

Time Out Bengaluru

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What's on & Where

Focus on - Gautam Raja

Theatrescience is an international project that uses theatrical techniques to illuminate science and scientific thinking to inspire new theatre. Bangalore's Jagriti has partnered with scientists at the National Centre for Biological Sciences to bring about 2008's *The Invisible River*. Gautam Raja, the group's resident playwright, tells us what's on the table in round two.

Science played ball with religion in *The Invisible River*. Who or what is science likely to play with this time?

The first week ended in a bit of panic for me, because we were thrown into some truly extreme science, with no human stories in sight. I mean there are people at NCBS who spend their time studying a protein in a cell wall, and do it simply to find out how it works, not with any application in mind. So there are plenty of Greek epics when you look through a microscope, but if you try and move them onto a stage, you can safely drop the "epic". But some interesting ideas included studies on memory and stress, insect flight, genetics and choice, and the behaviour of invasive species. With the play I'm writing, the science will talk about invasive species, specifically lantana – a weed that's taking over our jungles. It'll play with relationships this time: husband and wife, tribal and forest, ecologist and NGO and bleeding heart...and so on.

What's it like for a playwright to have all the actors around from scratch... chatting up scientists, each other and basically being a part of how pieces are conceptually developing? Doesn't it mess with your process and control as the sole writer?

Jeff Teare and Rebecca Gould of Theatrescience obviously have a lot of experience with this, in the way that they are able to balance all the needs of a pretty needy lot: actors, directors and writers. It was great to collaborate and share ideas in the first couple of weeks – we've had some amazing discussions both with and without the scientists. But as a writer, I'm encouraged to be my own man and write only what I want. It's great for me because I find ideas the hardest part. Dialogue comes a lot easier to me. It's almost like cheating.

Whittling down the science-art divide seems pretty noble, but what's theatre got to gain from science aside from the obvious empirical scenarios? Anything in its methodology or philosophy that can speak to doing theatre?

One thing we've learned at NCBS is that scientists have no problem saying, "I don't know." I really respect that, and I know MANY theatre people who can learn from that! Seriously though, I'm not sure about methodology but in terms of themes and ideas, science is just rife with stunning theatrical ideas. Huge ideas that pull in so many issues that it's a constant wonder to me that more people aren't doing what Theatrescience does.

Are the scientists learning anything from you guys? Surely this is an opportunity for them to learn to emote better when they say 'Eureka!!!' and such. But seriously...

Well, if they look out of their windows in the morning, they can learn a chi-kung-based theatre warm-up led by Jeff [Teare]. And they can learn how to truly faff over coffee and cigarettes... but yeah, more seriously, we like to think that the work will give back in some way. The most direct potential benefit is creating awareness about the issues surrounding their work, and perhaps improving research funding.

Finally, who's madder? Scientists or theatre folk?

Theatre folk like to act mad because it covers up the fact that they're just messed up. From what I've seen, the madness of the scientists is less flamboyant, but more honest, so... the winners are the scientists!

Bryan Richards.