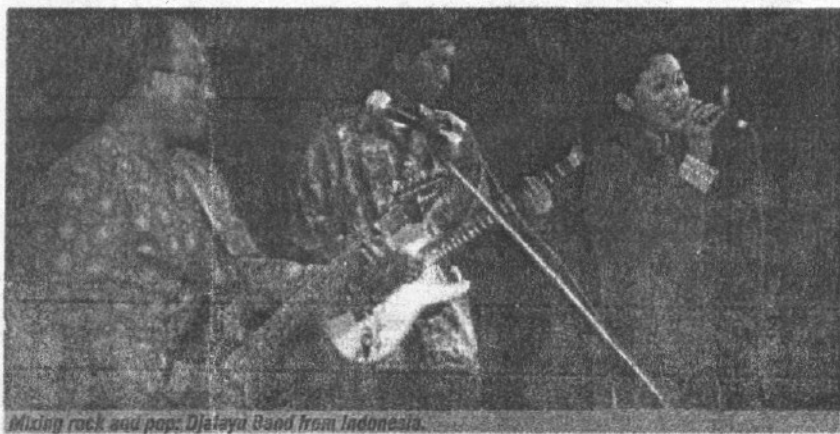
Among the local performers, Hamid Ali Khan of the Patiala Gharana delighted the audience with his virtuosity with classical forms and popular numbers. Shafqat Ali Khan of the Sham Chaurasi Gharana also sang both classical and semi-classical numbers. The performance packed with energy was of the group led by Sumar Lal Bheel and Krishen Lal Bheel from Cholistan as they brought the indigenous musical expression to the heartland of Pakistan.

This was a modest festival in comparison to the festivals which have been held under this banner. And the reasons are not difficult to guess. Many of the groups could not participate after showing their initial willingness because of travel advisories and many others could not get sponsorship because of this very reason even if they were all prepared to come to Pakistan.

The function of the bodies like Alhamra is more than met if the country's image is cleaned up and refurbished. The 13th International Festival of Puppets, Music, Dance and Theatre by the Rafi Peer Theatre Workshop has created immense goodwill in the cultural circuit of the world. The fact that it presents a face of the country not popularly known abroad is of immense advantage as there have been no attempts to present Pakistan as a society keen on promoting an image of a country that cultivates arts, literature and higher learning.

These festivals have been instrumental in bringing artists from various continents together and has broadened the artistic horizons of the audience. The fact that a festival of such a scale is held in one venue increases the possibility of interaction between various delegates from all across the globe. Alhamra Cultural Complex extends this opportunity and it turns out to be so much more fruitful for every one — artists, connoisseurs, organisers and audience.

The festival ends today.



Mixing rock and pop: Djatayu Band from Indonesia.