

ARTS & CULTURE



» **Tomorrow:** The countdown begins for the launch of Thailand's first watch museum.



ARAYA RASDJARMREDNSOOK'S video work, in which rural Thai folk discuss a 19th-century European painting.



BOLLYWOOD STARS BRING TEARS TO THE BANGKOK STAGE

SONALI BHENDRE in 'Aapki Soniya' ('Your Soniya').

LEKHA JSHANKAR
SPECIAL TO THE NATION

Dazzled by the glitz of several spectacular Thai productions, I almost missed the glint of an Indian play on at M-Theatre. "Aapki Soniya" ("Your Soniya") was produced by Benetone Live, who are raising the curtain on a new era for Thai theatre by bringing Indian plays to Bangkok on a regular basis.

Benetone Live is the theatre branch of Benetone Film, who coordinate the shooting of all Bollywood films in Thailand. Thanks to their connections, they've been able to secure Bollywood stars for the Bangkok stage.

Last year, they brought the excellent whodunit "Double Deal", starring Bollywood actors Manjesh Manjrekar and Sandhya Mridul. For "Aapki Soniya", seasoned Indian-movie actor Farouque Sheikh and gorgeous actress Sonali Bhendre made the trip.

Bangkok theatregoers witnessed something unusual: a two-hour play with just two characters, limited props and nothing but an avalanche of words to keep the action going. The result, however, packed a big emotional punch.

"Aapki Soniya" is a sequel to "Tumhaari Amrita", which was made famous with Farouque Sheikh and Shabana Azmi in the lead roles and is still touring the world almost 20 years after debuting.

Thanks to another brilliant script and outstanding performances from its lead pair, "Aapki Soniya" has created as much of a stir as its predecessor since it opened in Mumbai, a year ago.

Loosely based on a true story, "Tumhaari Amrita" traces the love affair between Amrita Nigam, a Paris-based Indian painter, and Zulfikar Haidar, a Lucknow-based lawyer, through a series of letters. The play ends with the death of Amrita.

"Aapki Soniya" picks up from there, and centres on a chain of letters written from Paris by a young girl named Soniya, to the same Zulfikar Haidar in India, now sick and ailing in hospital.

Not knowing who she is, Haidar is intrigued and confused by Soniya's letters. She, in turn, is angry, agitated and accusatory, and

demands to know more about his relationship with Amrita. Haidar patiently answers all her questions, asks his own, and slowly the jigsaw falls into place. Haidar is both happy and distraught to discover that Soniya is his daughter and sets about laying bare his life to soothe her sense of abandonment. The two lonely individuals cling to their newly-discovered family tie, knowing that Haidar's illness means it cannot last for long.

The last letter has a broken Soniya calling him "Abba" (father) for the first time, and signing off, for the first (and last) time as "Apki beti Soniya" ("Your daughter Soniya").

There were few in the audience with dry eyes after the emotional climax, superbly acted by Sonali Bhendre in a performance made all the more impressive by the fact that this was her first play, and that she was pitted against one of the most versatile actors of the Indian stage and screen.

Farouque Sheikh rose to fame with his boy-next-door image in '80s romantic comedies like "Chashme Buddoor".

Since then, he's worked with top Indian directors from Satyajit Ray to Hrishikesh Mukherjee. He said in Bangkok, that he was still involved with cinema but that theatre was a "welcome outlet".

Though often overshadowed by her stunning looks, Sonali Bhendre's talent came to the fore in "Anahaad", which was screened at Bangkok's World Film Festival.

Recently married and a new mother, the actress said in Bangkok that she totally enjoying being "out of the rat-race, and beyond all the pressures of stardom".

She described the play as a "welcome break" and confessed that the most difficult part was mastering the Urdu script. As for director Salim Arif, he said that he was delighted with the small but intense audience in Bangkok.

"It's not the quantity but the quality of audience that we are looking for," he said.

Hopefully, Benetone Live will be bringing more quality Indian theatre, which has the potential to reach out to all sections of Bangkok society.

SOMEBODY PINCH ME

Artists from Thailand and India burrow into the unconscious for 'Dreaming in Public'

SAILEE SARANGDHAR
SPECIAL TO THE NATION

Dubbed "Dreaming in Public", Gallery Soufflower's first major exhibition of 2009 showcases the work of four contemporary artists, two from Thailand and two from India.

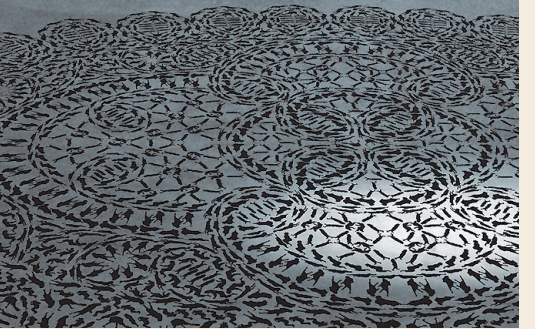
The title announces the show's contrasting themes: dreaming (private, personal and individualist) and "public" (indifferent, collective and consensual). The two terms imply opposite ideas, and yet have a tendency to permeate one another.

Overseen by the Indian ambassador Latha Reddy last month, the show's opening saw the launch of a book of the same name, compiled by its curator Brian Curtin.

The exhibition is interesting for the diverse currents of ideas that spring from the artists' different cultural backgrounds but flow into universal – if mysterious – meanings.

"Our aim is to push the potential of contemporary art and reveal its new directions," says Natasha Tuli, founder and director of Gallery Soufflower, the first in Bangkok to focus on art

HEMA UPADHYAY'S floor mosaic of stuck-down female figures.



from the subcontinent. The gallery showcases everything from conceptual art to paintings, installations, sculptures and new media.

"Dreaming in Public" follows this blueprint, with each of its artists displaying different media, though all are linked by the title.

The first section of the show, by Thai artist Jakkai Sributr, features hand-embroidered patchwork tapestries as well as amulets made with the same material. More bizarre is his ornament-like sculpture of a stag's head with zebra's body, complete with golden rabbits as jockeys.

One of the few Thai artists to adopt tapestry as a medium, Jakkai uses a "layering" process that extends beyond the actual sewing to the treatment of the fabric, dyeing and colour combinations, as well as cutting techniques. His choice of coarsely woven thread, pins, tape and plastic beads lends a distressed feel to the surface of the works.

The other Thai artist featured is Araya Rasdjarmrednsook, who has built an international career with her sensitive observations on human nature. The two pieces displayed by her are videos featuring a group of Thai rural folk asked to view and discuss 19th-century European impressionist and realist paintings. The unlikely scenario is amusing at first, but the rustic perspective of these art critics turns out to be surprisingly enlightening. The work is daring and unique, and succeeds by provoking much thought in the viewer.

For their inspired use of an unusual medium, the pieces by Indian artist Hema Upadhyay are a standout in the show.

Upadhyay has stuck down cut-out

vinyl figures of female forms in different postures to create an intricate mosaic on the gallery floor. The artist has also contributed two motif-based paintings of vines, flowers and birds. On to these standardised images of nature she superimposes her photographic self-portraits, echoing the exhibition's theme of the individual dreamer embedded in impersonal reality.

The last artist showcased, Sheba Chhachhi, adds shine to the show thanks to her medium – light-boxes consisting of layers of shimmering screens printed with a photographic collage.

The finished works create an enigmatic and shifting picture. The effect is filmic and dream-like, with yoga practitioners, animals and Hindu deities crawling over Google-Earth views of cities.

Another of the artist's installations on display is a video of a swimming elephant, the images of which disintegrate and then reintegrate in a snowstorm of pixels.

Like the elephant, visitors to the show can expect to find themselves afloat, navigating a fast-flowing dream world of different images, symbols and ideas.

Located in Silom Galleria's basement, Gallery Soufflower hosts "Dreaming in Public" until July 27. For more information, contact (02) 630 0032, (086) 082 1573 or info@gallerysoufflower.com.

SHEBA CHHACHHI'S light-box work 'Locust Time'.



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Tiptoe through the tapas

The Plaza Athenee Bangkok, a Royal Meridien hotel, and Siam Winery, the producer of Monsoon Valley Wines, are again presenting "Thai Wine, Thai Tapas". This year renowned chef Ian Kittichai has jetted in from New York to create seven platefuls of tasty tidbits, including limestone tartlet, meing tuna tartare and banana blossom and heart of palm US day-boat diver scallop. Until September 15, these are paired with the best of Monsoon Valley wines from 3pm to 2am in the hotel's Glaz Bar. The price is Bt730 per person or, for non-drinkers, Bt390. Call (02) 265 0880, extension 4324.



Hong Kong's hottest chefs arrive

The Conrad Bangkok is introducing Hong Kong master chefs Chung Ho Shi and Yiu Kit Lam from the multi-award-winning Golden Peony restaurant, Conrad Centennial Singapore, for a gourmet's week from tomorrow to July 19, at Liu restaurant. As executive chef of Golden Peony since 2000, Ho Shi is a master of authentic yet innovative Cantonese cuisine with celebrity fans all over the world while chef Yiu Kit Lam is one of the world's top dim sum specialists. Chefs recommendations range from golden-fried prawn served with kiwi mayonnaise and mocha-infused smoked salmon to double-boiled seafood in golden pumpkin broth. Call (02) 690 9999 or e-mail info@conradbangkok.com.

E-mail information on your interesting upcoming events to artsandculture@nationgroup.com.