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The first film in India was screened in 1896 at the Watson's Hotel, in Kala Ghoda, by The Lumière brothers



# EDWARD MOVES ON

This week, one of Mumbai's last single screen cinemas, Edward theatre, came alive with an audio-visual show and an avant-garde film festival. The crumbling venue, which usually screens B-grade films, may just be Mumbai's next cultural hotspot, writes Apoorva Dutt

**T**ransform' is a word we often use lightly. But it was the only one that repeatedly came to mind while watching the audio-visual feast at south Mumbai's Edward theatre this Friday.

The façade of the three-tiered 19th century theatre, faded white with blue and gold trimmings, shimmered and vibrated with multi-holographic images and surround sound, as over 500 people, filling up every wooden chair, were left awestruck.

This transformation took place because of British Council's that brought together London-based audio-visual artists the Light Surgeons, and the Eye Myth festival, an array of avant-garde films that visualised the concept of sound itself.

At the entrance of the theatre in Kalbadevi, two locals debated animatedly, gesturing at the furor within the theatre, a place that had, till the day before, seen screenings of B-grade Hindi films. As soon as one entered, it was clear that this was not the usual clientele of the theatre. Dreadlocked hippies rubbed shoulders with mohawked women in the courtyard, its walls decorated with both a poster of the 1997 Raveena Tandon-starrer, *Ziddi*, besides a poster of the event that lay ahead that night.

## KALEIDOSCOPE AT EDWARD

Built in the mid-1800s, Edward theatre is one of the last single screen theatres in the city. It stands out like an exceptionally well-built thumb against an increasingly drab and homogenised cityscape. Till a few months ago, the theatre screened reruns of old B-grade films, as well as movies a few weeks behind the time, for those who couldn't afford multiplex prices. Edward's ticket prices have remained obstinate against inflation and greed — a good seat will cost you about Rs28. On Fridays, the prices go



(Top and above) The audience at Edward theatre in south Mumbai were treated to a light and sound show by The Light Surgeons, multimedia artists from the UK, and the Eye Myth film festival, on Friday — Tejal Pandey/DNA

up to a comparatively obscene Rs300.

On Friday, the first of the two events was the Eye Myth festival. The films, meant to create a visual understanding of the nature of sound, confused and impressed the audience in equal amounts. A twirling, morphing red ribbon spun and writhed in time to a pulsating beat. Another cheerfully lopped off the heads of Lego-like characters (complete with pixel-like blood spewing) to an upbeat electro beat. A film composed entirely of computer code set to music had the audience comatose. An elephant-sized nose breathed noisily, and a heart beat to the tune of the soundtrack. During the interval, the audience was rewarded with complementary watered-down alcohol, and live twitter commentary projected on the screen.

Next, the Light Surgeons, audiovisual artists from London, played *Super Everything*, a multimedia documentary narrative on Malaysia. The film, played on several screens and surfaces simultaneously, had a kaleidoscope-like effect. Music blared from crackling speakers and the audience stood to its feet to enjoy the show.

## FROM B-GRADE TO GODARD

Christopher Allen, artiste and director of The Light Surgeons says that playing at such a venue has its rewards and challenges. "We had to understand the fact that it's a very old theatre, and may not have all that we need — technologically speaking — to stage our show. But it's an honour to play at a venue with so much history and character."

Edward theatre started out by staging plays and still has two special box seats on the sides, a music pit beneath the stage for orchestras to provide accompaniment to a silent film. It has only 509 wood-

en seats. The art deco-style entrance brings to mind a European opera house gone to seed.

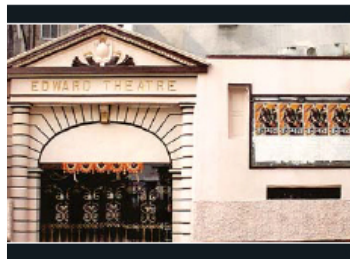
"We have kept our prices low," says owner Fred Poonawala, whose relatives founded the theatre. "Unlike in most places, the seats furthest away from the stage are the cheapest, at Rs18." This tier is usually men-only, because the high steps posed a threat to women teetering in heels, saris or fluttering dupattas. Even then, the theatre was renowned for running mostly reruns, as well as action serials grouped together for the younger audience.

Edward's makeover began with weekly screenings of foreign cinema classics like Wolfgang Becker's *Good bye, Lenin!* and Jean-Luc Godards *Breathless* by the Enlighten Film Society in Mumbai. "I hope to stage everything and anything here — experimental theatre, short films, dance, music, performance art," he says.

Poonawala hopes that the theatre's cultural heritage will be an advantage as he tries to make it a new-age cultural venue. "It's a cheaper than most venues in the city. We don't have a parking lot for your big car, and we don't have air conditioning to cool you down," he laughs.

The audience on Friday, perhaps more accustomed to the plush interiors of Blue Frog or Hard Rock Café, didn't seem to mind it one bit. People sat cross-legged in the external arches of the theatre, and cheered from the rickety steps of the balcony. "Having the event here, at the Edward theatre, is what has really made this night exceptional," said one sweaty audience member, sipping gingerly at her vodka and Sprite. "It's a great example of what Mumbai is capable of. We can really foster a sense of culture and innovation through events like this."

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