

House full of charms

Mumbai's oldest single-screen cinema reinvents itself by blending classics with the common

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The Edward Theatre's attempt to create a crossover audience has been successful, with its traditional working-class clientele and film buffs experiencing cinema in an environment different from air-conditioned multiplexes

The projectionist adjusts the reel and, craning his neck to peer through the small window, shouts: "Ab kaisa dikh raha hai [How is it looking now]?" With an assortment of nods, thumbs-up signs and shouts, members of the audience below let him know everything is fine.

As the screen comes alive with the Indian tricolour and strains of the national anthem, the audience stands up. Some continue to sit, only to be admonished by a man who suddenly appears from behind the screen and barks: "Sab khade ho jao [Stand up, everyone]".

Outside, the ticket counters — one for men and another for women — are doing brisk business for the matinee show of Godard's *Breathless*. The motley bunch in front of the counters would raise quite a few eyebrows among observers.

Shanty dwellers and labourers from the surrounding area rub shoulders with film buffs and intellectuals clad in handloom kurtas. This is the Edward Theatre, Mumbai's oldest single-screen theatre.

The seedy theatre in Kalbadevi was built in the 1800s as part of the Baroque movement that marked the city's architecture. It is known for its reruns of old, cheesy Hindi films, such as Raja Babu, and for its working-class clientele.

However, the Edward underwent a transformation recently and began to screen foreign cinema classics.

The makeover was part of an ongoing certificate course called City Narratives in Literature and Cinema, organised by the city's Majlis, a centre for rights and interdisciplinary art programmes, and organised by the SNDT Women's University and Max Mueller Bhavan.

Why the Edward? "I would say it is a guerrilla counter-act against the disappearance of so many things in the city," Madhusree Dutta of Majlis says. "So many things are fading out — old, single-screen theatres, prints. I also wanted to bring the city back to the city. Mumbai is increasingly becoming a cluster of villages because of the class and neighbourhood segregations that exist today. Nobody enters each other's space. We wanted to break that."

Dutta has also launched Cinema City, a project to create an archive about the city whose identity is integral with the production of cinema. The installation made it to this year's Berlin International Festival.

Dutta says it was Marla Stukenberg, the director of Max Mueller Bhavan in Mumbai, who suggested the Edward as the venue, as she had a soft spot for the theatre. "Edward has a strong German connection," Stukenberg said. "Some years back, I had seen a documentary here about the theatre's previous owner — a German woman called Gertrude. I have been hooked to the theatre's strange beauty since."

The woman Stukenberg was referring to was the late Gertrude Bharucha, wife of Bejan Bharucha. The Bharuchas owned the theatre. Today it is owned by the Poonawalas, relatives of the Bharuchas.

After Bejan's death, Gertrude wanted the theatre to remain dedicated to the working-class clientele it had served in recent years — the labourers, migrant workers and even beggars from the surrounding area, who came to take a break from the daily grind.

Ticket prices were deliberately kept low — Rs28 (\$0.60) is the most expensive ticket. Even the names given to the seating areas have not changed. "Orchestra seats" are the ones closest to the screen, the middle tier is the dress circle and the top tier — the furthest from the screen — is the "first class".

Edward's interiors make for the perfect backdrop for the City Narratives films. Its pastel blue interiors with white and gold trimmings, a stage, three tiers of seating and an orchestra pit are throwbacks from the past.

Over the course of its history, the theatre has been an opera house for British garrisons and a

popular venue for regional Gujarati and Parsi theatre. It has even played a bit role in India's freedom movement as the site where Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi made a speech. Well-known film critic Rashid Irani said he fondly remembered weekends spent as a child at the Edward Theatre in the 1950s and 1960s, watching serialised films such as *Spy Smasher* and *Flash Gordon* and reruns of Hollywood films.

"I saw a lot of really good westerns there, such as *The Sheepman* and *The Fastest Gun Alive* by Glenn Ford," he said. "Because Kalbadevi at that time was a predominantly Catholic and Parsi locality, Edward used to frequently show *King of Kings* by Cecil B. DeMille. My mother took me there to see *Pyaasa*."

Irani visited the Edward Theatre for a City Narratives screening and said he was amazed it had stayed the same. "It's a great idea to show these films at Edward but the sound is abysmal," he said.

But, overall, the experience was not to be missed, he said. "When this man yelled 'Khade ho jao [Stand up]', as the national anthem was being played, I was thrilled. Where do you get this nowadays? It is in the tradition of cinema."

The experiment in trying to create a crossover audience has been successful, with the Edward's working-class clientele and Mumbai's film buffs experiencing cinema in an environment that is different from air-conditioned multiplexes.

During the short period that City Narratives films were screened, the theatre reminded patrons of the days before multiplexes were invented, when cinema halls were democratic spaces and the audience was drawn from all classes.

As Irani said: "Nothing can beat the sheer thrill of watching a film in a house-full hall in the company of a really responsive audience".

Stukenberg and Dutta do not have any concrete plan for any project for the Edward in the future but said they were open to ideas such as City Narratives, which would showcase the beauty of the theatre. "However, I do not want to focus on Edward as a piece of nostalgia," Dutta said.

Anuradha Sengupta is a journalist based in Mumbai.