



MEMORY OF DESIGN

Sir John Soane's Museum has recreated the architect's experiment of lighting candles inside the sarcophagus of Egyptian pharaoh Seti I. The 3000-year-old relic costed Soane £2,000 in 1824. After the British Museum turned it down for being too expensive, he installed it at his home.

SNAP SHOTS



Magic Makers

AUTHORS NABANEETA Dev Sen, Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay (pictured), Amarendra Chakravorty and Kartik Ghosh have been shortlisted for this year's Big Little Book Award for children's literature in Indian languages. The award will be conferred on November 19. The award, in its second edition, looks at children's literature in Bengali this year. Dev Sen, a Padma Shree awardee, has written numerous fairy tales and adventure stories for children with girls as protagonists. Many books by Mukhopadhyay have been adapted for the big screen. His *Monojder Adhuth Bari*, *Goshabaganeer Bhoot* and *Patalghar* are popular among the young and the old. Poet, writer and travel-filmmaker Amarendra Chakravorty's books *Amazoner Jongole*, *Hiru Dakat* and *Shada Ghora* are well-known titles. His *Gorillar Chokh* won the Bal Sahitya Purashkar. Kartik Ghosh has received several accolades, including the National Award for Children's literature for his book *Ekta Meye Eka*.



Cinematic Salute

BOLLYWOOD ACTOR Sidharth Malhotra, who recently reprised Rajesh Khanna's role for a remake of *Ittefaq* (1969), has signed his next movie in which he will essay the role of the Kargil martyr Captain Vikram Batra. Chandigarh's Captain Batra lost his life in the 1999 Kargil war and was posthumously awarded the Param Vir Chakra. The shooting for the film will start next year, and the makers are working on the script at the moment. Malhotra will have a double role as he'll portray the role of his identical twin brother, Vishal.



Escape Route

THE STORY of two British sisters, Ida and Louise Cook (pictured), who became unlikely heroines in helping Jews to flee Nazi persecution will now be told on the big screen. The Cook girls, two civil service secretaries, secured a safe passage for dozens who would otherwise have died in the Holocaust. They did this through their passion for the opera and travelled repeatedly to Germany in the '30s. Titled *The Cooks*, the movie is being produced by Donald Rosenfeld, former president of Merchant Ivory Productions, who has previously made period classics such as *Howards End*, *The Remains of the Day*, among others. Emma Thompson will play the role of one of the sisters along with Oscar-winning actor Cate Blanchett. Canadian investigative reporter, Isabel Vincent, is writing the screenplay and a book on the same.

The Boy Who Got Away

Grammy-winning record producer and multi-instrumentalist, Jeff Bhasker, on his Indian roots, mentor Kanye West, President Trump and moving from jazz to R&B and hip-hop

DAMINI RALLEIGH

Away from the spotlight that beams so brightly on pop icons like Beyonce, JayZ, Kanye West, Alicia Keys, Rihanna, Lana Del Rey, Taylor Swift and Eminem, is the man behind some of their most popular tracks — Jeff Bhasker. With five Grammys and 15 nominations for the coveted gramophone, Bhasker, today, is among the leading songwriters, musicians and record producers in the US. Yet, his inclusion in the list of music doyens at the recently concluded MTV India Music Summit in Jaipur drew blanks. "I have never been a fame seeker. I don't make much of a push to be out there. People in the industry know me and for me, that is enough," says the 43-year-old musician of German and Indian origin who was seen waltzing through the three-day festival, stationing himself, intermittently, at the performances of his confreres, and later discussing his life and music with composer and producer Ram Sampath.

"Indian classical music, much like jazz, is complex and intense," says Bhasker, who trained in jazz piano and arranging at the Berklee School of Music. It was his mother, who during his growing up years in Sorocco in New Mexico, helped him develop an ear for jazz. "My mother knew a few pieces that had a jazz influence that she would play on the piano. I was soon obsessed with jazz harmonies and jazz in general. Where I grew up, there wasn't that much going on. Studying jazz seemed like an exciting step for me then," says Bhasker, a second-generation American, whose grandparents came to the US from Punjab. His father, a doctor, was the mayor of Kansas city for 24 years and as a result Bhasker grew up "being very American". His friendship with singer Jasbir Jassi and a collaboration with him in 2010 introduced him to Punjabi folk.

As for Bhasker's compulsion for jazz, it didn't last long and verged a genuine understanding of himself and the music he wanted to create. "I grew out of jazz. I



It's a fact of life in America that a black man who is confident and speaks his mind, will be torn apart. Racism is a big part of our country and is coming to the forefront again with the election of Trump. I think this expression of blackness is against that and it will continue

JEFF BHASKER

wasn't as good as those around me at Berklee. I don't want to sell myself too short but I had a teacher in college who told me that I would have to absorb entire traditions of music which included all the classical masters, the jazz piano legends, transcribe it, learn it, analyse it and then I'd be able to develop my own style. It was taking too long for me. So, at some point, I decided that I'm going to use what I've got to express myself and make my music. Yes, you have to imitate to learn but you also have to find yourself," explains Bhasker.

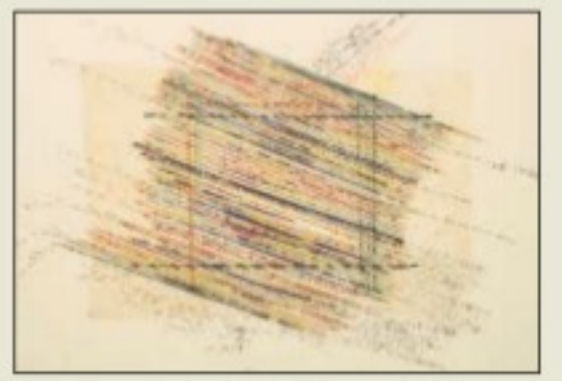
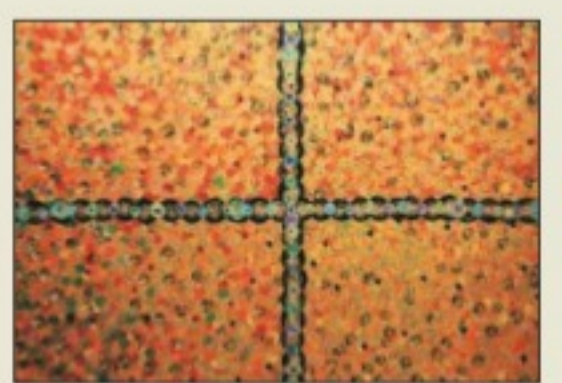
Side projects to win an extra buck — at a rehabilitation hospital as a music therapist and later in a wedding band — further enabled his search for his voice. "As I played the songs, I realised that what was just a vehicle to improvise for me, was to my audience a song that had meaning — body and soul. And that's when I truly began to understand the power of a song and the combination of lyrics and melody. It also pushed me to focus on that, which made these songs work instead of focussing on the form, so that it would sound like the song and not some jazzy interpretation of it," says Bhasker.

But jazz didn't peter out even after he arrived in New York on the day of 9/11. "It was a tough time. People were worried and un-



Jeff Bhasker (right); with Prasoon Joshi (centre) and Jasbir Jassi

Jeff Fasano



(From top) Mona Rai's works titled *Gift Box*; *Second Letter to My Mother Nature Morte*

Power of Nought

Artist Mona Rai enmeshes concepts of zero and her memories in an exhibition

PALLAVI CHATTOPADHYAY

AMONG THE many offerings at a recent exhibition at Delhi's Nature Morte gallery, artist Mona Rai's canvas, *Nothing More, Nothing Less* — a collage on palm leaf paper, features innumerable stitches made using a pointed needle. The stitches are in the form of straight lines running through the frame. *Sharp Shooter's Art* lies punctured with innumerable holes banded in colours, whereas *Night Landscape* reveals the gems of the night sky interspersed against a black coloured blanket. Created by drilling an electric rod into the frame, these works, the 70-year-old artist points out, serve as her reaction to the violent atmosphere she says she is currently surrounded by.

Calling the paintings in her latest solo, "My Play Zero", "energetic", Rai, who often tears, slashes or burns her canvases and sometimes even takes the help of cobblers to stitch her frames, expresses the violence of our times through these acts. She says, "Look at the world and what is happening in terms of caste, creed and religion. We are all human beings. So why are we fighting with each other over territories or saying this is your god and this is my god. No religion teaches you to kill or hurt people. The reason people are causing violence is because they are frustrated and are taking it out on others. I cannot become violent and hit people. As an artist I have the advantage of using that in my work."

In "My Play Zero", there is *Gift Box*, taking the form of a wrapped gift and has several zeros tracing the ribbon boundary, implying her never ending fascination with wrapped gifts, to the extent that she hasn't unwrapped many of the presents that were gifted to her years ago. "I paint spontaneously. Numbers play an important role in our daily life. Even in prison, the person doesn't remain a person and his identity comes only from numbers," she says. An overdose of pop colours and glitter adorns *All That Clitters*, a mesh of circles. The inspiration lies in the country's festivals. "All this glitter is so tempting and has always attracted me," says Rai.

She passionately speaks of infringement of privacy in the current times and says that it's an important element in what she presents. "The infringement is throttling. There is a lot of mental violence, leave alone physical violence. The way people are being dictated is a horrific feeling, which one can see in the strength of my strokes and in the energy of my works," she says.

Strips of newspaper form graphs in *Second Letter to My Mother*, resting beside cursive handwriting that cannot be deciphered by onlookers. The work projects Rai's bottled up feelings for her mother, who passed away 12 years ago. "The mother is someone you always remember and is the core of your life. I used to share many experiences with her that I cannot share with anyone else, even my husband and daughter. One shares a relationship with parents for 40, 50 or 60 years and then suddenly they are gone. For me, this work is a revelation of a mysterious surrounding. Where do our loved ones go after death? Do they come back to this universe?" she asks. Her work, staring at us, tries its best to answer her questions.

"My Play Zero" is on at Nature Morte, Neeti Bagh till November 18

A Book and Some Banter

In his latest production, *Qissa Urdu Ki Aakhri Kitaab Ka*, Danish Husain adapts Urdu poet Ibn-e-Insha's acclaimed satire for Prithvi Festival in Mumbai

DIPTINAGPAUL-D'SOUZA

WELCOMING THE audience, one of the cast members steps forward for the routine announcement at the beginning of a play, and requests them to keep the phones on silent. As he belts it out in Urdu, Danish Husain interrupts him. "Maybe you should wiggle your bum a wee bit as you ask them to place their phones on vibrator mode," he says, demonstrating it for his colleague at the rehearsal of their performance for the ongoing Prithvi Festival in Mumbai. The cast and crew laughs and instantly sees merit in Husain's suggestion.

This mix of flamboyance and humour has made Husain a favourite in Mumbai's theatre circuit. The theatre actor-director cleverly employs this in his latest play, *Qissa Urdu Ki Aakhri Kitaab Ka*, a political satire which premieres at Prithvi Festival today. Based on Pakistani humourist and poet Ibn-e-Insha's *Urdu Ki Aakhri Kitaab*, the play is a two-actor farce, performed by Husain, along with Gopal Datt, known for his work on stage as well as the popular web series,



Gopal Datt (left) with Danish Husain in a scene from *Qissa Urdu Ki Aakhri Kitaab Ka* Kevin D'Souza

TVF Pitchers.

"The original text is a witty take on what went on in Pakistan during the '70s. Ibn-e-

Insha wrote this satire in a textbook format, dividing the chapters into lessons on history, geography, grammar, mathematics,

moral science and so on, along with his poetry," explains Husain, who has directed the play. However, Husain presents it as a mix of banter, music, satire and storytelling. "The content and topicality," explains Husain, "merits a conversational kind of performance. The audience shouldn't feel that the play has been 'performed'."

While it draws from Ibn-e-Insha's text, *Qissa Urdu Ki Aakhri Kitaab Ka* is largely rewritten to balance it with what is topical in India today. Fake news, family WhatsApp groups, Taj Mahal, *gaumutra* — these and other subjects that dominate conversations and current affairs, slip into the play. "Like we tell the audience, it's an updated version of the book, a Version 2.0," Husain says.

The original may have been penned back in the '70s, in context of Pakistan, but there are several commonalities between then and now, which also apply to India. Husain has retained those bits. For instance certain lessons in history regarding the Mughal rule.

In the 75-minute performance, Datt is the voice of reason while Husain assumes the role of a counter-voice, while also ques-

tioning the norm. The former uses Hindi whereas the actor-director and founder of The Hoshruha Repertory, performs in Urdu. Husain, known for helping revive Dastangoi, explains that he didn't wish to force on Datt a language he may not be fluent in. "I play to my co-actor's strengths. Gopal has a fabulous sense of timing with comedy and may not have been able to improvise the text on stage if he were to perform in Urdu, a language I am comfortable with," he points out, adding that the play uses improv comedy that he has been recently experimenting with in his other popular play, *Qissebaazi*.

Husain believes this play pushes the envelope by combining various performance formats, and also offers musical interludes in the form of Ibn-e-Insha's poetry, performed by Shantanu Nandan Herlekar. "The closest it comes to is *Aisi Taisi Democracy*, where the stand-up comics mix gags and satire with music. But here, we also adapt an acclaimed literary work with all its nuances. It is, still, an ode to Ibn-e-Insha," he says.