



Festival City

Fayes T Kantawala  TFT Issue: 28 Feb 2014

Fayes T Kantawala loved the Lahore Literary Festival, warts and all

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Women relax on divans under the open sky.jpg-large

February has quickly become the most social month in my calendar, filled with writers, artists, talks, debates, backhanded public barbs and underhanded private attacks. Fun fun fun! At the end of it I feel exhausted, exhilarated, and only slightly more insecure about my vocabulary.

This is mainly due to seeing people like Vikram Seth speak eloquently at the Lahore Literary Festival, my favorite of all desi fetes.

The LLF is only a year old, something you likely forgot when you walked through the gates of the Alhamra on Lahore's Mall and saw the beautiful, seamless organization. It has become, in a span of mere months, the greatest cultural event Lahore can lay claim to today, and already people are talking about it in terms of decades. This time there were about twice as many rock star speakers as last year and it boasted an audience at least three times as large.

On the first day I made my way to the Alhamara at 11 am and caught the inaugural session, which was open to the public. There weren't more than 100 people there for some reason, probably because it was a work day. It was more an introduction to the entire festival than a talk, with addresses by all-star delegates (ambassadors, authors, art historians), all reiterating what a wonderful event it was going to be.

They later played a video message from Malala Yusufzai recorded especially for the LLF, and she said the usual cool MalalaWorldPeace kinds of things. When the session ended I was milling about awkwardly at my seat when an usher suddenly invited me to the back-stage area for refreshments. Clearly she'd mistaken me for someone who was important. Never one to refuse a free meal, I parked myself next to the lasagna counter and began my sidelong survey of the Who's Who as they mingled over breadsticks.

Sated but aware that the ushers had now discovered I was an impostor, I left the buffet for the LLF art show that was in one of the other buildings. It wasn't thrilling and seemed slightly last-minute, but there were some interesting pieces in there and I'm always happy to see some art. The catalogue, a collection of small detachable postcards of the art on display, was way cool. I stole 4 before I went to a lively session on Lahore, Literature and Longing. The speakers were all famous Lahoris (and one Indian who wishes he still was), and the way they spoke about not just the value of the city, but also about the value of what the city has lost was shockingly moving.

You could smell the adrenaline (and fear) when you walked into Hall 1

The session I was most excited about was that art talk by Shahzia Sikander. Last year, the speakers at the art sessions ungenerously said Sikander was “not a Pakistani artist”, a bitchy move (even for the art world) that I, and others, wrote about in our reviews of the LLF. The comment was part of a dedicated campaign to eradicate her from Pakistan’s contemporary art history and so imagine my joy when I heard that Sikander had been invited to the next LLF. You could smell the adrenaline (and fear) when you walked into Hall 1, packed to capacity for Sikander’s talk. Once she began (to much clapping and hooting), she spoke beautifully and thoughtfully. The level at which she thinks about her work is astounding, and she showed the audience one of the most beautiful pieces of video art I had ever seen (there were Mughals, there were swarms of birds, I totally almost cried). In the end, with surgical precision, she dismissed any jealous talk of her not being ‘Pakistani’ and invited an audience of art students to reach out to her for collaborations. In one hour, she decimated any debate about her validity and proved through her work and words (perhaps for the first time in a local setting) why she, without a doubt, is the biggest Pakistani creative genius working today.

Polio drops taste like bitter tears

The next day I began my Friday morning at 7 a.m., a time I honestly forgot existed after high school. I had to make an early morning cameo at some health official’s office because my polio vaccination certificate had to be amended. Bloody polio. Polio drops taste like bitter tears.

Fully immunized yet again (third time’s a charm) and up anyway, I caught a 10 am session with Shobha De, who was the founder of Stardust Magazine and is still an all-around Indian provocateur. She’s witty, quick and naughty, traits she’s made a career out of. Next I saw Vikram Seth talking about my favorite book by him, *An Equal Music*. The talk was fantastic (he knows calligraphy and speaks Chinese for god’s sake) except at some point a woman walking across the front tripped spectacularly on the stage steps, and for two seconds the entire hall stared at her in horror. Eventually Seth got up himself to help her, as did a bunch of others, as she breathlessly said, “Please, please continue with your talk. I’m fine! I broke my elbow at last year’s festival!” Lady, you crazy.

She was one of six different people I saw fall over steps at various points, which provided distractions from the more academic speakers. There were more talks: Mira Nair, Mohsin Hamid, a launch on Queen Victoria’s Indian servant-lover (I know! Scandalous!), Vali Nasr, Rajiv Sethi, and many more. By the third day I had run out of polite conversation and really only wanted to be next to a bed, so I caught one or two

sessions before leaving the fest until the next year.

I want to thank everyone who made the LLF possible. From the flirting ushers (it's like prom for them) to the speakers to the organizers and sponsors. Honestly. As a Lahori, I am so grateful that this exists and, given the enthusiasm, will only get bigger.

See you at next year's!

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