



The Q Rickshaw Project

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Nine Performance Works on
the Streets of Karachi

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4:37 PM - 5:53 PM

Curated by
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On a Good Day in Karachi

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On a good day in Karachi, no longer *fever-esque* (my condition was indeed improving on the fifth day of being smitten with that now infamous virus), Amin Gulgee called me up to announce he was sending me a copy of his short film – whether I might be interested in writing about it and in essence my feelings about Karachi. After finishing with Saturday’s papers, the English local ones, finding, as always, several items from the left, right or dead center so brilliantly or shockingly written that I had to clip and save them, I watched the delightful video featuring the mirror-adorned silver rickshaw I once admired in Amin’s studio courtyard. Ten minutes of a colorful motorized ride in busy streets of the sprawling megalopolis that is Karachi.

On a good day in Karachi, I dream of my first rickshaw ride a few years ago in Dhaka, in an older pedaled version, the young man attached in front on a bicycle turning around with a smile as he propelled us forward, myself holding on to whatever I could muster in the tilting cart. These were my first impressions of South Asia, a short trip, a day full of wonder, shock, and awe, and I went back to Jeddah with a case of Bengali Blues.

For two years now in Karachi, I have glided up and down a rainbow of emotions in reaction to my current home, my cherished heavenly purgatory. I came with arms wide open and warm emotion, given I happen to have a friend I’ve known so long I call him the big brother I never had; he lives far away but comes from here originally. A human being I am fond of, given his intellect and style, his warmth, even his tendency for quite sarcastic humor. A sophisticated, perfectly rounded, cultured individual. So naturally I came with high expectations. I needed to wait a moment for my reality check. We were holed up, albeit in fine surroundings, at the Avari Hotel in old Saddar, Covid lockdown still in place, awaiting final repairs to be done at our future home. And the move was still afloat. And yet, even in this limited first contact to the city itself, I began to soak up some first flavors; of the so varied people’s special brand of charm that make the city what it is, the food, the strong opinions (in that hotel room I developed my passion for the opinion pages and editorials of the Pakistani press). A locally owned hotel is a good place to feel out the quality of hospitality of a given country. Once out and about I experienced even more the warmth and generosity shown towards newcomers. At times it can be overwhelming to more northerly souls; I grew up in southern climes and I relish the emotional abundance.

So now back to the rickshaw video – a great vehicle for portraying a potpourri of life – on a good day in Karachi. It’s definitely good when the sky is clear and blue. It does get smoggy often, though, when millions are out and about on motorbikes, painted buses, 4x4s, little cars, big cars, motorized rickshaws...but when the traffic is not too congested and moves along, the

bikers showing off their acrobatic prowess popping in and out of lanes, many overloaded with too many passengers yet miraculously able to stay on course, it becomes a city ballet of sorts. Mesmerizing.

The first scene is a quick graphic layout of the tour we are about to go on, then our rickshaw comes into view, starting out at beautiful Empress Market, a building in classic Victorian Gothic style, with the first passenger: a cool young lady dressed in black, hair swooped up in a fancy swirl atop her head, graciously handing out perfectly wrapped little gift boxes to other moving entities on the road as she progresses on her journey. Her engaging gestures set the tone, inviting the viewer to sit back and enjoy the ride. The next passengers boarding the rickshaw are dressed in stark contrast to the first rider’s London-mod style. These two women are abaya and hijab-clad (not to be confused with Afghani burkas, something some of my western friends seem to confuse often, but then, I do not expect everyone here to know the difference between Austrian and Bavarian Dirndls). One in black, the other in a black-and-white ensemble which for a moment took me back to my convent school but no, these are not nuns, but ladies dressed in a way I know well from our time spent in Saudi Arabia. A young man jumps into the street waving his arms above his head in greeting to the passing rickshaw, captured from a bird’s-eye view for the video.

The journey progresses. In sunshine.

On a not so good day, like today (9 July), as I continue to write in midst of a heavy monsoon downpour, I sit inside, again mesmerized by the intensity of life experienced here. Darkness, and steady sheets of water pouring down from above. Hell, down here, surely, for those in town, in makeshift housing, and, OH GOD, where is Amin’s gorgeous silver rickshaw today? I hope it stays dry. It is a beautiful thing, its mirrors and all. Come to think of them, they are fractured, split, like experience here is. When the rains stop, it brightens up immediately. The birds appear. Many scavengers among them. Dark and lurking crows staring at me from outside. Edgar Allen Poe’s poem “The Raven” comes to mind on a day like this but dare I allude to an “American import”? Strongly voiced these days, all this fear of The West. De-COLON-ize. As long as you don’t tear out all your own bowels in the process. Babies, I fear, in this rain for sure, are being poured out with the bathwater. And the unwanted baby girls, deposited in shelters.

Back to sunny days, the video, on a fine January day in Karachi. Our next passenger is the most glamorous – a big, bright, happy bird, a *birdperson*, all pink and white and feathered. What a hope-inspiring sight amidst all the cement and city squalor, a fantastic flamingo in my favorite rickshaw, an artistic moment for sure. We are not at carnival in Rio or Mardi Gras in New Orleans

after all. But this is Karachi and fun surprises pop up around every corner.

My favorite street moment happened last September, when our three sons once coincided on a visit here. My husband was tied up with consular business and I was driving the boys, young men I should rather say, around in my little Aygo. And we come to a stop at the roundabout where a grand sculpture of three swords sits in the middle, a popular place for vendors to hang out along with dressy trans folks, one of whom has always caught my eye, he is a she on the wild side with spectacular panache right out of Lou Reed's song. Usually, when passing by, I sit in the backseat being driven in a bigger car; this time, I am driving myself and three young guys in a little car. Well, my glam friend on the roundabout drifts right over and simply gives me two thumbs up, grinning broadly. Charm personified – it was a sweet moment, with all the busy traffic of Karachi fading into the background in quasi-magical choreography.

The “balloon ladies” boarding the rickshaw next are another such fun moment in the video – two Pierrot-like girls with masses of balloons attached to their heads, then let loose on the cityscape, again filmed from above, until all balloons are gone and only their wacky balloon hats remain. A celebration of the brighter sides of this old port on the Arabian Sea. And then, a trio of artists appear, two girls and a guy in fantastic get-ups and translucent boards on which they paint, reflecting on all we are seeing in this city full of wonderful and wonderful, ponderous characters.

Next comes whom I will call the “young man from Berlin” with his big sunglasses and loud yet lounge-y tech tunes buoying along the ride; he is clearly getting into the vibes of the place. His presence breaks the sentimental reverie one may have briefly escaped to, and you find yourself dancing back to the tumultuous 21st century.

I was intrigued by the next passenger, a single girl with a huge bell she periodically strikes, setting off melodious chimes along the way. A poetic accompaniment to our progression. Which brings to mind the project we thought about undertaking to repair the charming colonial-era clock in the KMC Tower – somewhat delayed by life's usual little obstacles along the way.

Our next passenger, the lady in gray, has a more subtle yet perhaps the most pensive role. She appears equipped with a bamboo pole which upon closer look features a paint brush at its end. In sweeping slow motion, the continuing path is seemingly, albeit invisibly, traced in meditation – hers, ours, and well, perhaps all our prophets', the Abrahamic and non-Abrahamic ones', too. The artist is Ahmadi, that is of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, founded in late 19th century Punjab, yet frowned upon in modern Pakistan. A symbolic last call.

Finally, we arrive at Jinnah's spectacular white mausoleum on the hill

overlooking the sprawling city; I have taken guests here and visited his lovely mountain retreat Ziarat near Quetta where he succumbed to his illness. And there is so much to read about the founder of this intriguing nation. My favorite book, though, is about how Jinnah has been illustrated, how his image has been curated, in a private collection of classic and pop artworks all featuring this legendary man of vision. A fitting ending to the video, arriving at Jinnah's resting place, as, after all, without Jinnah there would be no Pakistan. Zindabad. The rain has stopped. I just saw a rare and precious fleeting image from the corner of my eye: a bright green Alexandrine Parrot flew by. It will be a good day in Karachi after all.