

Date:13/09/2008 URL:

<http://www.thehindu.com/thehindu/mp/2008/09/13/stories/2008091352231400.htm>

[Back](#) [Metro Plus](#) [Bangalore](#) [Chennai](#) [Coimbatore](#) [Delhi](#) [Hyderabad](#) [Kochi](#) [Madurai](#)  
[Mangalore](#) [Pondicherry](#) [Tiruchirapalli](#) [Thiruvananthapuram](#) [Vijayawada](#) [Visakhapatnam](#)

## Theatrenomics

Five years on, Evam has an economic record that few English theatre groups can boast of, says SHIV S. KUMAR

PHOTO: S.S. KUMAR



There's no money in theatre... or, is there?

At a symposium during this year's MetroPlus Theatre Fest, Shernaz Patel complained about the absence of money in theatre. There were murmurs of assent all round at the comment from the well-known actor who co-founded Rage, the Mumbai theatre group.

But here in Chennai, standing this logic on its head, a theatre company is celebrating its fifth economically successful anniversary. Evam is 16 plays and 225 shows old, and going from strength to strength.

The company is poised for a turnover of Rs.1.5 crore this year, and is looking to up this to a whopping Rs.7.5 crore by 2010. It's got an office on Chamiers Road, a godown in T. Nagar, six full-time staff and plenty of business on its hands. Very few English theatre groups in the country can boast of an economic record like this.

Just how does Evam do it? For one thing, it stages what audiences want to watch. Their repertoire consists largely of comedies and while many of them such as 'Neil Simon' and 'Monty Python' are familiar, Evam has managed to create and retain a loyal audience for its shows. Its recent production, 'Doubles, Triples and Quadruples' ran to full houses over two days; many had to be turned back.

A reliance on comedy has led to the criticism that they don't do serious theatre, a comment that doesn't bother the group's founders Karthik and Sunill at all. After all, we're bringing the audiences back, they say. Theatre Lite — which they do with some proficiency — has worked well for them, and enabled them

to make a living from the profession.

These are not rich kids who live out their fantasies on stage thanks to an ancestral fortune, actors who believe a cursory reading of Stanislavski arms you for a major role on stage; or directors who take refuge behind a half-baked intellectualism, a knowing sneer, and the comforting delusion that the audience is too immature to understand and appreciate what they are doing. Better good accessible theatre than bad ‘serious’ theatre, appears to be the Evam philosophy.

Another reason for its success is the fact that Evam provides a “warm and welcoming space.” From content to form, everything has been thought through. From the ticketing to the seating, to the chocolates handed out, everything is designed to enhance the experience; and which, in essence, is a fun experience. Unlike many other groups, Evam has created a large audience data base, which it is constantly updating and in touch with.

Today Evam has grown into something bigger than Karthik and Sunill: it’s a brand in itself, which perhaps also explains the success of their shows. “It’s not just us,” they point out. “It’s about all the young people too who make up Evam.”

Today, they’re into a number of ‘verticals’ as they put it: public shows (read plays), corporate shows, theatre workshops for companies (corporate training, in a very broad sense), student forums and managing the MetroPlus Theatre Fest. There’s not much money in the student interactions, they confess, but they love doing it because it’s a chance to fire young people’s imaginations and open them up to the possibilities around them. “If we can succeed with theatre, it only shows that you can do just about anything.”

The focus and energy have rubbed off on their employees. Karthik and Sunill are now looking at their most ambitious production to date: an adaptation of Chetan Bhagat’s novel, *One Night At The Call Center*. Evam plans a 13-city road show over eight months which should keep them busy through most of next year.

Their way of marking five years on Friday was itself a piece of pure theatre: 300 volunteers doing a freeze at the Citi Centre mall before handing out chocolates. Sometimes success is sweet.

## Take Two

Karthik is a chemical engineer from Chennai, and Sunill, an Andhraite from Bhopal with a commerce degree. Both have been involved with drama from an early age.

Karthik had been doing drama and film in school and college (“Poi Solla Porom”, the UTV film in which he plays the lead, was released Friday); Sunill was deeply influenced by the vibrant Hindi theatre tradition of Bhopal. They came together at the Mudra Institute of Communication, Ahmedabad. Here, they set about reviving an old theatre group, Sankalp and staging three productions, starting with ‘Evam Indrajit’. “It changed our lives.”

Their project thesis itself was a highly focused piece of work: “The feasibility of an entertainment company which has theatre as its core product.” The answer, presumably, was yes; but nobody really thought they had a chance. “There were a lot of thumbs down,” says Sunill.

They decided to give themselves two years to work, earn some money, pay back their loans... and launch themselves. They chose Chennai because it was sort of a halfway house for theatre: no big theatre tradition as in Mumbai, but not completely theatre-less, like Hyderabad, as Karthik puts it.

They started off with just one lakh apiece in March 2003: in six months they were in business, doing their first production, ‘Art’, on September 10, 2003. There’s been no looking back.