

OLOMOPOLO: Ten Years of Drive, Discourse, and Dialogue

Vicky Zhuang Yi-Yin

Imagine this scenario from ten years ago. A group of friends have decided to get together and the only place they can meet at is a café, and if they had some money to splurge, perhaps the cinema to watch the latest Hollywood blockbuster. Such was the case in 2013. But then I met Kanwal Khoosat, Iram Sana, Fyque Nadeem and Pakistan's powerhouse performer, Samia Saeed, in the midst of creating a theatre festival that never happened. Relax, this is not a sad story. From the ashes of failure was born our little community safe space, OLOMOPOLO Media. We thought, since we wanted to have 8 different theatre plays on 8 different but subsequent weekends in 8 different and unique venues, why not scale it down? Let's pilot this idea by setting up cultural activities every weekend on a smaller scale that would give people the alternative to just 'eating out'.

Since then, OLOMOPOLO Media has done just that, and has been able to organise or host over one hundred events in a year, and has expanded to creating original productions that have travelled all over: within Pakistan as well as the likes of Singapore, the United States of America, Dubai and even Norway - to name just a few! But coming to this has been a journey with its own set of ups and downs. It's alright. It's just part of the process. In a decade, OLOMOPOLO has proudly established itself as a premiere multidisciplinary cultural and social enterprise. Under this moniker, we have produced and conducted various projects for social intervention and empowerment; enhancing the value of visual and performing arts in facilitating social sensitisation for public awareness; and exploring narratives addressing ethical development and socio-cultural acceptance and sophistication. Under this ambit, we also created a little nook in the corner of Lahore, a space that we called home where our ideas flowed, flourished and flew.

When people think of performance spaces, they often think of a large hall, accommodating at least a hundred seats, and something proscenium and official-looking like an auditorium. OLO is not that. The space became a multipurpose studio space that would allow for various types of activities, such as a performance space for various mediums of expression, screenings for short and feature films that included an interactive session with the filmmakers, workshops for various interests

and forms of art, panel talks on important issues, and gatherings for thought-sharing. More importantly, it also became an inclusive and safe space for various communities that were otherwise invisible and mostly marginalised.

You could enter the premises on one weekend and find a children's activity happening in full swing, and you could hear songs like Billi meinay paali hai (The Cat I Pet) and If You're Happy and You Know It (sung in English, Urdu and Punjabi) loudly, or you could walk into a performance art piece like Dinner by Sarah Mumtaz, or you could walk into a musical gig with local bands and musicians jamming away into the night, or relax and laugh your worries away with a provocative comedy night, or be a part of a film festival, or join a game night like Antakshri with your friends singing songs and screaming at me over the scoreboard (because I am the scoreboard keeper), or learn through a workshop on acting, or filmmaking, or even be exposed to a different culture, through OLO People (a program that celebrates cultural communities living in Pakistan that are not part of the mainstream, but exist in the peripheries, whose holidays we celebrate with them). In fact, we just had a session on OLO People's Chinese New Year in late February, in the presence of the Chinese community where people learned about the various cultures within China, and what the Chinese eat on the New Year - of which some items we even had on the menu! We're going to share all the holidays like Eid, Easter, Nouroz and Vaisakhi sometime in April with all the fun activities associated with them.

The space that we have created is not just about entertainment. It is about creating an environment that is conducive to dialogue and discourse, even for topics that are very difficult to approach. Here, no intolerance is tolerated. Speak your mind, but respectfully. Bring your intellectual discussions and run with it, perhaps even explore what mediums your ideas can be expressed through. It is a space that fosters camaraderie not just within the team that is working here, but for those who enter the space to conduct their sessions or are just there to see what is happening. It is a space that fosters networking and ultimately creates a community that is inclusive, diverse and has something important to say. We approach all this by adding a human lens to our

work, and that has greatly helped us in our approach towards the narratives we work with and the multitudes of people who have come to OLO to showcase their work, their stories and their talents.

Yet, despite its many milestones, this is an organisation that has against many odds survived through thick and thin – even through the pandemic. I owe it to the unwavering dedication, drive, and heart that the team behind it possesses. It is almost magical. Surreal.

Many spaces have come and gone, and the struggles are real when potential corporate sponsors do not understand whether we are a CSR objective or not. At the same time, we have to be careful about pricing tickets so as to not alienate the audience with a high price and balance it out with being able to cover basic utility and rent costs. Yet, we do a lot of free events, our talks, open mic nights, and some film screenings are all free events that encourage expression and networking. At one point, the core team had to work day jobs to keep the space afloat and ensure that it had what it needed. For us, funding is hard, really hard, but the show must go on. We have places to go, and stories to tell. And people need a space to take time out of their busy lives and just not work. They want to laugh, relax to tunes, or watch a film that they would have never been able to find and discover new talent and anything that can help suspend them from their daily lives just for a moment to recuperate before returning fully recharged.

There should be more spaces like OLO in the city. I was once asked if I was concerned that other spaces were starting to pop up at a panel discussion, and I said no. In business and economics, competition is seen as a way of encouraging organisations to find their competitive advantage, and I am all for it. But from a social standpoint, I believe that having more spaces like ours is encouraging. Every space will have a limit. For us, our indoor space can take care of anywhere between 50 to 60 people and outdoors can take care of anywhere between 120-150 people. That is a drop in the ocean compared to the population of Lahore on any given weekend. More spaces, more activity, more solidarity is what I think. It is an opportunity for further collaboration and creating a larger space that fosters healthy discourse.

The future of OLO is expansive. No one can tell what will happen. But OLO is hopeful, despite hardships, that we can continue to perpetuate positivity in a hardened world. We continue to go experimental with the ways we can tell stories and stay open to new people to collaborate with when they come to our space to conduct their own sessions. Now we have to compete with them on when we can organise our own events on the calendar, and that's a great thing. It means that there are people out there who are willing to work in arts and culture.

We do hope that we can get enough support in the future so that OLO can become self-sustaining. That's still the goal. Perhaps in the next decade, this would be a path that we will endeavor to tread on with more fervour as the weekly events at OLO are becoming more frequented and requested for. Our first ten years were marked by an incredible journey of learning, struggling, and telling impactful stories. We only wish that this could continue into the future.

The author, a multidisciplinary storyteller, is the Co-Founder and Director of OLOMOPOL Media and the Founder and Creative Head at The Cheeni Chronicles.