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Thomas Block, the Founding Executive Director of International Human Rights Arts Festival, USA, in a candid interview with Shagufta. He shares his thoughts on Human Rights and Social Justice and how to promote these through Arts Festivals creating a universal camaraderie. An exclusive for Different Truths.

Thomas Block is the Founding Executive Director of the International Human Rights Arts Festival, USA. He is the author of five books, a playwright, is a 30-plus year exhibiting visual artist and Founding Producer of New York City's International Human Rights Art Festival (ihraf.org). Thomas (Tom) was the Founding Producer of the Amnesty International Human Rights Art Festival (2010), a Research Fellow at DePaul University (2010), LABA Fellow (NY, 2013-14), Hamiltonian Fellow (2008-09), and recipient of funding and support from more than a dozen foundations and organisations.

He has spoken about his ideas throughout the United States, Canada, Europe, Turkey, and the Middle East. His books include the non-fiction works *Shalom/Salaam: A Story of a Mystical Fraternity, A Fatal Addiction: War in the Name of God; Machiavelli in America, Prophetic Activist Art: Handbook for a Spiritual Revolution* and a novel, *The Fool Returns.* tomblock.com. He is in conversation with Shagufta, Different Truths' correspondent from Bangladesh.

Shagufta: How are you today Tom?

Tom: Thank you, Shagufta, I am doing well, all things considered. It has been a very unusual year, but a particularly good one for the International Human Rights Art Festival (IHRAF) and my own work as an author and artist.

Shagufta: Good to hear that. Let us talk about IHRAF and its future during the Pandemic? How pandemic effected IHRAF activities and how have you been able to continue IHRAF activities?

Tom: At first, of course, the whole experience was quite a shock. When the pandemic hit last March 2020, we had several events planned out, including two full-day Shalom/Salaam Creative Retreats, performance events and, of course, our full-week festival in December of every year. Well, all of that was canceled.

But once we got our minds around that, we greatly expanded our digital footprint and literary magazine publishing; our visibility quotient was raised as more and more people found us online, our fundraising went up and we were able to make our first two significant hires, an Editor for IHRAF publishes literary platform, and a Director of Operations, to work on all of our structural issues. We will be going back into the theater in late August 2021, for a four-day mini-festival and the inaugural IHRAF Youth Film Festival at the Gem Theater in Bethel, Maine. And we will be much stronger and more solid!

Shagufta: Share your thoughts on Human rights and Social Justice?

Tom: Big issue. Of course, it represents a shifting landscape, as the whole anti-Asian impetus (brought about by our last President) has really moved to the forefront. We (IHRAF) will be holding a fundraiser and awareness raiser for Asian Americans for Equality, an organisation here in NYC that works to raise awareness of anti-Asian bias, as well as to support positive, forward-looking initiatives.

This comes on the heels of the Black Lives Matter movement here last summer.

We feel very strongly that we plant our flag on the side of human rights and social justice, and never for or against one type of people. We stand for the values — and when we see those values being threatened, whether in India concerning domestic violence, Nigeria and police brutality or New York City and anti-Asian hate crimes, we raise awareness, produce beauty and set an example by showing how all people, everywhere, share the same divine core, and must learn to see through the skin and into the heart of each other, not matter how different we may at first appear.

Shagufta: How do you think history will judge Capitol Hill incident on January 6, 2021?

Tom: I think that Donald Trump will be remembered as the worst President in the United States (and hopefully an aberration), and his Republican Party will be remembered for enabling and supporting his horrifying four years.

This will be remembered along with McCarthyism, lynching, and anti-Civil Rights activists as a real low point in American history.

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Shagufta: What are your plans to expand IHRAF activities in Asia?

Tom: We look to expand everywhere! Currently, we work with you, and our Youth Fellow and International Fellow both come from India. We certainly continue to do outreach in Asia, and have worked with artists from Indonesia, Singapore, Myanmar, Japan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, China, Korea, and other countries around Asia.

Shagufta: IHRAF 2021 Fellow is from India? What are your plans regarding India in future?

Tom: Shashi Kadapa has been a strong member of our artistic community. His short story, *Cursed at Birth*, won second prize in last year's Creators of Justice Literary Award. Now, as a 2021 International Fellow, he is editing a collection of essays and short stories for us around the theme of domestic violence in India, and how the caste system there affects it. This is an extremely important subject on the Indian sub-continent (and everywhere else, for that matter) — the collection should be finished and published as part of our literary output by early in the summer!

Shagufta: IHRAF has many projects, competitions? In what projects and competitions would you encourage India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh artists to participate?

Tom: We have extraordinarily strong representation from that part of the world — and always welcome more. And we continue to expand our international footprint. For instance, we opened an IHRAF African Secretariat this past winter, and they are running programming and outreach under our banner in Africa. It would be wonderful to find a way to open a similar program in India/Bangladesh/Pakistan. This region of the world is one in which we already have a large footprint, and lots of submissions from.

Shagufta: Performing art has been a great part of IHRAF. Would you like to add something to its impact?

Tom: Our goal once the world opens again post-Covid is to produce the International Human Rights Art Festival at venues around the world. We are traveling to Maine this summer, and have a strong connection in Glasgow, Scotland. We also have the African Secretariat, and will explore presenting a multi-day Festival there, sometime in 2022 or beyond.

In each case, we look to highlight local artists and local human rights and social justice concerns, under our signature values of beauty, sincerity, vulnerability, engagement and celebrating diversity.

Shagufta: What is your advice to artists, poets, performers, and activists during this pandemic time?

Tom: Keep working and keep the faith! We will come out the other side of this, and the creative and social justice worlds need you to be stronger!!

Shagufta: Thank you, Tom. It was nice talking to you.

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Tabassum Tahmina Shagufta Hussein

Tabassum Tahmina Shagufta Hussein is an aesthete from Dhaka, Bangladesh and MA holder in British and American literature. She is a poet from unheard voices that deals with the Rohingya Refugees, human rights, freedom of expression, typical human desires etc. A humanitarian freelance writer, her poems have appeared in literary magazines. She seeks beauty from the blade of grass to twinkling stars. Aestheticism is the essence of her existence.

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