

Girish Karnad (1938-2019)

Obituary by Tobias Biancone, Director General ITI

One of ITI's World Theatre Ambassador passed away: Girish Karnad. A great actor, stage director, educator, writer and film maker - but above all a great personality.

When Claire Pamment, member of the then Pakistani Centre of ITI and member of the International Playwrights' Forum organized an event under the banner of ITI in Islamabad and Lahore, she had the idea of bringing Indian playwrights to Pakistan. Girish Karnad, GP Depande and Mahesh Elkunchwar. The Indian playwrights, but also playwrights from Croatia, the UK and Switzerland were first invited to help emerging Pakistani playwrights to write a play within two days and afterwards together with young actresses actors and under the guidance of the foreign playwrights were putting the freshly written plays on stage. The results of this laboratory approach of writing plays were amazing.

For me this approach reflected the important tenet of ITI – to use theatre as a bridge, even if the political situation between Pakistan and India at that time was not good, the playwrights and theatre people joined them and showed that mutual understanding and peace for them was possible.

As a matter of fact this was the first time that these three playwrights from India were in Pakistan - thanks to the initiative of Claire Pamment and the Pakistani Centre. Girish Karnad and his two friends were extremely happy to have been invited.

For me the most amazing statement which happened during the travel from Islamabad to Lahore took place when we were driven by cars under police escort. In the middle of the journey we stopped for refreshments and went to a historical site. There Girish Karnad looked at the mountains around, took a deep breath and said: "Here the Vedas have been written". And he took another deep breath: "I am so happy to be here. This is a spiritual experience for me". I was not aware that the source point of the Vedas, the holy Indian scripture, actually was located in Pakistan. After the statement of Girish Karnad, everybody stayed for a moment in silence, before the group headed back to the car that would bring everybody to Lahore.

Later, during his visit to Pakistan, Girish Karnad was extremely joyful and he showed it, when during an evening of performances he was dancing to Sufi songs of Pakistani musicians.