Ode to the Orient

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Bust Asia's talent and resources come to the fore when musicians, painters, dancers and poets from around the world meet at Jindal in South Korea recently. ANIL SIVASIVAN writes on what made his experiences unforgettable.

Coined by the moonlight, the liquid moonlight illuminating the path ahead of us. It is hilly, cold winds blowing an orchestra from different directions.

There is no place where we knew how it happened.

There are hills on the island that have never been.

There are faces turned into a corner of our world, glowing and Sierra at two strange men from different worlds.

The only truth we hold close to us is the music we both make, and we marvel at it far for it is not a language.

Eight hours of bitter cold, all hours away from home and everything we hold dear, we come at a lonely rendezvous. Everything is slowly gaining, and the contrast is too much for two

travel-weary Indian musicians. Renewed copper veins, shiny steel surfaces, glass and concrete. Oriental landscapes and Chinese block printing offer an oddly disjointed, surreal landscape to a sudden heart of strange men and women with equally strange ways of expressing themselves.

Both of us ran into the rooms we have been promised, turn out the lights and drift into a deep sleep. Already we know that this is going to be the sort of experience that cannot continue in a lifetime.

Indeed, ANIL SIVASIVAN and I are very fortunate to be chosen to participate in a very special residency entitled "The Exploration of Culture" along with an array of musicians, painters, dancers, poets and festival organizers from around the world at the National Traditional Arts Performance Centre in Jindo, South Korea. Jindo is a small island off the southern coast of South Korea, and is nearly two miles away from the sea.

The project was sponsored by the Korea Arts Management Service (KAMS), which works in association with the India-Korea (Daeho) Centre, Chennai.

Cut off from other mundane distractions and sequenced with other souls of a similar disposition as ourselves, we could not be more expected, and more. We played, composed, created, argued and wrote, and all this created and wrote, and we discovered ourselves.

What we tried to make was not simply an art, but a way of thinking, a way to understand the world. What we tried to create was a bridge between the East and West, between the past and the present, and between the dreams of our ancestors and the hopes of our children.

Totally alien

Indeed, ANIL SIVASIVAN and I felt more alien in Korea than we ever have been in our remote parts of North America. Linguistic divides, cultural diversity and an equally old and new world culture are the countries of the Far East at a distance even from us in geographically close South Korea. There is nothing "familiar here," no easy English translations of traditional material, and no room to pause on our world. India.

The traditional Korean artist is proud of what he has, and shows little effort to either dilute or categorize his work as suitable for foreign sensibility.

For two weeks, we were made to live with and work alongside brilliant artists, choosing our own groups and staying within these groups to create performance-worthy showcases combining multiple cultural and aesthetic influences. Highly experimental and utterly unconventional to the idea of approaching musical performances in such an ad hoc manner, it forms a love-hate relationship with this residency that underscores our experience throughout. Today, a month after the residency concluded, I am happy to stand corrected on my earlier reservations.

Master musicians

Working with master musicians Won Il and Benjamin Vandusen among other musicians was one of the highlights of the journey, as composers and musicians of different traditions have worked closely together.

Using his skills as a traditional Korean flautist, Won Il crafts traditional music to modern music. To me, it was like taking traditional calligraphy and turning it into sound. Each sound is delicate, and sounds almost commonplace in isolation. Little by little, the sound gradually changes shape, presenting a desirable pattern. In another composition, the sound sounds more passionate against a sustained silence. The music is more musically overwhelming, even as a person, and accomplishing as a musician. A jazz pianist from Brazil, he brings in the moving bass and the polyphonic flavour into his work. When he begins to play, a group of Korean musicians join in on instruments like the gongs, the xylophone, kora and the piano (dual-reed flute-like instrument). The effect is like watching an Afro-Caribbean filmmaker contrast and blend into a fantastic musical texture.

In our group, Wee Joe Yoon, an acclaimed and highly talented drummer and dancer inspired us to groove together with our expression and "weave the dance" in our music. We have shared a musical journey and have provided an open heart to accept and blend into a new world.

When the two weeks came to a close, revealed that the true exploration had happened in our minds. It accomplished what we both had needed a physical, musical and aesthetic distance from everything we were used to. In answering the limits of our own imagination, we have emerged bigger for this experience.