

Rajit Kapur, Shernaz Patel on performing 'Love Letters' at Delhi's Old World Theatre Festival

Fifteen plays. Ten days. The 2017 edition of the Old World Theatre Festival (OWTF) that kick-started on 6 October 2017 at the India Habitat Centre, New Delhi, has theatre lovers rejoicing at the return of some of the most prestigious productions on stage.

In an exclusive chat with us, veteran thespians Rajit Kapur and Shernaz Patel spoke about one of their longest-running plays — *Love Letters* (directed by Rahul da Cunha), the relevance of handwritten letters in a digital world, and their memories of working with one of the stalwarts of Indian theatre, Tom Alter.

Love At A Click

Letters are passé. The ink doesn't flow freely, and emotions are bunched up in 140 characters or less. Does a play on love letters have any meaning, then? For Rajit Kapur, love letters are precious. "Letters have become a novelty in today's age. If someone receives a letter, it becomes really special and cherished by the person. The value of a letter has really gone up," he says. Shernaz Patel too endorses the magic of handwritten letters and says, "I think love letters matter now more than ever. In an age where people make up and break up on SMS, it's so important to remember the absolute beauty and power of words. We all love receiving cards and notes that we can keep forever... that don't get erased with the click of a button."



Rajit and Shernaz perform *Love Letters*

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Love Letters Sans Letters

AR Gurney's epistolary play *Love Letters*, which premiered in 1988, has had several adaptations over the years — Javed Siddiqui's *Tumhari Amrita* (starring Shabana Azmi and Farooq Sheikh, directed by Feroz Abbas Khan) being one of the most popular. Rahul da Cunha's adaptation is unique. The protagonists are not reading out of letters, they have the lines memorised instead. Does it become difficult for the artistes to resist the temptation of looking at each other?

"Yes, it was something that evolved during rehearsals. But, the letters are a constant presence in the show and so even though we know the words, we create the illusion that all our conversations are on paper. That is also why we never look at each other," says Shernaz Patel who has been performing this play, together with Rajit Kapur, since 1992.

This theatre festival, she will also be seen in *The Glass Menagerie*, Rajit Kapur's directorial venture. "The relationship we have on stage is one of complete comfort and trust. It is a blessing to have him as a co-actor and as director of *The Glass Menagerie*, being an actor himself, he knows how to delicately get you to find the character. He is gentle and open and yet very clear about what he wants," Shernaz adds. "I think our production is very different from most of the others, because they have followed the playwright's directions with two actors sitting and reading letters on a table. However, we have redesigned the whole play and we take you through a journey with them ageing from eight to 60 years. So, our approach and design (have) been totally different," adds Rajit.

About directing a play like *The Glass Menagerie*, Rajit Kapur says, "It is one of the world classics — an evergreen and universal play — that still holds relevance today irrespective of time, place or person. It is one of my favourites and I acted in it 25 years ago, where I played the gentleman caller, and now to revisit it as a director was challenging. I decided to approach it differently by adding a fifth character: a musician. I hope I have done (it) justice. It is such beautiful writing that even if you read it, you can connect instantly."

Love Letters In A Bank!

It's been over 50 years that Melissa Gardner and Andrew Makepeace Ladd III have woven and exchanged letters expressing not only their love for each other but also promises, some kept, others not made; big dreams, small victories, defeats and disappointments. How has the life of two characters in separation evolved?

"Our first show was in a bank! We were nervous and excited, and of course, had no clue how it would be received. But the response that night was overwhelming and has been the same over all these years. We have lived a life over 25 years; so, while the second half (when we grow older) was something we could only imagine 25 years ago, today we are at that age, so we actually understand it. The first half now is actually more difficult as we have to play children and so the audience has to stretch their imagination a bit!" Shernaz Patel shares.

Actor-director Rajit Kapur reminisces over the first show of *Love Letters* at ANZ Grindlays Bank's foyer and says, "We didn't know what we were getting into. We had an audience of 100- 120 people and the response was tremendous. It started off with 10-12 shows and we have carried on for over 500 shows over the last 25 years. It is wonderful that we are still running to full houses with *Love Letters*."

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Byomkesh On Stage?

When you're in conversation with Rajit Kapur, you cannot help but bring in Saradindu Bandyopadhyay's memorable sleuth Byomkesh Bakshi. With Basu Chatterjee's TV series *Byomkesh Bakshi*, the actor became a household name in the 1990s. As a slight digression, on being asked if he would ever like the Bengali detective to return to stage, Rajit says, "No, that's something that has been done. I feel it's over. It's out of my system. Although, its impact has been tremendous and everlasting."

On the other side of the spectrum, Shernaz Patel seems hopeful about the future and revival of short films. Not long ago, she was seen in Adhiraj Bose's critically acclaimed short film *Interior Cafe Night* with Naseeruddin Shah. A film about unforgettable conversations between two lovers who reunite after several years, Shernaz says, "The short film is a wonderful format. It's the same as reading a great short story. It's also a boon for young and talented film-makers as it becomes a calling card when they are pitching for feature film work. Besides, in an age when attention spans seem to have reduced, it provides perfect length for online consumption!"

Tom Alter: A pure heart and a dear friend

The passing of one of theatre's most revered thespians, Tom Alter, has left a void in the hearts of all theatre lovers. A passionate actor and a compassionate human being, Tom Alter meant different things to different people. "My memory of Tom Alter will always take me back to the way we used to greet each other. We literally used to jump on each other whenever we met. I don't think I have been that vociferous and expressive with someone or rather anyone, on seeing that person," recalls Rajit.

Shernaz Patel who recently featured with Tom Alter in *The Black Cat*, a short film based on Ruskin Bond's story, walks down memory lane, "Tom and I had worked together in three plays in the 1980s and early '90s. But we had not stayed in touch. The five days we spent in Bhimtal this April rekindled our friendship and we had such an incredible and fun time. We laughed, sang songs and had long chats. I can't still get my head around to the fact that he is gone, but I am so thankful to have had these five days with him. He was a wonderful, kind and loving human being...a pure heart and a dear friend. I miss him dearly."

What: Old World Theatre Festival

When: Up to 15 October 2017; 5 pm onwards

Where: The Stein Auditorium, India Habitat Centre, New Delhi