

Performances come straight from the heart

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YAMCHAO INTERNATIONAL THEATRE FESTIVAL

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Around the world, young people use theatre to give voice to their lives. But it was in Pathum Thani, north of Bangkok, that those voices were heard from January 23 to 30, at the Yamchao International Theatre Festival held in the Khlong Hok neighbourhood. Over those 10 days the Moradok Mai Theatre community played host to young people from theatre groups around the world and via exchanges and performances they shared their experiences and confirmed the fact that theatre remains a powerful tool to develop young hearts and souls.



Children of the Heart

As part of the festival, two performances were put on in the Science Museum in Bangkok on the evening of January 27. One was by a troupe from Reshit Yeshiva High School in Tel Aviv, Israel who are studying drama at the Performing Arts Studios in that city; the other by the Mohanam Performing Arts Group from Auroville in Chennai.

Before coming to Thailand, the Israeli troupe gave several well-received performances of Children of the Heart at international arts festivals in Scotland and Germany. Both here and in Europe, the Israeli troupe have worked under the able direction of Yair Mossel.

Their piece centres on a remote but powerful figure who is troubled by all the violence plaguing the planet. He challenges four ordinary young people to save the world within 24 hours. In the process, the young people discovered that the turmoil they faced was not only "out there", but also something they had to deal with in their own relationships. Most importantly, they discovered that saving the world required them to act together as a group.

The five actors gave a compelling performance using little more than the power of their voices and body language. The set was very simple but was enhanced by highly effective lighting and sound. Even though the actors spoke mostly in Hebrew, their bodies projected power and sincerity, helping to move the story ahead and showing the talent of the director. Children of the Heart blended humour with seriousness, giving the piece a positive and hopeful tone.

The Israeli group was led by Yoram Loewenstein, who founded the Performing Arts Studio in Tel Aviv in 1988, and has made it into one of the leading drama schools in Israel. The studio offers a full three-year acting studies programme and gives students the requisite skills to become successful professional actors in cinema, television and the theatre. Located in one of the poorest areas of Tel Aviv, the group encourage students to get involved in their community and work closely with the elderly, immigrants, the children of migrant workers and disabled young people.

The performance by the Mohanam Performing Arts Group from Chennai, used a different mode of storytelling centred on dance and music. Using very simple instruments commonly found across South and Southeast Asia such as variously sized pieces of bamboo shaped into percussion instruments and mock swords, the Indian troupe told a series of voiceless stories by dancing to an array of rhythms.

Without a word, dancers and music led the audience to a river to hear birds singing and flying away, frogs jumping into a pond and the sounds of insects and elephants in the jungle on a cool evening. By hitting, blowing and scratching the pieces of bamboo, they created exciting soundscapes for the dancers who made a place for themselves in this vibrant landscape, sometimes painting their faces with brilliant greens, reds, blues and yellows - all of which clearly delighted the audience.

Ballu Balasundaram, who leads the group, is a social activist who believes in bringing peace and harmony to the world by training young people in the arts. The performers have jobs in their village back home but are also involved in the arts. Their act demonstrated how the arts can help promote a sense of cooperative creativity and solidarity.

The duo of performances at the Science Museum were a good example of how the Yamchao International Theatre Festival succeeds as a global network for empowering young people through artistic collaboration and performance. The festival also helps performers grow by giving them the opportunity to share their life experiences with people from very different backgrounds and the chance to meet and make friends with creative youngsters from other countries who understand that the arts can be a powerful tool for development.

They bring theatre down to earth and into their communities, helping other young people create art for themselves and in the places in which they live.

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