

# WORLD PERFORMING ARTS FESTIVAL, LAHORE

**Simon Broughton reports from a festival pioneering Pakistan's arts and music revival**

**A**s you walk into the grounds of the Alhambra Cultural Complex in Lahore, Pakistan you are faced with an extraordinary spectacle. Against the backdrop of the walls of the circular open-air theatre, vast doll-like puppet figures wander around with wide eyes and arms outstretched greeting the visitors. The main music performances take place in the large open-air theatre, a little brutalist architecturally, but with good sightlines from its concrete terraces. In a ring around it are seven smaller tents (called 'camps') for more intimate performances. With some tasty food stalls thrown in, the complex becomes a lively cultural village for ten days with music, theatre, puppetry and dance performances from early afternoon till around midnight. There are film screenings too. The main music concerts at 9pm each evening are billed as 'Pop Night', 'Rock Night', 'Classical Night', 'Sufi Night' and so on, although the categories are pretty porous with many bands cropping up on several nights. Lahore is Pakistan's cultural capital, but there's no other opportunity in the year to witness such a concentration of musical and theatrical talent. Tickets are very reasonable ranging from 100 to 300 rupees (£1 to £3).

The World Performing Arts Festival has been running in various forms since 1992 and is probably the largest festival of its kind in South Asia. It's organised by the formidable team of four Peerzada brothers. They have a missionary zeal to raise the profile of the performing arts in Pakistan. The president of the festival is Faizaan Peerzada: "The first reason for doing this is that Pakistani artists don't get enough exposure, particularly as several governments in Pakistan have not encouraged the arts – and classical music and dance have suffered particularly. The festival has become a platform where



Above: festival president Faizaan Peerzada

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artists can collaborate and interact and it's become especially important when there are so many misconceptions about Pakistan. It brings foreign artists here and opens their eyes through their experiences of the city and the reactions of our audiences to their work. There are so many layers of reasons why the festival should be done."

The festival runs on a very limited budget which means Peerzada has to rely on bands that can finance their own trip or get support from the British Council and similar organisations elsewhere. These acts might be self-selecting, to some extent, but they come with an enthusiasm about being part of the event and collaborating with local artists. The final 'Fusion Night' included collaborations between Czech folk-rock band Čankišou and Sufi singer (and BBC Planets award-winner) Sain Zahoor, between the Norwegian female trio Fryd and whirling *dhol* drummers Gongga & Mithu Sain, and the intriguing French band Pain d'Epices with the spectacular *qawwali* singer Sher Miandad Khan. For me, the main attraction were the Pakistani artists taking part. It was my introduction to pop bands like Jal and Ali Zafar, the great classical singer Shafqat Ali Khan and, of course, many wonderful Sufi singers.

The vast figures with their arms outstretched ambling around the entrance

to the complex are a reminder that one of Faizaan Peerzada's main interests is puppetry. Amongst the performers are Movingstage Marionette Company who usually perform on a canal barge in Little Venice, London; a Turkish company performing *karagöz* shadow theatre; Florian Feisal from Germany who seals himself inside a latex bubble, contorts himself into extraordinary positions and comes close to suffocating himself in the process; and a regular afternoon showcase for local folk puppeteers. There's a wooden booth which looks exactly as you imagine a traditional puppet theatre. A husband and wife team creates the show – the woman sings the story accompanying herself on a small *dholak* drum, while the man, behind the booth, operates the brightly coloured puppets and blows a whistle in his mouth to simulate their speech. There's a kingly figure with a huge Rajasthani-style moustache, a *jogi* (snakecharmer) confronted with a pair of threatening black cobras and a rider galloping furiously on a camel. Women and children watched entranced as you feel they must have done for centuries. But it's a dying art and Peerzada, who's researched the traditional puppetry of Pakistani Punjab, reckons there are only 25 families still doing it. "Folk puppetry suffered a major decline in the 70s thanks to TV," he explains. "But it



The open-air theatre in Lahore where most of the musical performances take place



Above: puppeteer Khalid Hussain, hailing from Dunya Pur. Left: multicultural collaboration between CankiSou and Sain Zahoor Below: qawwali singer Sher Miandad Khan performs with his group



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lingered on in the rural areas, although the few performers left are in their old age. I'd say in five or six years we won't even have them and that's very sad."

Lahore is only 20 minutes drive from the Indian border, yet for many years travel between India and Pakistan was impossible. One of the significant achievements of this festival is the contribution it's made to breaking down the cultural barriers and the number of performers who come over from India. Its contribution towards dance is particularly important as traditions like Kathak have been neglected in Pakistan since independence. There's a tendency in Islam to see female dancing as something akin to prostitution and, although Kathak has an illustrious history in the region, it's still widely seen as 'Indian dance'. Since president Musharraf came to power, there's been a more supportive climate for all the arts and he even paid the festival a visit. The heavy security threw everything into chaos, but was a useful pat on the back for the Peerzadas.

In Pakistan, an event like this becomes political just by existing. Before the last year's festival there were protests from the MMA (Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal), the coalition of Islamist parties whose conservative clerics disapprove of music and dance. They complained that after the



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devastating earthquake of October 2005 it was "like rubbing salt into the wound". Faizaan Peerzada, of course, argues the opposite: "Pakistan has been through a great deal of sadness. But we are artists, we can't become doctors, or engineers or cranes. We're the engineers of hearts and minds and I believe the festival has consoled those who've been affected by this tragedy and helped them to move on." The festival helped in a concrete way too by donating 30% of the box office revenue – over one million rupees – to the earthquake fund.

Lahore is perhaps Pakistan's most appealing city – similar in character to Delhi, but smaller, greener and much less traffic choked. For anyone wanting to combine the spectacular sights of the old city, the fort and the Badshahi mosque with some of the country's musical highlights, then the World Performing Arts Festival has it all – except a cold beer. ●

**The 2006 Festival takes place from November 9-20**  
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 (operational from end of Oct)