Urging people to take up some form of art to rejuvenate themselves, several panelists at the healthcare and education industries speak of ‘The Importance of Arts Post Covid’ at The Little Festival.

In a trip to Germany, I came across the perfect example of why art is important. There was a concentration camp where a Polish woman would smuggle people in, so the children at the camp could draw what it would be like if they got out of the camp. Once the war ended, these paintings preserved by the woman in a container under her bed were displayed in a museum. Then, a group of successful men and women (the children now grown up) showed up to see the paintings. They spoke of how the only reason they survived the camps is that they had art, and the power of pencil and paper. That is the power of art. Art is hope.”

This story narrated by Krishnakumar B (KKB), the artistic director of The Little Theatre, at a panel discussion called ‘The importance of arts post COVID’ at The Little Festival speaks to the artist in everyone.

During the pandemic, many picked up (again) various forms of art as a hobby, as therapy, as a skill and much more. Despite the urgency and trauma that the world faced, art still found a way to thrive. Discussing this, and encouraging the audience to keep up their artistic spirit alive were two panels at the event: one discussing the importance of arts in healthcare and the other in education.

A medley of health and art
The first panel comprised Dr R Padmavati, director of CARE, Dr Arun Sawant, retired director ICH, pediatrics, neonatal specialist, PWG Davidar, IAS (retired), advisor to TNEGA, and Ashrita Keshav, Kuchipudi dancer, psychologist and expressive art therapist, with moderator Dr Rohini Rau, trustee at The Little Theatre, Internal Medicine/Functional Medicine doctor and TEDx fellow.

The isolation, boredom and devastation during the pandemic left us all in a state devoid of any movement or exercise. “During COVID, one of the main drawbacks was that we had become sedentary. Art engages your body and mind, and you can lose yourself in the soil. It’s important to integrate art into your life,” he noted. The panel spoke also of the importance of art education and how it is crucial to build a healthy space for it. Where organisations facilitating arts spoke of adopting arts and adapting to the new conditions, the educators spoke at length about the scope and importance of art in education. “There are so many practical difficulties in implementing arts in education. The belief that we need to carry on with the boxes we’re in—this is the only way, and not allowing the boxes to be imagined for you. The more they are not thought of, the more it is to realise arts in education.”

The second panel featured Rathi Jaffar, director at INKO; S Bhavanishankar, director; strategy, innovation, Lalaji Memorial Omega International School; Divakar Subramani, musician, composer, music educator and ethnomusicologist, Janaka Pushpanathan, director South India, British Council, with moderator Krishnakumar Rathi and Janaka shed light on how the ideas of art and performance changed during the pandemic when everything went digital and “hybrid”. “Overnight, we had to move everything to digital. We managed to put out a lot of research work. Some data was hard-hitting. We found that, during the pandemic, 30 per cent artists were losing out on 80 per cent income.”

Sahana Iyer

Photos: Srikanth R

Art in education is certainly something we have to start talking about. The panelists believed it was already on the radar. “Now it is time to realise arts in education.”

Rathi Jaffar

The first panel spoke of the human nature to focus on perfection and perfectionism that are often hindered by art. The panelists talked about the importance of enjoying art and the benefits it brings. "There was a lot of discussion and a lot more to be spoken, but as the panel ended for the night, amidst a hushed excitement, it certainly inspired the school-going children (and a few adults) in the crowd to search for the artist in them."
Panel at Chennai's 'The Little Festival' calls for treating trauma through art

Urging people to take up some form of art to rejuvenate themselves, several panellists of the healthcare and education industries spoke of "The Importance of Arts post Covid" at the Little Festival

"In a trip to Germany, I came across the perfect example of why art is important. There was a concentration camp, where a Polish woman would struggle people, so the children at the camp could draw what it would be like if they got out of the camp. Once the war ended, these paintings - preserved and taken by the Nazis - were displayed in a museum. Then, a group of successful men and women (the children now grown up) showed up to see the paintings. They spoke of how the only reason they survived the camps is that they had hope, and the power of paintings helped them,' narrated Dr Rahul Rau, trustee at The Little Theatre, Internal Medicine/Functional Medicine doctor and TED fellow.

The isolation, boredom and destitution during the pandemic left us all in a state devoid of any movement or activity. "During COVID, one of the main drawbacks was that we had become sedentary. Art engages your body and mind fully, it’s an escape with the soul. It’s important to integrate art into your life. There was a lot of de-personalisation we saw in the healthcare industry," said Dr Anam Shereen, an art doctor and nurses because if they got involved, there would be no self-preservation. There were programmes worldwide (now abroad), where they set aside time and practice art, music, dance, theatre to express what their 5th dimension felt. "Art directors, adding that their development stage became more efficient and more mindful.

There was also the question of the mental health of hospital workers. Dr Anam showed the joy that dance brought to Indian healthcare workers who were constantly in the presence of death. "We had one video door by the nurses who were dancing. This was shared on WhatsApp and seeing this, other groups got inspired too. At one point, it even became a routine about which hospital’s performance is the best. When given the opportunity to destress, even the ones considered strict began dancing. It is about having a healthy space in hospitals. We also worked with some hospitals to paint in patient wards, in themes, so it allows the mind to reorient. You should not allow your mind to run on one track. The more tracks, the more cognitive functions you have and you become better," he noted.

The panel spoke of how the human nature to focus on perfection, rather than enjoying the artform and encouraged us to move away from the former, towards the latter.

Art in education

The second panel featured Ratul Jatkar, director at India, S Bhaskaran, director-strategy, research and innovation, Lalit Memorial Omega International School, Dhruber Subarmaniam, music educator, and eThekwini music educator and eThekwini education and music coordinator, Josnka PudzhanKaren, director South India, British Council, with moderator Kristinakumar. Ratul and Jatkar shed light on how the idea of art and performance changed during the pandemic when everything went digital and "physical space was replaced with virtual space.

"Observingly, we had to move everything to digital. We managed to pull off a lot of research work. Some was hard-hitting. We found that, during the pandemic, 50 per cent artists were losing out on 80 per cent income," shared Jatkar. She added that while it is great to learn an instrument, say, an instrument, art is about having a conversation, and allowing yourself to think beyond the routine.

Where organisations facilitating art spoke of adjusting and adapting to the new conditions, the educators spoke about the scope of involving art in education. "There are no practical difficulties in involving art in education. The belief system that we carry and the boxes we’re in... anything outside of language is maths and science. The other subjects were, at best, co-curricular or, at worst, extra-curricular. So, this is the boarding of finer aspects of life.

They have been pushed to the back burner, but nothing stops us. At schools or educational institutions, we are engaged in associating arts in different forms. Language and maths are taught through rhyme, repetitive patterns are taught through rhyme. Biology has a certain aspect to drawing. (There is art in) everything we experience in the education landscape but it goes unnoticed," explained Bhaskaran, while Jatkar added that arts is not co-curricular or extra-curricular.

There was a lot more that was discussed and a lot more to be spoken, but as the panel ended for the night, amidst a roaring noise, it had certainly inspired the schooling children (a few adults in the crowd) to search for the artist in them.

Focus on enjoying

The first panel spoke of the human nature to focus on perfection, rather than enjoying the artform and encouraged us to move away from the former, towards the latter.