

Ebrahim Alkazi

Sahar Zaman

Ebrahim Alkazi – his name stands as an authority in theatre and in archival photography. The recipient of all three Padmas – the Padma Shri, Padma Bhushan and more recently in 2010, the Padma Vibhushan, he has been awarded several doctorates by different universities and honoured for his contribution in revolutionizing the style of theatre in India. At the age of 87 today, there's something else that's keeping him busy. A new venture for an old, passionate, long standing relationship. "We are still keeping it under wraps and not revealing much. But Mr. Alkazi has kept me busy every day since 2009....It's a lot of work", says artist Fakeha Tarannum. She is happy to be the chosen one for Alkazi's current subject of attention – his own private museum in the heart of New Delhi. Built from scratch and designed in a style that maintains his love for the classic. There are still a few months to set the opening date and announce its launch but Ebrahim Alkazi is only too glad to tease his critics who have been spreading rumours about his ailing health and growing insanity. Two days before the interview, I was warned by a well wisher to be careful of his walking stick that could well be directed at me in a fit of rage! More than scared, I was amused by this piece of news! Excerpts from my interview with him below shows how nasty these rumour mills are beginning to get about a man whose senses are well within control to execute the building of a museum of his entire art collection of the past 60 years.

Towards a Museum of Innocence

Sahar Zaman - What's keeping you busy these days?

Ebrahim Alkazi - Curiosity! Curiosity of life, trying to learn always, who you yourself are. You aren't merely working through characters in play. It's the story of your own life, and you want to know how your own life is related to the lives of people from different parts of the world. The terrain is tremendously exciting.

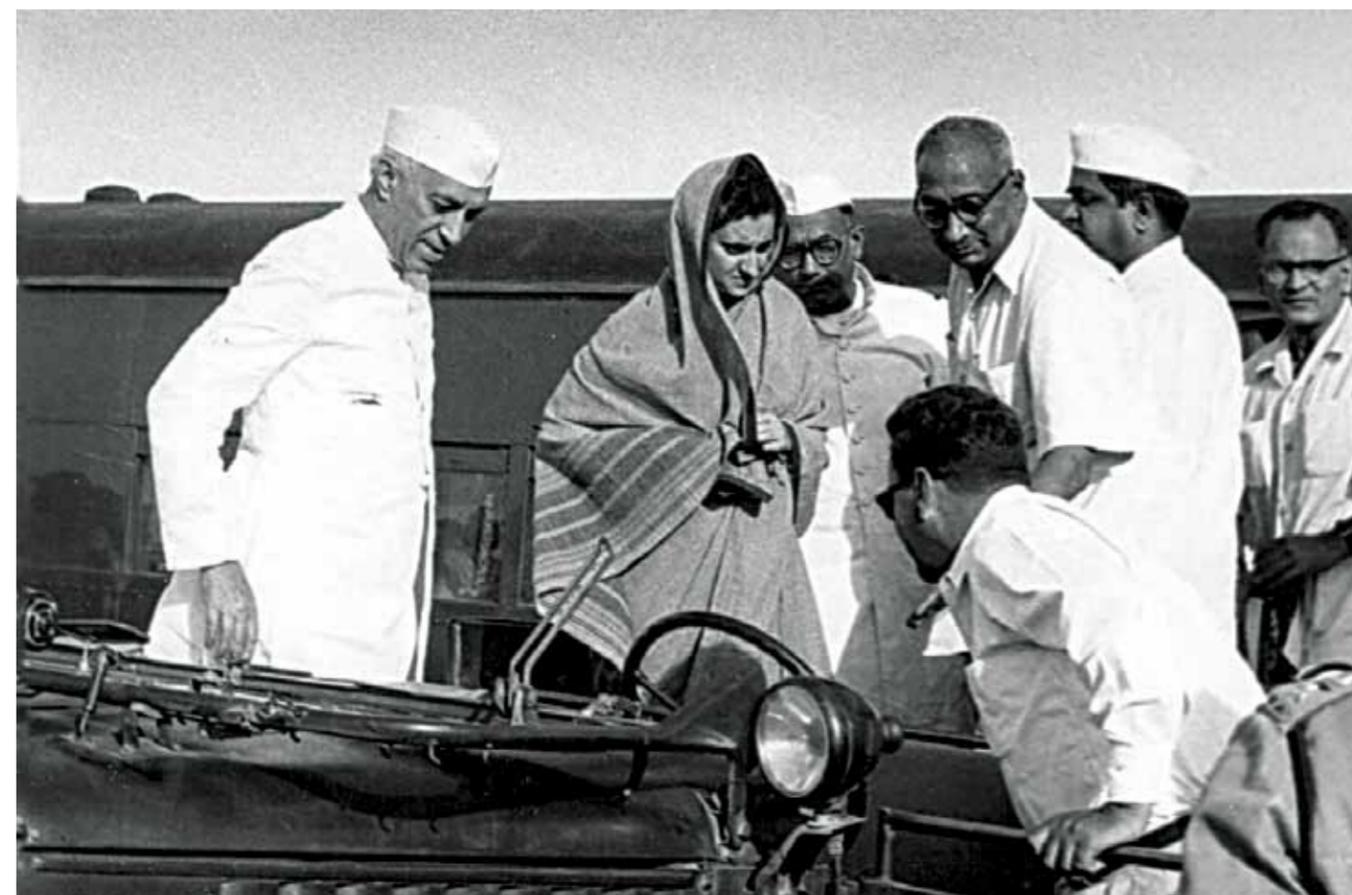
S.Z. - Let's be a bit more specific and talk about this museum you plan to open soon.

E.A. - Well, I want to call it The Alkazi Museum. I have an enormous collection of art. My main concern is that who will look after it when I am not around. And it's very important to retain this part of your country's history. The space will be divided into art, theatre, photography and publication. My art collection is from all over India – modern art, sculptures and antiques. I have never bought anything

from under the table, so I have nothing to hide. The antiques were mainly bought from auction houses and there are receipts for most. They're from all over India. The paintings of modern masters I have acquired from artists who have been my dear friends like Tyeb Mehta, FN Souza, Akbar Padamsee and MF Husain. There are other names like KG Subramanyan and Chittravanu Majumdar who are part of my collection too. A lot of other artists whose works I have retained down the years from shows that I did in my gallery Art Heritage will be on display too. The old catalogues of Art Heritage gallery form an interesting timeline in the collection as well. In theatre, I wish to display images of performances from my productions and posters of my famous plays like Rakht Kalyan, Din Ke Andhere and Julius Caesar. Apart from that, there are artifacts I have collected from across the world like traditional Japanese tapestry, Indonesian folk art, etc.

S.Z. - How will this museum be different from the already existing Alkazi Foundation for the Arts because that also houses a large part of your collection?

E.A. - That is only archival photographs with our publishing wing dedicated to making books on those archival photographs. And that's a private space where you can visit only by appointment. This museum will have art and antiques that have been part of my collection for so many decades. It will be open to public. I may also look into conducting educational lectures by scholars across the world. There's been quite an impact on people from Europe with the work I have done with my exhibitions. For instance, the French Ambassador comes and sees what we're upto. He is determined to show it in France. But it needs to be worked out well. What they should be drawn by is the authority of the collection that I have put together. And it's the right attitude that we



Mahadeo Singh with Pt. Nehru and Indira Gandhi, Suratgarh

need to cultivate in India. Museums need to be open to visitors and help in cultivation of your thought process on art. Museums in Europe and UK do that very well. They cultivate good relations and make an effort to sustain you as a dedicated visitor. The encouragement and courtesy that you are given is amazing. But this pushing and pulling attitude in India is bad and it's largely because of the market talk in art.

S.Z. - Is it because of lack of government patronage? There are private collectors like Kiran Nadar, Anupam Poddar and Neville Tuli who are all working on their own museum. But you have been in the art scene much before than them. I would like to get sense of history from you on when government art institutions like the Lalit Kala Academy came into being and why did the initiative from the government gradually wane away to reach such a dismal situation right now?

E.A. - It depends on the head of the government. There was great impetus given to the arts when you had leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi. They were rooted in the culture of the country

but they were open to a whole world of options. They had travelled a great deal and they had an open mind about things. They encouraged things. It was a privilege and honour to be around the time of Nehru. And he took a lot of interest in the theatre work I was doing. I didn't seek his presence but he used attend a lot of my shows. I tried to get the character and force that our monuments stand for. They were used for military affairs but I wanted them to be used for creative work of theatre because I didn't want to do my theatre in small buildings, I wanted larger spaces. And Nehru used to come and see them. He himself showed interest. When Pandit ji died, I was taken to his home where his body was still lying and then I was asked to prepare the running commentary the next day for All India Radio. Even at Indira's death, I was rung up and told about her body lying and if I could go and see it. When I went there, there was a little book on the table that was on the side of the bed where she lay. The book had these lines – "The woods are lovely dark and deep, I have promises to keep, and miles to go before I

sleep.' I was so touched and moved. It was lovely how these leaders sought me out. When I moved from Delhi to Bombay, their support was special.

S.Z. - Who from today's leaders do you expect this kind of appreciation and encouragement in art?

E.A. - I am not aware of the leaders of today. Because you have to be going around and meeting them and knowing them better. I don't do that now.

S.Z. - How closely are you following the works of contemporary artists like Subodh Gupta, Jitish Kallat, Bharti Kher, etc.?

E.A. - Well, it interests me a lot. It opens your mind and soul to a whole new variety of experiences which are different from your own. But to familiarize yourself more with the latest, you need to move around a lot more which I don't anymore. And I strongly feel a lot more needs to be done by institutions to aide artists who have worked so hard in trying to share their experiences on life which is projected on to the canvas. That kind of refinement has not come into our entire system of putting up exhibitions.



Pt. Nehru with Mahatma Gandhi

S.Z. - How about the annual art fair that happens every year for popularizing art and attempting to reach out to an audience that is not used to going out to galleries?

E.A. - Well, it's a commercial affair and I'm not a businessman. There's a lot of rubbish talk about arts there. It's a matter of how much this painting was paid for and what's the market price. There should be a sufficiently long history in the study and evaluation of art before you can work out what pricing is all about. I'm just too distracted in these fairs with a lot of trivial rubbish on the art market which will not be tolerated in any serious art institution in the world. But because the prices in art have shot up so high, people are mesmerized by the money attached with art. There's no subtlety.

S.Z. - Let's talk about theatre since that has been such a major part of your life. In what manner are you connected with the present day theatre?

E.A. - Oh, this is theatre, my museum. New ideas are coming to me every single

day and you keep adding to the existing. The creativity of Indian artists is extraordinary. Wherever they were in India, they did remarkable work. And when you see it as part of your own contemporary history, it's brilliant and insightful. They wanted their art to be a reflection of their own lives, their struggles and their community.

S.Z. - Your contribution to theatre and art in India is tremendous. Did you ever at any point think of going back to your roots in Saudi Arabia or following art from the Middle East? The artists there are doing very well too and there's the Sharjah Biennale that has already marked its 10th anniversary.

E.A. - I was rooted in Arab culture, studied our language, the Quran. But at the same time, I lived here and this country is where I was brought up. And at the end of the day, a lot depends on what my educationists brought to me. So I got an incredible world view on things. I was educated by the Jesuits in Pune. They were excellent educationists who not just

taught Western thought but also educated themselves on the history of the place wherever they were. Unlike the British, the Jesuits never looked down upon Indian culture. They were interested in humanity as a whole. They were interested in Oriental languages and local languages too. All that opened up tremendous areas for me. And most significantly, at the same time, the working of independent India also shaped my thoughts. It was a very interesting period for the history of man in the subcontinent because we were all subject to British rule. And a great deal of the civilization (Indian) was much better than anything created by the British themselves. ☹️

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