

Expensive Tea

“The tea in the hotel is expensive” remarked Aas Mohammed Khan, “they charge six rupees for a single cup. We prefer to go down to the tea stall..” Aas Mohd Khan and his cousin Babban Khan and 10 year old nephew Nadir are traditional Indian Street Magicians, whom I have invited to Mumbai to do a series of shows. I met them for the first time in May 2008 at the Magic Convention in Kerala and was astounded by their skills and at the same time shocked by their poverty and the way they were being treated. The Xmas mela at my son's school gave me an opportunity to showcase their art in Mumbai, and here they were...



I was initially apprehensive, I had booked seven shows for these guys – what if they didn't or couldn't turn up for any reason? Travelling to Mumbai, immediately after the terrorist attacks did not exactly seem like a good idea either. . But in the end their art won out. The trip was a success beyond my wildest imagination. Nine shows in five days, that netted them a handsome sum of Rs. 50,000 for their efforts. . Thanks to my friend Werner, they got a full page story in Mid-day, besides coverage in Indian Express, Loksatta., Times of India.. Television crews from from Doordarshan and ETV filming them... inquiries from TV Channels and Production houses... and of course the tremendous reaction of the audience wherever they performed .. But I am getting ahead of my story

Magic for the Magicians

Thu Dec 11, 7pm. Dadar. Forty of Mumbai's most experienced magicians, some with 25 years experience, have surrounded Aas Mohd and Babban from all four sides during the performance. They are watching them like hawks, for the slightest false move that will give away the secret. But it is all in vain. They can figure out nothing at all. Finally, all they can do is applaud – as Aas Mohammed nonchalantly produces series of marbles, cast iron balls and rusty nails from his mouth...



It's another world

Fri Dec 12 – Willingdon Catholic Gymkhana – Xmas Party for Underprivileged Children.

As Aas Mohd and Babban climb up the stage and survey the crowd of 400 plus children, it is very clear to me that they have stepped into a world that is vastly different from the one they were used to. The mike, for example. It was the first time they were holding one in their hands. Even before, when stepping into the elevator, Nadir looked around in wonder as the steel cage transported him to the top floor. It was probably his first elevator ride. A visit to the toilet too was an experience. He stopped mid-step when confronted with a line of gleaming toilet bowls and western style commodes, unsure of where to relieve himself.

But 50 years of experience entertaining people does not go in vain. Very soon they were in full flow, handling the mike like pros. In full view of Doordarshan cameras, Aas Mohd proceeds to transform a dry mango seed into a mango tree on stage, complete with leaves & fruit, taking all of ten minutes to do so. No wonder the kids are bowled over, as are Salim Khan and Helen, the chief guests at the show..



A change of Clothes

On Saturday, I notice that Nadir was wearing the same clothes in which he alighted from the train three days ago. I asked Aas Mohd about this and he said that the boy refuses to change. I suspected something else – that he had no clothes to change into! My wife Rita was horrified. She marched him off to Linking Road and got him two new sets, and shepherded him into the bath as soon as she got back. Soon he emerged, scrubbed fully clean and a broad smile on his face. But two days later, Nadir was still wearing the same clothes – he had not changed into the second set! Showing the new set of Mumbai clothes to his family back home was important to him. We did not insist.....

The Flying Man at Tridha

Sat Dec 13th, 5pm. Tridha Steiner School. In front of 200 pairs of unbelieving eyes, Babban Khan lies down flat on the stage, covered by a quilt and then rises slowly up into the air – drawing a series of ooh's and aah's .. and spontaneous applause. The result – Rs. 7000 worth of tips in just three shows!



Mahakali Caves Road or Napean Sea Road.. is there a difference?

Sunday Dec 14th. An Xmas party on the 15th Floor Terrace of a posh Napean Sea Road Building. It is really a sight to watch to these penniless slum dwellers from Delhi holding the millionaire kids in thrall. They were having as much fun as the orphan children from Mahakali Caves Road had earlier. Kids are kids.. and performers are performers! The location does not seem to matter.



Aas Mohd oldest fan

Monday Dec 15. Aas Mohammed Khan has just done the impossible. A twelve year old boy, tied up inside a cane basket in the living room of a 4th floor apartment in Cuffe Parade, has vanished into thin air. The matriarch of the family does not believe it. Checks the basket. Front, back. Side. Nothing. Then she demands that he creates a pigeon from the basket. He obliges. First one. Then two! The lady is flabbergasted. She is now won over and pulls out a Rs. 100 note as a tip. Aas Mohd has one more fan – probably his oldest in Mumbai! Not only location, it seems that age also does not matter! Magic transcends all these artificial boundaries that we human beings have created to separate one from another. At a fundamental level, we all seem to be the same.....the same things make us laugh, the same things make us cry...



Money matters

Later that evening, I handed over Rs. 11,000 to Aas Mohammed, the balance money that I had planned to give him for his efforts. “Are you happy?” I asked him. “I would have been happy even if you had not given this money” was his reply.

I launched into a convoluted explanation as to how I had arrived at this amount. I had consulted magician friends in Goa and Kerala, trying to figure out what would be the right price to pay them, since Aas Mohd refused to quote me a figure and said he was leaving it to me. But even before I could finish, Aas Mohd cut me off. He was not interested. At this stage, the money did not seem to matter either..

What are you getting out of this?

In the past few days, as I was making all the arrangements for their visit, one question I was often asked was “What are you getting out of this?”. My answer was “Nothing. I am just doing it to promote them”. But by now, I had figured out that I was wrong. I was indeed getting a lot out of this. A lot more than what I was putting in. I had just noticed that a strange sense of calm had come over me. The endless chatter of my mind had slowed down considerably. The small worries and anxieties that used to plague me all day had all but vanished.. and replaced by a quiet confidence that everything will work out well. I was at peace with myself after a long while. Many of the things that I wanted didn't seem so important any more. Complaining about petty things no longer made sense. My mind was clear. I was content. I was on a high. This was worth a hundred times more than what I had put in!! This was real magic!! I only hope that it lasts....

More Real Magic

But there was more real magic in the air. The way everything fell into place for their visit, was nothing short of miraculous. Willingdon deciding to have their Xmas Party exactly one day before the Tridha Mela. The Indian Magicians Society have their monthly meeting on the 2nd Thursday of the month – exactly when they were here. All of this was unplanned. It just happened. A journey from Napean Sea Road to Santacruz on Sunday evening – which normally takes one and a half hours – was done in 45 minutes, enabling them reach the show in time. On Monday 15th, when they were sitting idly, suddenly requests for two more shows! And the press coverage.. just see the samples below - WOW!. I could go on and on... too much happened for it to be plain coincidence here. Larger forces that we maybe do not understand, have gone out of their way to make sure this whole thing goes well. All I can say is

that I am very grateful for happy for the grace that has been bestowed on this venture.



My own brand of magic

I got my opportunity to get back at Aas Mohd on the last day. He has been pestering me for photos of the shows for the past two days. As we sat at dinner, I produced a photo album with over fifty photographs, some of which you see in this article. Aas Mohd was suitably impressed. “But these are very small photos” I said, “Tell them – grow bigger”. Aas Mohd looked at me, not quite understanding. “Say the magic words” I said, “Say - Grow Bigger!!”. As he did, I took out another album which had giant 8 x 10 photographs of the best moments of the trip. For once, the tables were turned. It was Aas Mohd who could not believe his eyes.

The pending bills

Finally the time has come for them to leave for Delhi. I have come to the hotel to pick them up and drop them off at the station. I can see the reluctance in their eyes, they want to stay more in the city that has given them so much in such a short while. As we are leaving the hotel, the manager Mr. Menon calls out “Please settle your pending bills!”

“But I have paid for everything in advance” I protested.

“Yes, you paid for the rooms, but the bill for the tea is still pending” says Menon

“How much is it?”

“Rs. 18”

That was the bill for the first (and last) three cups of tea that Aas Mohammed and his team had during their five day stay at the Star of Cochin.

I paid the bill and we walked out .

Peter Theobald

(For more info visit www.streetmagicindia.com. If you would like to help or support the street magicians, by booking them for a show, or by arranging some exposure for them at public events, TV and other media, please email me at peter.theobald@gmail.com