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### Rebel without a PAUSE



Rajivan Ayyappan

The Hindu

**Luxembourg-based Malayali sound designer Rajivan Ayyappan is an original. He talks about his fascination for manipulating sound**

Rebel and its many synonyms – maverick, non-conformist, free spirit... all seem to fit Rajivan Ayyappan to a T. But then, the Luxembourg-based, internationally-renowned Malayali sound artist/designer and musician doesn't seem too keen on labels. As we catch up with the sound wiz at Chitranjali Studios on the outskirts of the city, where he is completing the sound design for director Manoj K.R.'s debut feature film *Kanyaka Talkies*, it becomes increasingly clear that Rajivan is an original.

"If anything, I am a bit disorganised. I like to live like that," says the notoriously media-shy Rajivan, running his fingers through his scraggly goatee, a ghost of a smile on his face. "I have not had any formal training in sound, and because of that I am not technically sound. Whatever creations I've done, be it sound design for film, video, choreography or installation, it has been an instinctive manipulation of sound. I don't like to be boxed in by the methodology and standardisation of digital sound. I much prefer the immediate physicality, the warmth of working with good old analog sound," he adds.

Although Rajivan is reluctant to talk about his philosophy of sound, simply shrugging it off saying "sound is something that knocks on the ear", it seems to have always been a source of fascination for this native of Kottayam. "Music and sound are linked to some of my earlier memories, such as watching all-night-long Kathakali at the Thirunakkara temple with my grandfather, Krishna Pillai. We would doze off in-between only to be jolted awake by a thunderous *attahasam* on stage," reminisces Rajivan.

He began his journey in music at age five learning Carnatic classical music (vocals and percussion). Then, when he was barely 10, Rajivan and his brother, Sajan Ayyappan, hand-crafted an acoustic guitar from scratch! "We figured out the measurements, sourced necessary light wood from Ashoka timber depot next door, crafted it and even learnt to play it. Our entire family, including my father, [renowned illustrator] P.K. Raja and my uncle helped us make it," says the 48-year-old. Rajivan's affinity for sound continued well into his teenage years – in the 1970s, when he was active on the ganamela circuit in Kottayam, as both a singer and a guitar player.

However, he says that it was only when he enrolled to study visual arts and communication at National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad, in 1984, that he fine-tuned his ear for sound. "The five and a half years in Ahmedabad were an eye-opener. My traditional music skills, interest in typography and my exposure to the history of European art triggered a kind of paradigm shift to the possibilities of sound design. I would spend hours in the Institute's much unused library, familiarising myself with its wealth of music and visual literature, especially Japanese works that experimented with noise," he says.

Those years also introduced him to world cinema. "Every weekend, my friend and classmate Ramu Aravindan, son of auteur G. Aravindan, and I would hop on a bus for a 12-hour ride to Pune just to watch films from the Film and Television Institute of India's archives," he recalls.

Ironically, Rajivan says that of all the mediums he works in and despite an impressive filmography that includes, among others, Mira Nair's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and Geetanjali Rao's Cannes-award winning short *Painted*

*Rainbow*, sound designing for films not his favourite occupation. “Again, I just don’t like the standardisation and methodology of filmmaking. *Kanyaka Talkies*, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. Besides, I don’t really need to work in films, to be honest. I’m quite busy at least for eight months of the year with my sound design for choreographies, installations, lectures and the like. The rest of the year I like to spend with my four-year-old son, Estepan,” he explains.

What he does enjoy is working in children’s theatre. In Luxembourg, which he has called home since 2006, Rajivan and his wife, Emanuela Iacopini, a contemporary dancer and choreographer, along with movement therapist Isabell Siemplekamp, run Vedanza, a non-profit initiative that aims at producing multimedia performances for children, young people and adults. “I moved from India because I was not being given the space or the freedom to create the things I wanted. Luxembourg, which is really a city with all the perks of living in a village, has given me a sort of a free rein, and the city-state’s government, lots of support,” he says, adding, almost whimsically, that at some point of time he would like to bring his productions down to India, especially Kerala.

### **Recent ‘creations’**

‘Jungala’, an ode to nature, where creepy crawlies such as spiders and cockroaches introduce their micro-environment and the mysteries of the forest to children.

‘Tables’, an interdisciplinary project that features dance, live music and interactive projections, which deals with the perspectives of space limited and unlimited to the object that is a table.

Artistic direction of ‘Project-O’, a contemporary dance performance for children

Mise-en-scène of ‘The Job’, a choreography project in collaboration with Emanuela Iacopini.

‘Sound mapping Mithi terrain’, a sound project (field recording and installation) at the National Gallery of Modern Art, Mumbai, 2009

‘Tele-scape’, Audio elf-screen and sound installation for the opening event of FIFA World Cup, 2006, at Koln, Germany.

On screen

### **Select filmography**

Manoj K.R.’s *Kanyaka Talkies*

Mira Nair’s *Reluctant Fundamentalist*

Anand Surapur’s *Fakir Of Venice*

Geetanjali Rao’s *Printed Rainbow*

Ketan Mehta’s *The Rising*

Aparna Sen’s *15 Park Avenue*

Keywords: [Rajivan Ayyappan](#), [Malayali sound designer](#), [Rajivan filmography](#), [Kanyaka Talkies](#), [The Reluctant Fundamentalist](#)

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