

## The Latest at Goethe

### Cineastes in Mumbai: Breathless in Kalbadevi



Edward Theatre: A little Bollywood, a little Germany (Photo: Amrit Gangar)

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Those who follow Mumbai's cultural calendar would have been startled to notice foreign films being screened at Edward Theatre every Thursday. That's as incongruous as, say, finding filet mignon on the menu of Shiv Sagar or listening to a Bach recital at Razzberry Rhinoceros. After all, Edward, which fits snugly between the Udupis and textbook shops of Kalbadevi Road, is a firmly working-class cinema hall that screens dated Hindi films. The posters outside the ticket booth at the moment are of films like *Kashmir ki Kali*, *Zaalim* and *Daud*. However two weeks ago, Wolfgang Becker's German film *Good bye, Lenin!* was screened at Edward and last Thursday Jean-Luc Godard's *Breathless* was shown.

The public screenings are part of a certificate course called *City Narratives in Literature and Cinema*, which is being run by Majlis, a two-pronged organisation that promotes the arts and also deals with legal advocacy for disadvantaged women and the arts, SNDT Women's University and Max Mueller Bhavan (Goethe-Institut).

There are several reasons for the unlikely choice of Edward. For Marla Stukenberg, the director of Mumbai's Max Mueller Bhavan, the theatre forms part of her first impressions of the city. Soon after arriving in Mumbai in 2008, she watched a documentary at Edward on Gertrud Bharucha (nee Binz), a German woman married to Bejan Bharucha, whose family

ran the theatre from the 1930s. The Bharuchas had leased the property from the owner, who migrated to Pakistan after Partition. Gertrud, who died in September 2005, was credited with ensuring that the cinema remained unchanged and served the working class population of the area. Even today, the most expensive ticket is just 28 Rupiah (46 cent).

“I was struck by this strange kind of morbid beauty that theatre has,” Stukenberg says. “I learnt it is one of the few stand-alone cinema screens in city. When the initiative began I remembered Edward and thought ‘let’s have screenings in an alternative space.’ It’s not really an alternative space, but to have screenings of foreign films is new. It seems Gertrud also defended this cinema. And I felt this is something special and needs some support because it’s part of Bombay’s history.”

### **Like a giant wedding cake**

Majlis’ Madhusree Dutta describes the screenings as a “small guerrilla counter-act” against the disappearance of an entire cinema-going culture. “Old theatres are going away, there are more multiplexes, cinema is getting domesticated, nobody stores prints anymore,” she says.

In the midst of the homogenous tide of multiplexes, Edward has become quaint. The theatre was built in the mid to late 1800s and served as a venue for plays. Later it began screening movies. Bharucha’s nephew Burjor Poonawala recalls watching American films like Captain Marvel and Gang Busters as a child. Poonawala’s nephews now run the theatre. The modestly sized cinema hall is designed to resemble an opera house. There are three tiers – the stalls that still have wooden seats and two levels of balconies decorated with floral reliefs. On the sides are smaller balconies, like opera boxes. It’s like sitting inside a giant wedding cake.

The theatre is also a reminder of Indian cinema’s German connection. In the 1920s and ’30s, a handful of German directors and technicians worked with Indian cinemawallahs. Franz Osten collaborated with Himanshu Rai to make *Prem Sanyas* (1925), *Shiraz* (1928) and *Prapancha Pash* (1929). Osten became one of the first full-time directors of Rai’s production company Bombay Talkies and directed *Acchut Kanya* in 1936. Another German filmmaker who worked in India was Paul Zils, who joined Indian Films Information, which later became the Films Division.

“But for me that is an anecdote,” Dutta says. “We are talking about cityscape and Edward is part of cityscape.” The experiment seems to have succeeded. Stukenberg says that the two screenings have drawn a mixed audience – the art house crowd that one routinely finds at such events as well as Edward regulars. The hall was three quarters full for the screening of Godard even though it had been raining heavily the entire day.

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**Cinema City:** The four-month study course *City Narratives in Film and Literature*, which the Goethe-Institut Mumbai is organizing on the initiative of Majlis, an interdisciplinary arts and research centre, and in cooperation with Majlis and the SNDT Women's University in Mumbai, is one module of the project *Cinema City*. In addition to lectures, seminars and practical exercises, the programme involves screenings of selected international historic films in Edward Theatre. This historic cinema is a landmark of the golden Bollywood era. *Cinema City* deals with the city in films and with how the phenomenon of the cinema affects life in the cities and the perceptions of the urban. What stories does the city tell us in film, in what light does the film show its city, and, in turn, how do film, the cinema and the material aspects of film production affect the city? *Cinema City* is supported by HIVOS and the Ford Foundation.