

***Nagesprek* for the play 'Instant Happiness' from Punjab, India**

In July this year, a group of us researchers —some Indian, some European— from the Maastricht University were travelling in villages in Punjab, trying to understand why poor farmers set agricultural land on fire at the end of every harvest. Acres and acres of land are covered with dense and polluting smoke as wheat straw in April and rice straw in November is burned as a quick fix to get rid of waste straw and stubble that is left on the field after harvesting. Contrast this to the tranquil forest on Terschelling in the Oerol Festival, where some of the same group of researchers took part in the '*nagesprek*' (post-conversation), as Cello8ctet Amsterdam along with Via Berlin performed every day two shows of their political opera 'Instant Happiness' to packed Dutch audiences. The cellists performed a story about the ills of consumption that come out of a society's desire for 'instant happiness', inescapably and increasingly leading to feelings of alienation. Over the week, the politics of development were debated over and over, through cold spells and thundershowers, while the cellists' bodies visibly turned leaner and more weather-beaten, even as the music they produced grew sweeter and stronger.

The underlying message from both the rice fields of Punjab and the forests of Oerol is acutely similar —a wake-up call to rethink development that leads to a consumption of resources that is unsustainable for the individual, for society and for the planet. Both messages speak of human desires and aspirations, of skills and capabilities, of producing and consuming, and they raise foundational questions of what development ought to mean. Yet again, the messages do not stand on the high ground of moral certitude, and they are definitely not simple. Both messages are entangled deeply with what it means to be human; to be complete with a nature that is at times basic, at others upliftingly sublime, and sometimes both at the same time. While the farmer forcibly extracts ground water for his rice paddy fields and thereby irreversibly and irresponsibly depletes centuries old aquifers, he coaxes hundreds of seedlings of paddy to germinate so that he can feed a nation; while the cellists tell a story of a society that is almost inevitably doomed to repeat its mistakes, their music seeds hope in the listener's heart.

The play starts with golden bags hanging from the trees—later we see that they are full of colourful clothes, which the actor-cellists greedily fight over. The clothes transform them from unclad beings of nature to fashionistas glutted on over-consumption to the point of sickness and addiction. The story of the excesses of consumption, told through the metaphor of clothes, succeeds in drawing our thoughts to the impacts of first-world consumption on third-world production. Such unthinking consumption of "instant happiness" leads to extractive production with unsustainably low returns to poor producers and unbearable pressure on natural resources. Echoing the messages of excessive demand, toxicity and sickness that come from such consumption, in the heartland of Punjab the cotton farmers' lives flicker unprotected under the sharp effects of global commodity markets. Both the land and the farmers equally suffer from the cancerous effects of the pesticides and fertilisers the farmers use so that they can produce enough to meet the demands of a hungry market.

A second layer of the cellists' story sketches the alienation that this kind of consumption brings —isolating people into a society of clones, who even as they inevitably give in to the exploitative system, mourn the passing of their innocence. Mirroring this message of alienation, farmers in Punjab commodify their generations-old connection to their land: they flog it to produce more and more, all the while extracting water from depleting ground water tables. Producing for a demanding market turns precious rice straw into waste; burning the straw degrades the land, which no amount of chemical fertiliser can replace. Yet, the farmer has no time to spare for thinking about the future when the present is so instant and precarious.

'Instant Happiness' is a play without words in which cellists scurry around, communicating, fighting, acting, attached inextricably to their cellos, always also creating beautiful music in complete harmony with each other. After an hour of watching a story of such despair clothed in such sublimely hopeful music, one can be forgiven for wondering what the true message of the play is. And equally anyone in the audience watching this confluence of music and message could be forgiven for wondering why any actor would ever need words to convey such a message, if she could play a cello. And so natural does the cello-*cum*-cellist duo seem, that it breaks down the barriers in our mind, reconnecting what has been disconnected between man and the things he fashions. We begin to see that it is not production 'there' and consumption 'here', but always both, here and there. It slowly dawns on the audience, that the play goes beyond the moralistic narrative of a consumerist society here that preys on impoverished producers elsewhere. It tells a more universal story: one where consumption brings its own ills to a society, whether here or there, of addiction, acquisitive behaviour, aggression, wastefulness.

Yet, at the same time, the play offers an alternative that is all the more powerful for being tacit. This message has to be read from the almost primal comfort the cellists find in their cellos, in the production of beautiful music, individually and as a harmonious group; and it resonates with the audience's individual reflection and their collective understanding. And indeed the complex message of the play 'Instant Happiness' offers an alternative, and with a refrain as delicate as only a cello can conceive it offers hope. A hope that is echoed in the farmlands of Punjab, as farmers turn to organic farming, to remember how it feels again 'to love and be one with the land', to form collectives to fight against tremendous odds, to make and maintain relationships with sensitive markets.

Two haunting moments from the play stay etched indelibly in the mind of the audience. First, the picture of the over-clad cellists looking heavenward, fruitlessly demanding for more after laying waste to what was already in the golden bags. Second, the picture of the cellists, having shed their excess clothes, lying bare-skinned in a field of waste, bringing home the message that when the earth dies, we die with it.

And for a brief moment—while playing music, listening, talking—we were not any more separated as performers and audience, producers and consumers, but

became one under the clouds over Terschelling. Nature irrepressibly united what man had divided in his limited wisdom— producers and consumers, them and us—while the clouds over 'Instant Happiness' showered rain that equally drenched performers and audience, and then parted to let the sun out, turning the experience truly golden.