



Sanjna Kapoor

It is amazing that hardly 10-days go by without my meeting someone who has fond memories of my grandparents, Geoffrey and Laura Kendal, and their theatre company, Shakespeareana, that would annually visit schools across the country bringing the magic of Shakespeare, Bernard Shaw and other contemporary playwrights to school and college children. The experience of these performances left an indelible impression on a generation of English school-going children. This was in the 1950's and '60's. To quote from Geoffrey Kendal's book, *The Shakespeare Wallah*, "We were among the most rewarding audiences in the world; rows of intelligent Indian school girls gazed at the drama with startled absorption, drinking in every word and gesture."

I grew up with stories either of Shakespearean plays or my grandparents' amazing adventures across India. And these stories were always dotted with encounters with principals who lead outstanding educational institutions.

I went to a school in Bombay that was unique for its times – it was non-competitive - exams began after the VI STD, each child was looked upon individually and not as some trophy the school has to hold up for itself at the end of 12 years. I was fortunate. Fortunate that the school understood my drawbacks and my potential and just let me be.

I personally went through an extraordinary experience with regards to mathematics in the IX STD and this changed my life and my self-esteem! But that is another story. However, I do believe all this lead to my deep interest in education, and in particular what the arts can do to a child.

Twenty-two years ago I began a small programme (that has grown over the years) at Prithvi Theatre – Summertime with Prithvi Theatre, Creative Workshops and Plays for Children. This programme now comes under the new organisation, Junoon, and is called Arts at Play.

The aim of this programme was very clear – to develop an appreciative and discerning audience for theatre. To get kids to fall in-love with theatre. And the side effects were all the wonderful benefits in the development of a child and impacts on their personality, etc. But that was not central to our aims.

Today with Arts at Play, developing the value of the arts in our lives is central to our aims. So engaging with kids, and those who are their decision makers, i.e. their parents and schools, is critical for us. I shall not go into how we propose to do this in this article – but we have plans!

I give you this background because I feel it is necessary to know where I am coming from with my strong beliefs and assumptions with regards Arts in Education.

I think it is critical for us to articulate why we believe the arts are important in a child's education – what is it that they bring to the fore? How we believe this should happen and what it would take to enable this.

Alfred North Whitehead, the English mathematician who became a philosopher, says,

"Art is the imposing of a pattern on experience, and our aesthetic enjoyment is recognition of the pattern."



It is this aesthetic engagement that is critical, more so today than ever before, as critical as the joyful engagement with education.

Why do we believe the experience or understanding and appreciation of arts would make a difference to a child's life?

The arts have transformative powers. Arts, and especially performative arts have the ability to open up windows of new or different perspectives. Immersing you in experiential learning. It is these powers that need to be tapped to develop a more holistic person. It is quite terrifying the way our world today is churning out specialists who have no broad engagement, understanding or interest in the world at large. Steve Jobs once said, "A lot of people in our industry haven't had very diverse experiences. So they don't have enough dots to connect, and they end up with very linear solutions without a broad perspective on the problem. The broader one's understanding of the human experience, the better design we will have".

The arts can contribute to this non-linear way of thinking, of igniting the imagination. Albert Einstein said "Imagination is more important than knowledge..." and "It is a miracle that curiosity survives formal education."!!!!

So how are we to bring this world of the arts to our children? Through formal and non-formal education.

I believe we need to have a world where both these opportunities are available and accessible to us – the formal structures within the educational system and those without, which are public. But both have very

clear mandates of enhancing *exposure* to the arts and *experience* of the arts.

So how do we go about establishing these two distinct ways in which the arts will engage our youth? Within the educational institution framework? And in the public arena? What is to be done?

"An aesthetic experience is one in which your senses are operating at their peak, when you are present in the current moment, when you are resonating with the excitement of this thing that you are experiencing, when you are fully alive"

- Ken Robinson

A few years ago I was invited by the NCERT to a meeting that was looking at the syllabus

of theatre in schools, in response to the recent initiation of theatre in the curriculum. It was the most chaotic meeting I have ever been to! What shocked me the most was the complete lack of coherence between the groups dealing with their specific age-groups. There seemed to be no over arching philosophy or approach that was decided on what would work through all the various ages. Till date we wait to see this syllabus.

But there is something so terribly wrong at the core of this idea. If a school hires an art teacher or a music teacher – surely you can see if they can paint/draw or sing/play a musical instrument. And yet this does not guarantee an ability to ignite enthusiasm and interest in these subjects. When a school hires a drama teacher – what do they look for? And where is this person trained?

So I believe a huge emphasis needs to be given to the training of arts teachers – drama, art, music and literature too!

And a constant reconnect to why we want arts in schools. If we are clear that we want the arts to develop a child's creativity, exploration, innovation



– and through this to enhance the child’s confidence and self esteem, and broaden their world view, then we shall work a certain way. But if we want the child to be up on stage at every school function and to be part of every competition to win accolades for the school, then we sadly, have a very different approach.

I am of course interested in the former.

As well as having well trained arts teachers in educational institutions we need regular exposure of the professional arts to children, both through school engagements and outside.

There are countries where it is mandatory that schools take their children to the theatre every month! And likewise theatre groups that are funded by the state have to have had a certain number of school children attend their shows. It is built into government policy!

There are also countries where every neighborhood has a theatre, gallery and children’s theatre too!

There are three inspiring stories (all from the Southern Hemisphere!) that I shall share with you...

Brent van Rensburg & Laurence Esteres’ *Zip Zap Circus* in South Africa. Begun over 20 years ago, this circus school ensured that the kids in a really rough neighbourhood of Cape Town stayed away from sniffing glue and turning to crime by introducing them to the world of the circus. This work developed through life skills – trust, honesty, responsibility, teamwork, discipline. And has impacted the environment of the neighbourhood tremendously. Zip Zap performs regularly. And today many of Zip Zap’s ex-students are performing with the highly acclaimed *Cirque du Soleil*.

Venezuela’s *El Systema* was started about 35 years ago by a musician Jose Abreu to teach music to slum children. El Systema has touched the lives of thou-

sands of children and brought in a sense of dignity and self worth not only in the children but in their families as well. This programme, started by an individual, has the support of the government. Today these musicians are amongst the most coveted musicians of the world’s symphonic orchestras.

Brazil’s SESC, Community Cultural & Sports Centres, were started over 60 years by the business community – who needed to ensure that their employees, a majority of whom were migrants from across the world, had food for the soul! The business houses set out to develop this system of cultural hubs by financing them with a 1.5% cess of their employees’ salaries. This enabled all their employees free use of the facilities, with a small charge for non-employees. This system was introduced into the Brazilian Constitution and is mandatory by law, even today. Danillo Miranda, SESC’s regional director, says: “SESC is not only a cultural or sports institution. It is a social welfare institution which uses every possible strategy to promote the people’s development and quality of life. The very base of welfare projects has to do with giving value to the human being, who deserves respect within a standard of absolute equality. This is not a matter of religion or politics. It is about culture. From a cultural point of view we are all fundamentally equal.” Sao Paulo that has a population of 30 million people has over 30 SESC projects across the city and with an annual turn out of:-

- Theatre: 3,968 (807,000 people)
- Music concerts: 405 (2,150,000 people)
- Dance: 656 (310,000 people)

Can you imagine a time in India when our business community contributes fundamentally to the development of cultural community spaces – not as their advertising or CSR programme, without wanting their name to it, but in the true belief of the impact such spaces will have on the quality of life!

“Culture is the widening of the mind and of the spirit.” - Jawaharlal Nehru



As Steve Jobs said, *“Technology alone is not enough. It’s technology married with liberal arts, married with humanities, that yields the results that make our hearts sing.”*

In anticipation of a world full of singing hearts!

“Man is unique not because he does science, and he is unique not because he does art, but because science and art equally are expressions of his marvelous plasticity of mind.”

- Jacob Bronowski,
Scientist, formerly of the
Salk Institute



SANJNA has been heading Prithvi Theatre since 1990. In her time there, she has regularly curated an exciting theatre calendar, challenged Mumbai theatre groups with festivals demanding new work, toured festivals, presented theatre at other Mumbai venues and introduced an arts outreach programme for children. She has also expanded Prithvi Theatre into a broader cultural hub by bringing other disciplines (poetry, science, documentaries and short films, etc.) into an ongoing Prithvi calendar, and running an art gallery to present young and established artists. Most recently she initiated the India Theatre Forum, an all-India network of theatre practitioners. She is also Director of Junoon. Junoon is her platform to take her innovations for theatre to audiences beyond Prithvi. She can be contacted at sanjna@junoontheatre.org