

"One of my favorite stories is that I had to make a gargoyle for an event once but the craftsman, a Bengali guy, didn't quite understand what a gargoyle was. So I asked him to first make a clay model and the model he made looked like a monkey. When I asked him what he thought a gargoyle was, his perception of the image was something like Hanuman. So I told him, 'Don't look at it like that. Think of an imposture. Think of a cat coiled on the ground. Think of a wolf about to eat up something.'"

Scenographer, installation artist and set, event and light designer Sumant Jayakrishnan narrates this story while talking about the process of collaboration. And this story illustrates that he might be a man of sundry

talents, but there is this inherent sense of poetry that brings everything together. This poetry is the soul of the extensive variety of work he has crafted in theatre, film and events. It's also the soul of how he conveys his thoughts, of how he collaborates and of his various passions including dance, colors, lights and theatre.

Born in Kerala, Jayakrishnan grew up all over India including Arunachal Pradesh, Shillong and Delhi as his father was a bureaucrat. His artistic genes, he says, come from both the mother's and father's sides of the family. "My grandfather was a mathematician and was also very much into photography. He gave me my first camera when I was 11 or 12 years old." An important experience while growing up was when he moved to Pondicherry for three years where the schooling he did involved a huge amount of extra-curricular activities in art, classical music, scouts, etc. "Till then, I was a self-effacing little child. I was quiet and not outgoing at all but Pondicherry changed that." He also credits the five years he spent at Sardar Patel Vidyalaya in Delhi, again for being able to explore his talent through a score of various activities.

After the school counselors suggested, he decided to give NID (National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad) a shot while he was in his 12th standard and he got through. At NID, he took graphic design and exhibition design after the first year. "I had an inclination to do product design but product design was quite limited in the way NID taught it back then. I also did projects in typography, photography and worked on mundane projects in exhibition design and audio visual."



MY LIFE IN DESIGN: SUMANT JAYAKRISHNAN

By Payal Khandelwal





Photo credit:
Kamal Kansara

When he had to choose his final year diploma project, he wanted to do something related to dance or performance (dancing and theatre being two of his biggest loves) and he ultimately decided on design through performance. At this time, he had moved to Delhi for a couple of months and met a lot of people at NSD (National School of Drama) including dancers, theatre folks, puppeteers, etc. "I found a lot of possible projects that I could do but the one that got approved was the musical of the Mahabharata called 'Jaya'. It had two aspects to it; one was developing multimedia software and the other was the stage and costume design for the actual festival itself. I did it as a documented conceptual project at that time." After being connected with NSD, he had also started doing a lot of real life theatre projects including 'Normal Heart' with Barry John, which got good reviews, and 'Kiss of the Spider Woman' with Rustom Bharucha. While still a student, he had started teaching and taking workshops on stage design at NSD. At the end of the year, he did a Muppet show (Choonaa Laga Ke) for television with Dadi Pudumjee and Sanjoy Roy (Teamwork Films). By this time, he had also started working with theatre directors like Anamika Haksar and M.K. Raina.

Then the British Council's cultural department, which had seen some of Jayakrishnan's shows, told him about the Charles Wallace India Trust. He was touring at that time with the late dancer and choreographer Chandralekha and another dance group from Germany. "I see that as a very formative year in my life where I had the opportunity to work with all these very iconic people and then I got a chance to go to London on the Charles Wallace grant." He went to the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London to learn set design techniques. "I told them that I don't want just theoretical knowledge, I want practical work experience. I got to work at the National Theatre, Royal Shakespeare Company, Opera House, Royal Court Theatre, etc. I also worked at the motiroti company."

At this time, another grant he had applied for came through, so he headed straight to France to study puppetry and light design. "While the UK was so much about the script and how you develop it and work with it, working in Europe was far more radical. Then I ended up doing a project in Germany, my first installation there. So while in the UK and France, I was following other people and working as an apprentice, in Germany I started doing my own stuff again," he says. To add to his global learning and exposure, he also went to New York on the Fulbright Arts Fellowship (2002 - 2003) where he attended a workshop with Robert Wilson (New York - Watermill Centre). He was also a visiting artist at EYEBEAM (New Media centre in Chelsea, NY) and a visiting scholar at the New York University.

And in the time that linked Europe to the USA, he came back to Delhi and continued working in performance. "What was great in

1997-98 was that the Mahabharata musical 'Jaya' that I had done as a project in NID actually happened in Bombay. I designed it very differently and it was a big scale breakthrough project." In this phase of his life, he was working with directors like Anuradha Kapoor and had started associating with artists like Nilima Sheikh and Nalini Malani. He also worked with Pooja Sood (who now runs the Khoj Foundation). He did an installation exhibition on khadi which toured in South Africa and then in India. So there was this mixture of different type of projects and this led to films with Govind Nihalani. He worked on the film 'Thakshak' as a set designer and in a film called 'Deham' where he performed an act as a villain. "But I had figured that Bollywood wasn't for me." He, however, did Deepa Mehta's 'Water' eventually as an art director and enjoyed it immensely. "I went to Sri Lanka but after five-six months of working on it, and other projects falling apart in the process, I realized that even though I did love films, I was not completely passionate about them. Though Water was a very organized project as our roles were clear and commitments weren't complicated. But after Water, I didn't work in any other film even though I got so many offers," he says.

Around the millennium time, a few projects that happened together in Delhi included a big exhibition in National Museum and an international film festival where he put together the design and concept. "At the same time, I got asked by the team of the Lakme Fashion Week to design the entire event. They had seen a show I had done for Rohit Bal in 1998 in Bombay called 'Omega' which was an iconic show and had a very dramatic theatrical set. That's how I got sucked into fashion and that was a big shift. In six days, I had to do some 24 sets as there was a new design every hour."

After his grand beginning in the fashion world, a lot of the clients from that cluster started calling him to design events, parties and weddings. He confesses that at that point all of these were alien to him but he was ready to give it a shot. "I had no ego about it. I was really the first in that space at each point of time so I created that niche as I went along. I didn't have a path defined for me and had to make my own way. And that was a great luxury and joy."

And following this, Jayakrishnan has also added a lot of high end events for international brands like Louis Vuitton, Swarovski, Chanel and Christian Dior to his portfolio. "These were the events where I had to push the limit, like Tim Supple's 'A Midsummer Night's Dream'. We got fantastic reviews for the stage, costume and lighting. To be in that space and have that opportunity is also important." In between all this, he also continued working on things like music festivals including NH7, Bhakti Utsav, Rock Sand Festival and The Big Chill. "My studio developed a vocabulary of being able to work across a spectrum of projects," he says.

And this vocabulary is being constantly built and redefined by Jayakrishnan as he moves from one project to the other. We spoke to him to know more about his creative process, how he chooses a project at this stage, his love for theatre, dance and colors, his experiences with the fashion and Hindi film industry, among other things. Edited excerpts:

How was the fashion industry experience different from everything else you were doing at that point?

It was interesting. The idea of collaboration stays in my mind in whatever I do. So how do you find different ways of collaborating? You also have to learn how to step back a little, which you have to do a lot in films as there is the creative director and a cameraman who can also be the light designer. A major part of your set may or may not be used. I found that hierarchy not completely satisfying. But this wasn't the case in fashion.

Also, working with performance in dance and theatre, you learn how to transform a state quickly. You have to go through many experiences within an hour or two and that's the process of transformation or alchemy, as I call it. How do you transform an experience within a period of time, even if it's just with lights? I felt that I wanted to create an experience live, which is complete in itself. And that entire process sped up while working with fashion designers.

Also, at that time, there was a young community of designers who were all looking to move ahead and make a change. It was an industry which hadn't come into its own. There were a lot of exciting people, risks were taken and chances were given. They were very different people with different aesthetics. Sometimes people had clear visions and sometimes they didn't, so you gave them a vision. I have been with some of those designers right from the beginning and that relationship continues. I still design their big shows.

A lot of projects that you do must be quite labor intensive and thus easy to execute in India. But are there any limitations that India poses when it comes to actualization of ideas?

Yes, it's easier to function here when it comes to labor intensive work but increasingly my work is very architectural and those structures may or may not be labor intensive. The good thing is that people have larger budgets here. And very often when I have to do something abroad where labor is a huge cost issue, I design differently.

In the last 10-12 years, things have changed in India. People in India travel a lot now and are much more exposed to what's happening outside, so the concepts have to be high level. The expectations of what product they get here is much higher now and as a consequence, professionalism, which I used to grumble about a lot earlier, is much better now. Bombay is of course far more professional than Delhi but in the last three years, that gap has reduced dramatically. It's no longer okay to say 'ho jayega' or 'chalta hai' in Delhi.

Has Delhi had any influence on your creative life?

Oh absolutely. Delhi has been an anchor. Delhi, as a city, is not overwhelmed by Bollywood, unlike Bombay. It has these different groups—literary group, fashion group, performance group, dance group, etc.—which are all at par with each other. They mingle with each other and therefore, there is a lot of creative stimulation. Delhi is a democratic space for a creative person, in terms of what you choose to do.

Once you get a brief on a project, what's your creative process like?

The first step for any project is brainstorming and to figure out the space we are going to work with, since everything we do is in a space. Sometimes you are given a large chunk and sometimes it's a park or a farm house. So we have to see what the limitations of the space are and how do we work around those and create visible geometries and structures. We have to look at invisible structures and dimensions and create a world from scratch for it.

So two things happen in parallel to each other. One is to understand the visual and mental world we want to create, through brainstorming and research. And the second is how do we structure and layout these, the flow of how it will all work. And when the responses and ideas come through, you start making them work as one. Sometimes it happens quickly because your intuition tells you that it will work but sometimes you need to dig deeper. Once you have the core vocabulary idea, you can build layers around it and create the complete world.





Do you think that the Indian education system is not fully equipped to teach subjects like set design and light design?

It's getting better. I have had people coming over from Shrishti (School of Art, Design and Technology) and NIFT (National Institute of Fashion Technology) all the time but funnily enough, I have had the least number of people from NID. Then I have had a lot of architects come in too. It gives you a reflection of who are the kind of people who are actually interested in this.

What we do can be permanent or temporary, but it's ephemeral. And those who are willing to take a chance can do this. You need to be someone who doesn't want to be boxed into a particular label to do this kind of work. It's easier now but earlier it was hard for people to do work that did not belong to them. But that's got value now as straddling in different worlds can be an advantage. So that's something these institutes have understood and are trying to achieve.

Also, there is so much work in TV, films and there are a lot more exhibition design projects. India is an exciting place to be right now. The possibility of making a difference is the most here and not somewhere else. The rate of change and growth is phenomenal. It's beginning to slow down a bit but it is relatively still moving at a fast pace.

Theatre and dance are your first loves. Do they somehow still permeate the projects you do?

I am glad that I never went into dance professionally. But I think

I am still a performer, a silent performer on the stage. This is a different kind of dance. This is not about 'am I beautiful or not' or 'am I old or am I young', it's a mental space. Every stage is a dance.

Someone said something very interesting to me the other day. Every year, I do 2-3 wedding design projects and it has become an integral part of what I do because there is so much scope. At one of the events, an ex-client said to me that 'you are like a priest'. That was a wonderful way to put it. Till then I always thought it was ironic that I am not married or particularly need a reason for it and yet I am so involved in weddings. There is sanctity in the process of creating something for a wedding. To be called a priest, I liked that.

Is there any particular material you enjoy working with the most?

I love working with rope, thread, yarn and ribbon. You can create these beautiful architectural forms by using very little material, which is light and yet has form and occupies volume and space. I also like using mirror as it lets you work with illusion, magic and reflections. It has a telescopic quality. You can play with it in structural ways to change the perception of what's happening.

Do you feel there is a technique or a process that has become your signature style over the years?

It's the ability to connect with whoever I am working with by

spending a lot of personal time in interacting with them and coming up with something that's unique for them. I have to constantly fix a vocabulary. You know there is no copyright for the kind of work I do. I come up with an idea and two weeks later, bits of it is copied by somebody or the other. I am used to it and it doesn't matter anymore as it pushes me to keep re-inventing vocabulary. And I think this is what more and more people have started understanding. I never stick to a particular style of something and thus, a lot of times clients come to me because they know that I am not churning out the same things over and over again.

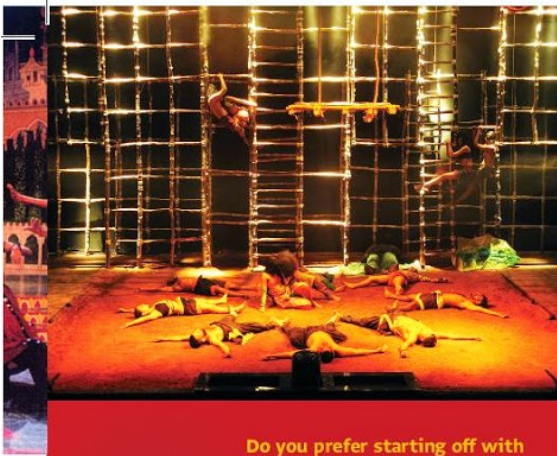
What are the things you want to do in the next five years?

I want to increase the percentage of things that are more permanent and I have started making the effort towards this. When I say permanent, I mean it in terms of scale because the object ideas we create are great but they are only for a day or for one event. There is a possibility of a further life for these ideas. They could be implemented in public spaces or as installations in offices etc.

A larger intent is to do architectural spaces which have a quirk. I am not, strictly speaking, an architect but I have a particular way of looking at spaces which is not mundane. And I also want to translate the research I have done in the last few years into vocabulary.

How do you actually feel when your sets are being dismantled? Or are you immune to it by now?

No, I am never immune to it. But at some level, I have gotten quite comfortable with it. It's really like life. Life changes constantly and you try and adapt to the change. And this (dismantling) is something that literally forces you to change and live in the moment. It stays in memory, or in images as photographs. I think it's a different kind of creating because it allows you to let go. The human instinct is to not let go off things easily.



Do you prefer starting off with pen and paper or do you go the digital way right away?

It goes pencil on paper and then computer. I find it very tangible to actually get a sense of the idea on paper as your mind is connected to your hand in a different way. Computer is a fantastic tool but for me personally, it comes after that first scribble. And that first scribble is what allows me to find where the idea is going.

My most treasured possessions till today are my pencil, eraser, transparent tracing papers and my 72 color pencils as I absolutely love colors and have learnt to be very bold about using them.

What attracts you to take up a project?

There are obviously different parameters. When you run a studio, you have to think about the cost. Earlier when it was 2-3 of us, the costs weren't so high and important but now we have to balance projects in terms of those that pay enough to keep the studio running and those that I simply would love to do.

The first thing to look at is if it's exciting or not. Even in the realm of projects that can pay, there has to be something where you can push the boundaries, expand your vocabulary, try

something new, keep your team interested and most importantly, learn. That's a duty one has to do for oneself. You have to ask yourself some questions. Are you testing yourself and not becoming complacent and falling into a safe pattern and rhythm? Are you carrying the team with you?

Who are the people you have enjoyed collaborating with so far?

There are a few people to list. I loved collaborating with Tim Supple on 'A Midsummer Night's Dream', with fashion designers Tarun Tahiliani and Rohit Bal, and with Deepa Mehta as she was quite open to various possibilities. I also loved working with Christian Dior in India. Sometimes these international companies have very strong rules when it comes to representing themselves in a different country but they completely trusted that I will represent them as they are and yet find a way to do it in India. Then I love working with Pooja Sood as I have been collaborating with her from 1996 and have done so many public art projects with her. These are all relationships that are built on trust. You trust their integrity, their creativity and you spark off alchemy when you get together.

How has the relationship with the vendors evolved over the years?

There are a few vendors who I have started working with more and more in the last few years, because I have worked with them enough to know that they understand my thinking now. And these few vendors can also take what you have, add a bit more to it and make it a little more technical or more finished. Thus, for me, a vendor is a very important collaborator, and without him/her I cannot make anything happen. So whether it is working with these embroiders from Banaras or glass workers from Ferozabad or metal guys from Muradabad, etc., the interaction is great because they have their own skill set and when you transmit an idea to them they will add to it and then you find another product which might not be what you imagined but it's great.

Light design is still a very niche category in India. Where do you see it going in the future?

Light design for shows and events is still alright but if you look at interior spaces, there aren't consultants in India and you end up consulting elsewhere. It's not been given its importance in India yet.

What you light is what you see and how you light it will give it a mood or an emotion. The level or color of light and how you fill it is so important. But somehow when it comes to interiors, they don't have a community here yet. It will happen and it's really worth getting into. Earlier I used to do light design in theatre and I had gone out to do those light design courses. And it has been a huge advantage as I have spent 4-5 years lighting a lot of my work and even now when I work with light designers, I am very clear about how it has to be done.

