



Serious About Theatre?

# Let's Talk

An exploration of Asian, African Caribbean,  
Children's and Community theatre.



Serious About Theatre? Let's Talk!

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## FOREWORD – ROBERT LEE

Greetings!

We work hard, we play hard and we definitely have less time for cooking. So how do we serve up speedy meals without compromising on quality or taste? The Peepul Centre has the answer with **Serious About The Arts** - great food-fast-for busy Peepul.

**Your enthusiasm for good simple art becomes more and more infectious.**

So...why is the Peepul Centre very **Serious About The Theatre**? Well, the amount of times people have come up to me, in the foyer, often in the coffee shop, in the restaurant, occasionally in the dry cleaner's.....and oddly even in the Gent's and asked me to recommend a play which they can understand.

Arts and culture continue to enhance and change people's lives and we are committed to increasing access to the arts in general and in particular theatre for everyone.

Today is a milestone as Government announces its £5m backing for a free ticket plan. We are delighted to hear that the National, Birmingham Rep and 93 other publicly funded theatres across England will be offering free tickets to young adults as part of the government-funded scheme.

So it seems we are not the only ones serious about theatre.

**Serious About Theatre? – Let’s Talk!** follows the same model as Serious About Dance. However, this piece has proved more difficult to deliver than dance as the art form seemed to be more fragmented as an. Although the work is not complete and the report is still outstanding, the process has presented the same benefits as Serious About Dance, with an improved programme artistically and financially as attendance has increased.

Relationship theatre companies and artists like Steven Berkoff continue to innovate and are becoming part of the annual programme and again launch the autumn’s artistic season. Due to the success of the relationship like this we have been able build a reputation for issue-based work of the highest quality. Working with companies such as

- Vayu Naidu Company
- Phizzical Productions
- UK Arts International
- Twisting Yarn
- Reality Theatre
- Women and Theatre
- Sampad South Asian Arts
- Ensemble
- Tara Arts

Serious About Theatre has been the inspiration, which has lead to our very first Punjabiwood comedy play “*Pendu Peo London Wich*”.

Although we are led to believe that dance is the poor relation to theatre this has not been the experience during the life of this project. The project aimed to look closely at what was happening in the sector particularly around diversity. The series focused on four key areas that play an integral role in contemporary society and the changing face of Britain – Asian, African Caribbean, Children’s and Community theatre.

It posed questions such as: What is the role of theatre in the twenty-first century? Is theatre thriving? Who are the participants, makers and creators of new and inspiring work and how does theatre engage with new communities? Who makes up the audience? What is the legacy and is it being archived centrally?

Serious About Theatre? Let’s Talk offered a great opportunity to position theatre as a priority area, needing attention within the arts, whilst also celebrating how far it has come in terms of embracing and mainstreaming the forms of theatre that were nor perceived as high art.

Finally, what is the role of the Peepul Centre in building a vocabulary and dialogue that supports theatre. The issues raised in these papers clearly demonstrate that it is vital to build and support a more dynamic and robust infrastructure that sustains the fluidity required to nurture a spectrum of theatre so that it is reflective of the communities we serve. Therefore, these papers serve as a guide and an inspiration that open up the discourse for a future series that aims to platform work from existing and emerging artists, thus continually refining the art form and moving the dialogue forward.

Via **Serious About Theatre** we intend to moderate an informed, practitioner led, innovative, honest and we hope really interesting conversations about the state of theatre in the U.K. and Leicester's role/status as a cultural centre.

The papers contained within this document are either transcripts of or reactions to papers delivered during a series of workshop discussions held in 2006.

The views and opinions expressed by authors are entirely their own and do not necessarily state or reflect the views of the Peepul Centre its officers, staff, board or associates. These are however a true reflection of the views and opinions espoused by authors who have participated in a conversant, practitioner led, novel, candid and we hope really exciting discussion about and by those who are **Serious About Theatre**.

The Peepul Centre remains very "Serious About The Arts" and we are thus

- Serious About Comedy
- Serious About Dance
- Serious About Music
- Serious About Theatre

## **Serious About Theatre? – Let's Talk! publication**

### **Acknowledgements**

A big thanks you to also to Pawlet Brookes (nee Warner) and to Jessica Tickle for their early inspiration whilst this project was being conceived and created; to my board and founder president for all their hard work, energy and enthusiasm; to the researchers and writers, contributors and especially to Sâmir Bhamra and Ashok Mistry for helping to pull it all together (what a cracking job).

Thanks also to:

Myriad of hard working thespians, who continue to awe, amuse, delight, encourage and inspire audiences young, old, contemporary, traditional, black and white, this is why we are **Serious About Theatre.**

Will free tickets encourage young adults to go to the theatre? Should theatres have more productions tailored for younger audiences?

## Peepul Centre

### What does Peepul mean?

Peepul is the name of a large, leafy tree found in the Indian subcontinent – also known as the Bo Tree or the Ficus Religiosa. Hindus and Buddhists alike hold the Peepul tree in high esteem as a holy tree, and it is commonly found at the heart of the community, growing and flourishing in even the most adverse conditions. The Peepul Centre is a remarkable story of resilience and vision. It is in itself an enduring example of the greatness of the human spirit to achieve.

The Peepul Centre is an exciting and innovative community-empowered urban regeneration project which opened its doors in October 2005. The Peepul Centre is so very different from anything that has gone before. For the first time the concept of a community centre, arts venue, educational facility, health centre and leisure complex is fused into one dynamic idea.

The Peepul Centre concept marks a pivotal and groundbreaking milestone in redefining all the parameters that currently define what community service is in the 21st century.

Through the provision of an integrated holistic range of services including arts and leisure, employment and training, health and children's development, the Peepul Centre builds and support a vibrant and self-sustaining community.

*Every where you look the community is disappearing, yet it keeps popping up like flowers between paving stones and that is what the Peepul Centre does!*

Dame Anita Roddick

**Taking Centre Stage**  
Asian Theatre

## Jatinder Verma, Artistic Director, Tara Arts

Born in Dares Salaam, Tanzania, Jatinder grew up in Nairobi and was part of the mass Kenyan exodus to Britain in the late 1960s. In 1977, he co-founded Tara Arts. The theatre group's first production was the anti-war play *Sacrifice*, by Bengali writer Rabindranath Tagore. Verma's mission was to reflect the genuine Asian experience, away from imposed caricatures.

When Tara began to receive Arts Council funding in 1986, Verma was able to widen his creative reach. He started to mix western classics with Indian theatrical tradition, developing a characteristic "Binglish" performance style. In 1990, he became the first Asian director to stage a play at the National Theatre. In 1997, he became a member of Channel 4's Poverty Commission, investigating social exclusion in Britain.

### **What is Asian Theatre?**

To put it baldly, and as simply as I can, a bunch of darkies on stage. That is its, admittedly crude, contemporary identity. Is this enough of a definition? I think there is a difference between Asians in the theatre and Asian Theatre. The one reflects changing socio-political realities; the other implies a distinct theatre aesthetic. There are many Asians in the theatre who do not wish to be in Asian Theatre, or who do so reluctantly, as fellow-travellers,

seeing in Asian Theatre a road to the so-called “mainstream” represented by companies like the National Theatre or the RSC. For me, the question of the identity of Asian Theatre lies not in this ‘fellow-traveller’ attitude. So I will ignore it and concentrate instead on Asian Theatre as a distinct theatre aesthetic of our times. An aesthetic which is, essentially and perhaps necessarily, a masalla.

I use the metaphor of food deliberately: any act of theatre, it seems to me, is analogous to cooking food. You decide what dish you want to serve, line up your ingredients, start mixing them up - which can be painful, frustrating or joyous, depending upon your mood at the time as much as the manner in which the ingredients mix with each other - and then wait on luck; hoping against hope that when the dish is tasted by your guest it will have the effect you desired. Like cooks, we are the only other profession whose entire aim is to be in the best state of in-completeness: for we, like cooks, are made complete only when our audiences are present and respond appropriately to our creations. They form the unknown characters lurking around in every play.

The inspiration for this metaphor has come from the Natya-Shastra: a treatise on the art of performance composed around the 4th century AD. in India. A treatise that, in its range of practical detail and depth of theory is unsurpassed in the world - the writings of Aristotle, Stanislavsky, and Brecht on the theatre appearing mere scribbles by dilettantes. A central concept in the Natya-Shastra is that of *rasa*: flavour. As in the flavour of food. Precisely like in cooking, our job in the theatre is to evoke the *rasa* we want in our audiences.

So what has all this to do with the identity of Asian Theatre? It seems to me that before we can consider this question we need to have some sense of the nature of the masalla that is Asian Theatre: is it garam, onion-based, rye-based (mustrad seed), lot of turmeric, too little cinnamon?

One of the ingredients of Asian Theatre's peculiar masalla is a forgotten history. The earliest recorded presence in this country is during the Napoleonic Wars, a time when England was ranged against the empire of Napoleon in France. The latter end of the 18th century and the early years of the 19th. Two English brothers brought an Indian performing troupe over to England - rather like their modern counter-parts, the International Festival directors, who scour the world for exotic new performance delights to offer modern audiences. With this troupe the brothers toured all over the country, until they got to Liverpool. Here, the brothers were arrested for theft. The Indian performing troupe was left stranded. Somehow, they made their way back to London, to the docklands. There, they were housed in a stable. There they lived, giving performances to the locals amongst the horses and the manure, until, 9 months later, they were discovered by the authorities as vagrants and shipped back to India.

Who were these people? Where exactly in India did they come from? What exactly, did they do? No one knows. The only reference to them is in an obscure local history record that I came across in 1989. I always remember this story because I wondered whether their history would be our history: un-sung, un-recorded, and forever trapped in the memory (and perhaps bile) of those who lived at the time, at best a historical foot-note when some future historian comes to write of England at the close of the 20th century. Part of me, of course, also rebels against such a fate! So, I go on.

Stories have no passports. This is a simple but very necessary concept. If they are good stories, they have no passports. I've always had a love for the classics, and the idea of standing on someone's shoulders. This could be due to the migrant experience of loss of a home – as one gets older one becomes more acutely aware of what that rupture means. Connecting with the classics means that one can connect with the grandparents and ancestors of the theatre family, one I have been in all my life. There is also great challenge in recreating a classic – what does it mean to you? What does it say to you? How do you make it again? This is a fantastic challenge – deeply traumatising but wonderful all the same.

For performers, recreating classics is also a great opportunity as Asian actors in a world where opportunities are lacking, even after you've done the three years training.

### **All theatre in Britain is Asian Theatre.**

Tara Arts has been around for 30 years and has seen amazing developments in that time, but we need to be careful of separatism – culturally diverse art as opposed to “ART” per se. All theatre in Britain today is influenced by Brecht, Brooks and Anton Chekhov who were all in turn influenced by non-western forms of theatre. This means there has never been a question of “becoming” centre stage because I am already centre stage and always have been. But crucially, the dialogue has not been equal – it has always been about western artists taking what is best from the east and claiming it for themselves.

For example, after World War Two, Holi theatre was all about creating a shared theatrical experience and a shared sense of community - for those two hours that the performance was on, everyone in the theatre was one community, the only community. The inspiration for this came from Asian theatrical and spiritual practices.

The **Asian + Theatre** equation is deeply problematic. Theatre in itself is essentially a minority art form. In a previous age, that of Shakespeare, it was a forum for public issues but it no longer has that primary function in society. This role is now performed by TV and internet blogs etc. It is also a minority art form because it requires a certain level of class and there is no point denying this. In the context of Asians in Britain – does theatre really have any relevance at all? As a tool of the heart, do Asian's use theatre or film or song? My feeling is that this gut cry from the heart does not happen as frequently in theatre as it does in film and song. Asian communities have gravitated towards these forms to express themselves. Is this a reflection of our class background?

Asian theatre is not an art form. As best it is a “movement,” a sociological phenomenon, which ranges from Asians in a theatre at one end of the spectrum to creating some kind of aesthetic at the other. This movement has dotted the landscape of theatre. For many, it is a road to somewhere else and this is because we hate ourselves fundamentally – we don't want to be Asian. When people find success they distance themselves from their cultural heritage.

But now the whole world is turning towards India, but within ourselves we are finding we're not white enough to be English and not brown enough to be Indian. This experience of being neither here nor there has been best articulated by the novelists – most recently,

Monica Ali, Zadie Smith, Andrew Levy. Theatre has yet to do this wholly – to really show that to hate oneself is also the equivalent of really loving oneself.

*For me, the future of theatre lies in being able to articulate this very modern feeling. All of us will have to face this in our lifetimes with the imminent rise of China and India in the world economy and in the UK the majority of our urban centres will be minority white within a decade.*

### **Power**

Power is a crucial part of what faces us in the future. I believe there is time for a home for Asian theatre – the movement will move forward if there is this fixity of a building, centre or venue. Once there is a home you can really start talking about an art form. Crucially, a centre also offers career opportunities. I don't think Arts Council England has heard this properly yet. There are always the arguments about the ghetto, but this is as we have discussed, Asian theatre is a ghetto area anyway!

On a final note, when Tara Arts goes into majority white schools, at first the Asian kids don't want to know us, because they think they will get picked on as a result of association. But when they see the show and see their peers enjoying it they become proud to be associated with us, and ergo their cultural traditions. This makes me want to weep.

## Suman Bhuchar

Suman Bhuchar works in a freelance capacity as an arts producer and cultural leader. Her areas of specialism include arts production, press and marketing for theatre, film, music, dance, arts journalism and making documentaries. Her work over the last 25 years has contributed to the growth and development of the arts and cultural map of Britain. She has worked with a range of theatre companies handling the press and marketing, concentrating on developing Asian audiences for the theatre, and now paving the way for many mainstream initiatives in this field. She works in broadcast documentary production, beginning her career as a production assistant and working up the ladder to producer. She continues to produce factual stories that are at the cutting edge of the independent circuit. She is also a writer on Asian arts and lifestyle, and her journalistic output has appeared in The Herald, Glasgow, India Today, Bombay Mid-day, Telegraph, Calcutta, Verve & Movie Magazine. She is a speaker/ curator of seminars on Asian arts and popular Hindi cinema.

She also supports and advises many creative artists and individuals on press & marketing, how to create better productions, networking on a creative level on behalf of artists. She is about to undertake a part-time Doctorate in South Asian Theatre at the University of Westminster, London.

## What is the current state of British Asian Theatre?

I am very happy to say that in my view British Asian Theatre is very healthy -I am only dealing with the theatre that has come up during my lifetime and I am happy to inform you that we are peers and have almost grown up together.

Tara Arts celebrates its 30th Birthday next year -and I too began my engagement with British Asian theatre, at Tara, when it was just a baby. So I am delighted that here we all are alive, well and occasionally flourishing.

During that time, most British Asian productions -whether it was a play, or even sketches on the state of society - tended to be performed in local town halls or culturally specific community centres, but in recent years, we have seen big commercial successes with productions on a large scale circuit, as well as in the West End, where British entrepreneurs and national venues and companies have taken risks with 'Asian' stories.

I am thinking here of **Bombay Dreams** by Sir Andrew Lloyd Webber and the Royal Shakespeare Company's production of **Midnight's Children** which opened at the Barbican, London, toured the US and several venues in the UK.

It is a testimony to the success of this art form, its creative and survival spirit that it continues to inspire entrepreneurs to be inspired - now we have Harvey Goldsmith, just about to give us his **Merchants of Bollywood** musical drama - you may of course point out that this particular production is very specifically 'Indian' and not British Asian. Yes, that's true, but the point remains that if we hadn't paved the way, people would not feel confident in taking risks in

this creative business. I have to also confide here, that over the last few years, it has become such a lucrative proposition that even some Asian businesses have felt confident to invest in a small way in West End shows - although they are just tentatively dipping their toes in water. (I shall come back to this later).

Apart from now inspiring big commercial producers to focus on 'Asian' or culturally mixed stories, British Asian theatre has been a real pioneer in many ways - this is the arena which has been the testing ground for so many actors to hone their craft and really get an opportunity to show off their skills - witness of course the big Leicester success story - Parminder Nagra, who is now enjoying living in Hollywood and being on **ER** - well I am sure you all know that she is a Leicester girl, who used to be in youth productions at the Leicester Haymarket, and then she worked with Tamasha (**Partition, 14 Songs**) and Kali (**River on Fire**) and landed her big break in **BILB** and the rest is history.

I can remember that only 25 years ago, there were probably only about a dozen or so Asian actors, who were working and if they were busy doing something then there was a shortage - now we probably have hundred fold that number and counting and sometimes they go up for the same jobs.

Not a lot of you may know this - but even Meera Syal, a household name to Asians and mainstream alike began in theatre, but sadly has now been seduced by television. British Asian theatre has been a good training ground for writers of whom several have over the years been poached by television & or have had the opportunity to develop into the 'mainstream' -Tanika Gupta has written scripts for several plays as well as adapted western classics for Old Vic, Watford Theatre and the like and more recently, Neil Biswas wrote and directed the

recent Channel 4 production (can't remember the name), King Lear adaptation with Anupham Kher.....

British Asian theatre is the place where 'risk' taking goes on - whether it's in the style and aesthetics of the production - Over the years, several different companies have presented productions with their own distinctive signature, and their work has drawn on classical performing styles or western contemporary forms. - basically they are mapping out a style of performance drawn from their eastern and western influences Although we as an audience may not notice this, and only look at the story-to see whether we are enjoying it or not, these forms have then been taken up by western directors when they put on shows that are Asian - for example, **Baiju Bawra**, at the Theatre Royal Stratford East, or Supple's, **Indian Dream** - has a distinctive signature of his own, mind you, but he was open to Indian art influences for his recent play.

Another aspect where they have taken 'chances' is working in collaboration with Indian / Pakistani actors - let's not even get into the practical problems that are entailed in engaging talent from abroad, but, I have to argue that it has certainly given those individuals an opportunity to showcase their work here to mainstream as well as Asian audiences, promoters, agents, other producers and the like.

Tara arts had Naseerudin Shah at the Royal National Theatre in **Cyrano**, then he was also seen at the Leicester Haymarket in **Bali: The Sacrifice**; Koel Purie, now a well know Indian star, was in **Othello** at Haymarket again, as well as in Tara Arts, **A Taste for Mangoes** - along with Soni Razdan, while Tamasha has had the Pakistani actor, Rehan Sheikh appear in several of their productions (although I have to add, he used to be based in UK before).

I hope I am not boring you by mentioning things you may already know, but I think it's important to recollect, and recognize the significance and connectivity of these seemingly random or one off decisions.

I am commenting, as I have been asked to, on 'the state of British Asian theatre' It is a young art form, which is growing all the time - more and more young people want to get into acting, they want to write and produce plays dealing with their experiences and parents now positively encourage you to get into this profession. A far cry from 25 years ago, when you were advised to pursue this profession as a 'hobby' but to focus on getting a good degree, which could get you gainful employment. I remember going several times to my local Indian shops, after my sister got in **Eastenders**, with my mum, and when the shop keeper recognized who she was, she glowed with pride - and although she never discouraged us from being in the 'arts' I am sure, our time-keeping did drive her bananas. (No 9 to 5 in this world, sadly). Up to now, I have talked mainly of the British Asian theatre that has been produced and performed mainly in English, or with some elements of bilingual involvement - eg a smattering of words, in Hindi, Punjabi, Gujarati & Urdu for added authenticity. I just want to turn now, briefly to British Asian Language based theatre - which too, I have to say is a lively and busy art form, albeit a poor relation in comparison to the English language based theatre.

Why do I say that?

Basically, because it is hardly or not even funded; it's under- resourced, and it struggles to achieve similar production values, however, despite all that, it is very popular and delights audiences across Britain.

But, there are regular and passionate advocates, directors, producers and actors, who doggedly continue to meet in rehearsal rooms, usually the front room of someone's house to get a production together. This language based theatre has been going longer than 30 years, due in most part to the devotion of its peers. (I am not talking here of productions that may come over from India and tour the UK).

There are plays constantly around - usually they tend to be bawdy comedies, in the case of Gujarati theatre (**Mare Var Ni Bahu Kaun**) - here I have to remember, the late Naresh Patel - who was a businessman but passionate about theatre (mention also the other producer, Jayant Bhatt)

Other stuff tends to be adaptations of western & Indian literature in Urdu, Punjabi and Hindi comedies, focusing on inter-generational culture clashes in the UK, and other more social themes. I think this area is growing and might benefit from cross-fertilization with the English language element of British Asian theatre, although it has certainly spawned a lot of actors, who nowadays, thanks to the advent of satellite television end up working in the soaps, or even in language based adverts for things like BT, which then end up on the Asian channels.

I have deliberately up to now just focused on this area -based on my personal involvement in this field, and now I wish to turn to the state of British Asian theatre, where we have not really been very savvy.

Most of the British Asian theatre area is creative driven: someone wants to do a play, or set up a company in order to say something, and voila, a project takes shape and it grows from there - we have only a handful of companies -Tara, Tamasha, Kali, Rifco, Rasa, Asian Theatre School,

Peshkar, Hungama, Phizzical -around 10 producing work in English and a similar number in the language English touring companies tend to put on the odd - Asian show, but that too is sporadic - Pilot, Red Ladder, Sheffield, Tricycle, Chol Theatre come to mind.

So, what's the problem here, the problem is that we have no continuity and history over the last 20 years the Asian community has grown to under 4 million in the UK and part of it is a formidable theatre going audience - but, we have no shared heritage in this field - we do not publish books, playtexts, - nowadays they tend to be part of the programmes but Asian audiences will not spend money on a programme unless they have enjoyed a show or they do not wish to spend the extra pennies..... What we really need is for people to understand that 'British Asian theatre' is part of our culture in the UK - not just Asian culture, but also 'mainstream British culture' New companies, or productions always feel they are doing something new - I have seen so many plays now on arranged marriages, that I feel we ought to have a moratorium on the subject

We need to have a library of our work - plays that were produced 20 years ago, need to be performed by young people in youth centres, new companies, amateur dramatics groups, let's not neglect our own work - after all if you look at the Western scene so many plays written 50 or so years ago, are now considered classics - **Look Back in Anger**, is constantly on - there has even been a Language production **Dekhate Angare** ..... **East is East** is the only play I know off, which is constantly being put on. (I can think of several others which might be enjoyed by audiences today, as they were when they first came on: **House of the Sun** by Tamasha, an Asian "Neighbours" set in Bombay; **Prem** by Jyoti Patel and Jez Simons, if you want a love story; **Journey to the West** by Tara, an epic about migration and settlement, to name just a few). British Asian theatre community needs to be clever and decisive about creating a culture

of theatre amongst its audience; be they students, ordinary members of the public and future cultural leaders. Although, I am pleased to see a growing audience for British Asian work, which is quite opinionated, I feel that a little more 'education' is necessary in order for them to identify what is distinctive about each company or production. We need to be more proactive in engaging and commenting on contemporary politics eg; Tariq Ali, has been the only playwright of Asian origin who has done that, newer and younger companies for the most part only want to do 'entertainment' in the style of Bollywood, which is fine, but you need to be able to do it as good as the movies to make it work.

We don't dialogue with each other or tackle thorny subjects -when Gurpreet Bhatti tried to address social injustices within her own community, she got bruised very badly. It was Sheffield theatres that produced, **Gladiator Games**, a tribunal play about Zahid Mubarak, the young Pakistani guy who was murdered at Feltham.

Most of all, I think we need a 'home' - British Asian theatre lacks a flagship venue, or even a venue, where the core objective would be to perform works from this sector not to say it can't do other things. This subject has been debated for 20 years and even now the ACE is undertaking consultations on its Sustained Theatre' report. (There may be dividing opinions on this, but I am of the view that we need a venue) Yes, there are places such as the Peepul Centre, which offers an opportunity for British Asian theatre to have an exposure.

The British Asian Theatre community should take the bull by the horns and get together with the British Asian business community and badger them to come together to acquire a venue. I have spent at least ten years of my life going on about 'British Asian Theatre' to them so the ground is there. As I mentioned earlier, these Businessmen are beginning to dip their toes,

here, - it's a glamorous industry and they are hard nosed business-wallahs - maybe we need their financial knowledge to make it work properly So what is the future?

A 'home' is very important as far as I am concerned, a heritage, library and documentation of our work, accessible and available for public consumption, more good quality productions on contemporary topics, growing the audience, so that the work crosses over much more. There have been significant developments over the last 30 years - mostly in what the theatre has given to the arts culture in the UK

- created some big name artists /writers /actors
- taken creative risks
- created a niche audience for this type of work
- generally being too nice to other people shared knowledge & expertise

Nevertheless, I am not dis-heartened, we have come a long way in just 30 years, and we are still young, and if I have anything to do with this field, I am confident we will grow big and strong. Thank you very much ladies and gentlemen.

## Madani Younis, Director, Asian Theatre School

South Bank Show Award Winner - Arts Council England Decibel Award 2006. Madani Younis studied on the MPhil in Playwriting at the University of Birmingham under the tutelage of April De Angelis, David Edgar and Richard Pinner. Madani has worked nationally and internationally as an arts practitioner with both writers and actors. Appointed in 2002 as the Director of Red Ladder Theatre Company's Asian Theatre School, Madani has successfully completed 5 productions for the company. Streets of Rage (2002), a response to the Bradford riots achieved a sell-out run in both Bradford and Leeds. Silent Cry (2003/ 2004 national tour). Freeworld (2004), an international collaboration with the Studio Theatre Damascus, Syria, which explores contemporary notions of terror and terrorism. In the spring of 2005 Madani worked closely with Red Ladder Theatre Company in scripting its devised show Freefalling which went onto tour nationally. He also wrote A Waiting Room for Journeying Souls (2005), a piece of musical theatre directed by Geraldine Connor, that opened the new Peepul Centre venue in Leicester. Caravan (2005), inspired by the paintings of Caravaggio, looked at the everyday struggles of a family of cake makers. As The Director of the Asian Theatre School, Madani strives to offer and empower young British Asian actors with an opportunity to learn their craft as performers.

Madani Younis' contribution is available in the form of a short movie via our website.  
[http://www.peepularts.com/serious\\_about\\_theatre/madani](http://www.peepularts.com/serious_about_theatre/madani)

## Rani Moorthy, Artistic Director, Rasa

Rani Moorthy was born in Kuala Lumpur. Following the bloody Malaysian race riots of 1969 her family attempted to move to Singapore. Making it only as far as the border town, Rani found herself carrying a passport on her daily journey to be educated in Singapore. Eventually moving across the border she became a star of stage and screen and hosted her own hit TV comedy, The Ra Ra Show.

Rani moved to the UK in 1996. She has since appeared in A&E (Granada), Coronation Street (Granada), Dead Meat (C4) and Romeo and Juliet (Birmingham Stage Company). As well as writing all of Rasa's productions she has also written for Doctors (BBC1), and is a popular host of Radio 2's Pause for Thought and a guest presenter on BBC1's Heaven and Earth.

### **Is Asian Theatre already on centre stage? If not, how do we get there?**

When I was teaching Theatre and Performance in Singapore a distinguished Chinese scholar, who had been imprisoned during the cultural revolution told me a story that I always remind myself of whenever I feel the ground below me metaphorically shake with uncertainty. The story

goes that in the 1980s when China was experiencing the early whiffs of democracy from intellectuals, an artist was asked to make a large sculpture of the word democracy in Chinese calligraphy in one of the campuses of Beijing University. The artist could not refuse the government sanctioned commission, he had to toe the line but at the same time knew

that he will be seen as lacking in integrity to actually create this work of art which did not reflect the truth, denounced by his fellow artists as a fake. Eventually the artist created the piece, so large to the point of being vulgar. Before the public unveiling of this work he had a private and secret showing in the early hours of the morning to like-minded artists and friends of this sculpture of the word democracy... so big, solid and permanent. Before anyone could say anything the artist tapped the giant sculpture and a tinny, hollow sound emanated from the sculpture... the artist had the last word.

This anecdote has served me well. I have been an artist in more than one country. As a product of Sri Lankan Tamil immigrants, born in multi-cultural, Islamic Malaysia and having made theatre under heavy censorship in Singapore, I feel that this story illustrates the tensions and challenges that face artists who are forced into stances that don't necessarily reflect their inner truth. It also reminds me that artists are essentially uncomfortable with labels and really uncomfortable with how and where society, the audience, market forces and the arts community positions us.

Unlike Suman Bhuchar and Jatinder Verma I don't have a "lived" understanding of the history of Asian Theatre in Britain, having only lived and worked here as an artist for 10 years and unlike Madani Younis I don't have the confidence of youth to look forward with optimism unmarked by experience or not jaded with a sense of irony. All I do know is that having lived and worked in different artistic environments that forced me into all kinds of challenges, I constantly have to question the boxes people put me in, boxes I feel impelled to be in and the boxes I definitely want to avoid.

So this question of whether Asian theatre is already on the centre stage intrigues me, mesmerises me, but most of all it bothers me. I want to unpack what this expression “centre stage” means. Is it the forays into the west end, the easy access into venues usually occupied by established British theatre and in turn access to the established British audience, is it getting your brand so recognisable that theatre managers and marketing departments salivate at the thought of programming your work, that the work sells to mainstream audiences as well as attracting the holy grail of Asian Theatre... the Asian bums on seats.

I want to also know who is with us on centre stage and what it took to get us there.

Let's look at why we might possibly believe that Asian theatre might occupy centre stage. I can see where little dents have been made from Tara Arts at the National, Tamasha at the Royal Court, writers like Hanif Kureshi and Tanika Gupta writing for mainstream theatres. There is also the phenomenal rise of Asian theatre companies creating new writing and touring. There is excitement in the air and it happens once every few years when there is no doubt in anyone that we belong on the main stage and command it. After which we have that sinking feeling. We feel like we're walking into a curry house the morning after the Friday night... you get a whiff of the party but the feeling that something has eluded you, all the energy and air has been sucked out of the room and the party has moved on or you've got to wait for the next one.

I want to explore why this happens... why British Asian theatre has not had a sustained period on centre stage even though I think we evidently have the two basic ingredients, searing talent and an audience, a British audience hungry to see the work.

- We have we yet to create a British Asian aesthetic that doesn't fall into what I call cultural shorthand. British Asian writers and audience are familiar strangers. We can all draw on a South Asian cultural tradition that frames our own particular stories, this makes us all feel we are on safe territory... the sitar music or some kind of desi sounds in the foyer, a kind of cultural foreplay, then the colour onstage both physical and metaphorical - and preferably drawn from Bollywood because that has always been a unifying force, so much so I feel the whole South Asian Diaspora sighs with relief when the Bollywood aesthetic is involved. And then we want to leave the theatre with a kind of folk dance feeling, the metaphorical bhāgra... that now you can get on with real life, all is well with the world. I know I have taken liberties with this parody of the British Asian theatre experience, but I think we do struggle to find an aesthetic that doesn't alienate and mystify because we are essentially strangers... divided by language, religion, fractious communal divides and the multitude of different philosophical and geo-political divides that is our South Asian cultural heritage. Failure to find a satisfactory unifying aesthetic can lead to a kind of generic brand that will not bode well for the legacy of British Asian theatre
- If the elusive British Asian aesthetic is a kind of window dressing and dangerously elliptical, then what about the body, the meat and bones of the work? Has content also become a kind of consumer friendly package, made palatable with lashings of characters and themes that won't look out of place in a Bollywood film. Fortunately not every artist allows market forces to dictate what kind of work they want to engage in. We moved from insularity, where the personal was just all the things

that happened to you... to an exploration of the surrounding, what happens around the corner from you, in the corner shop even, then the issues that challenge your community and with time we will find our voice within the global family. With my background, I am all too familiar with censorship, especially the insidious self-censorship that engulfs me from time to time... the I-can-only-write-about-that-when-so-and-so-dies syndrome. I possibly echo the all too familiar story that all of us have, of doing the degree to please our parents and then spending the rest of your life proving your worthiness because you choose the arts... so we make nice and fail to explore our inner truths.

Does self-censorship even within a democracy mean a failure of true introspection, a failure to get at what really causes our anxieties, an un-self conscious leap of faith that maybe doesn't plague our non-Asian counterparts? If this is true as it sometimes is for me... are we letting ourselves and our audiences down?

- In order to join the ranks of the centre stage we must lose our collective cultural baggage which some of you will find easier than others. And the moment we use the English language we have baggage. As Asian artists we don't have the one voice... we have many voices and languages. In our minds we divide life from the life indoors and the life outside the home. One of the necessary but disturbing sides of British Asian writing has been about the power of second generation issues populated by attractive edgy young people and then a supporting cast of first generation characters who are ciphers, the victims of our anger and frustration so we either laugh at them or diminish them. I know artists who are so frustrated by the baggage that we want the liberty to actually be free of all that...

why can't we be writers, actors, artists who just happen to be Asian? I'm sure we've all considered the freedom to completely deracinate ourselves as an answer to this barrier that we have to negotiate.

- The state of being Asian enough to satisfy the Asian audience and intrigue the other theatregoers but not too Asian as to alienate. Is there a kind of de-politicised, desensitised, anaemic character on stage, so bleached of their cultural "baggage" that they might as well be white. Is this colour blind art or just blind?

Given all this, do we want to be centre stage at all?

I find Peter Brooks' breakdown of the 3 cultures a useful paradigm to compare with the British Asian model.

The first culture is the culture of state, which in our case is the English hegemony which takes centre stage at present... a set of identifiable values we all subscribe to. We can find our own brand by tagging on the coattails of an established brand - Shakespeare, Andrew Lloyd Webber, E.M Forster for example. This plays nicely into the colonial baggage that we all share. Middle class Asians can subscribe to this too... the brown pound is rampant for this kind of work and visiting South Asian artists from the motherland. These forays into the official culture are tempting, lucrative... and remember that bhangra feeling I mentioned? We can also tag on the coattails of the official cultures from the subcontinent...so Mahabharata and Ramayana have offered us some diversion. And therein lies the problem... unless you can find a truth in our cooption of state culture, revisit it and make it a way of

allowing all people into our world, it will still be a distraction from the real challenges of creating British Asian theatre. I do not doubt the sincerity of the work, just whether it takes us any further to creating an aesthetic or, if need be, the multiplicity of aesthetics that we can call British Asian. It depends on who is doing the adapting, sometimes a depressing cultural laziness of just changing names and creating an ethnic look, and worse the generic and obligatory Asian accent.

The second culture is the culture of the individual. For the British Asian this is complicated. Culturally speaking, a Gujarati from Kenya now living in Oldham has less in common with a Gujarati from India living in Slough. On the other hand a Malaysian born Sri Lankan Tamil living in Manchester has more in common with a farmer in Somerset. Why? By accepting that there is no common ground to fall upon except what makes us human, not taking anything for granted, by presenting metaphor rather than verity, archetypes rather than stereotypes and by the boldness of content, being brave to present a point of view.

I find great hope in the third culture that Brook calls the culture of links. It has to do with finding relationships that have been lost or submerged by all the forces I've been talking about. That life in the margins can be a very powerful position that transcends the barriers that market forces, policies, buzz words (by the way its no longer cultural diversity, no longer multi-cultural, the new buzz word is inter-cultural), cultural trends and all the divisive, corrosive cynical positioning we find ourselves in and the posturing we find ourselves performing.

It's excavating our own secret nooks and crannies for our own cultural truth. I go back to that Chinese sculptor, you might package something that looks like something the great and the powerful want from you... a hulking sculpture that says democracy when you know this

is blatantly a manifestation of hypocrisy... but you make it hollow. That rings true for you and if people bother to tap they will also experience the pleasure of knowing your inner truth. I use this in my own work... Curry Tales looks like its Ready Steady Cook and a bit of curry, plays on a stereotype... one that even a farmer in Somerset will recognise and not feel threatened by... we all have to eat, we have the same sensory functions, we all like a bit of a story, that farmer has not seen any theatre. But once he and people like him walk into my space, I could weave my particular magic. The only assumption I made is that I want to understand what it is we share, rather than try and force my difference onto anyone.

This question of whether British Asian theatre is centre stage should however preoccupy people who have to sell the work, if marketing is the more relevant truth in our business. They have to find the short hand...the packaging, deal with the reality that a photo with a brown face will put people off seeing a play, or as I remember with my play Pooja, naming it Pooja made it difficult to sell - was it even in English? Is it Hindu and if so who are you trying to convert? This was my first play in Britain, and I have since learnt better ways of selling Pooja, marketing it as a coming of age story which has now not only been successful nationwide but found an international audience when I toured it in Sri Lanka and Malaysia. Would I name it differently now? Probably not, but I will work closely in the marketing and publicity of the work - that is my responsibility and a necessary part of being a writer who is Asian. Six years later when I did Curry Tales I overheard an American looking at a poster of me with four arms looking like a Hindu Goddess..."Do you think it's in English?"

For those of us who are serious about what we do, who struggle to find our authentic voice, who cannot help but be creative, the issue of whether we are centre stage or not is irrelevant. We don't want to live in the comfort zones; we thrive in the uncomfortable and need to scratch the itch. We live in hope that if the work is good the audience will find us.

## Sâmir Bhamra, Artistic Director, Phizzical Productions

Phizzical Productions is one of the leading exponents in contemporary British Asian theatre. Founded in 2003 by artistic director Sâmir Bhamra, the touring theatre company has created a prestigious platform to nurture and showcase South Asian talent. The company is dedicated to tackling important and risqué issues in entertaining productions that tour nationally and internationally.

Currently, Phizzical is the only British Asian company in the East Midlands region that works with professional actors, emerging new talent, and in schools via the Creative Partnerships programme. It has produced six productions, and a majority of the company's funding is self generated. As the director of this company, I find these thoughts terribly upsetting. The Midlands region has possibly the largest British Asian and South Asian migrant communities, yet London is the home for almost all Asian theatre.

Phizzical's roots are firmly within its community and our programming is youth led (16 years +). I realise that this may contradict my earlier statement where we separated ourselves from community theatre. That is indeed true, and I hope this paper clarifies why I believe this to be true.

## **I want to be a Bollywood Idol / Star**

Phizzical launched BollyIdol™, a nationwide talent search in 2003 with support from BBC Radio Leicester and B4U. This concept was created to find hidden talent within the Asian community to meet the new demands of our changing landscape. The concept sought actors, comics, dancers, singers and costume designers.

It was judged by an independent panel comprising of Steve Nijjar (Hangama Productions), Nilima Devi (CICD), Sita Sagoo (Ishq Records) and Sujata Barot (previously BBC Asian Network). Over 500 people from all over the UK turned up one cold Spring weekend to Leicester, just to audition. Twenty-four people would be short-listed for a part in the new musical, Precious Bazaar.

BollyIdol is seen as the gateway for many young people to act, sing, dance, and make people laugh and open new doors – doors that lead to theatres.

Ten young people (from 18 – 36 years) were selected to star in the production and one young lady was given the opportunity to design costumes for the leading protagonist. No one could foresee that eleven lives were going to be transformed that weekend. And they did. This platform started to change attitudes of young people and their families, that they too can contribute to theatre, and have an opportunity to shine. Some examples include:

- A parent allowed his only son (18 years old) to enrol to drama school
- Two young ladies were cast in feature films. One of them can be seen in the British

feature film Brick Lane, and the other has starred in a Bollywood and a French feature. Both have recently completed more films, and worked professionally in theatre.

- One young man was cast in two short films made by ITV
- One young lady is on the BBC Asian Network soap Silver Street
- The costume designer has worked with companies like Sampad and more
- One mature lady who was South Asian immigrant developed the confidence to travel without a male escort, start relationships and eventually secure employment.

And as for the production that opened doors for them - Precious Bazaar, toured for two years nationwide! It received a Windrush Arts Award nomination and was described by many reviewers as “better than Bombay Dreams!” Considering that this project was deemed risky by most funders, it worked really well, and had secured support from local and national businesses.

Our performances have reached a diverse audience who have appreciated a colourful and exciting experience. Beyond the acting, Phizzical gives young people a chance to understand the process and the business of theatre. We also regularly host workshops with a sample of British Asian and South Asian Diaspora and this influences our productions.

Taking inspiration from Tara Arts, our co-production with Leicester Youth Association, Romeo + Laila received unanimous critical acclaim as it fused with the greatest love stories in

Eastern and Western literature. What followed was research in two inner city schools with young people from diverse backgrounds about why they cannot identify with Shakespeare or his text. When this was performed for them, they could visually appreciate it – but they couldn't comprehend it.

As we were about to re-launch Bollydhol, we decided to set the finalists with a challenge to adapt a Shakespeare play and present a 20-min version to an audience. This process added with our ongoing work in schools, led us to commission a writer to work in schools to create What You Fancy, our adaptation of Twelfth Night. This high energy production also toured for two years.

Phizzical was commissioned by East Midlands Minority Network to devise a play that explored racial tension and harmony. Retailiation opened at Peepul Centre over Christmas 2007 and saw a multi-ethnic cast explore ways to communicate in a comedy. The production received good reviews from the press and 77% average audiences adored its sensibilities. So far, that has been Phizzical's journey and yes, it does sound like community theatre. And it probably was. But it was the national community who starred in the productions and national business who supported the national tour. Phizzical created something new, and went one step further.

And being in this no-man's land has been strange. At some stage we had to decide when we would jump into professional theatre. In 2008, the company toured its first professional production A Perfect Ganesh written by one of America's most prolific writer's Terrence McNally and the cast included a previous Bollydhol who went through the same rigorous audition process as other actors.

The company also secured funding from the cultural attaché of the US Embassy to invite the writer to talk about the production at universities and on the press night. The production received mixed reviews but each one praised the cast's performances and questioned the topics in the play: hate crime, breast cancer, homophobia, AIDS, the role of mature women in society etc.

The company has begun to nurture new writers, it has toured internationally with its productions and it has young audiences at tenterhooks waiting for its next production. Phizzical started to get serious about theatre, and we have started to get people talking. There is clearly a need for the work that it does, it has proven that it reaches audiences, and that at the heart of its activities are young people, and their well being. And as the only British Asian theatre company in the East Midlands, Phizzical should be nurtured.

**Born of Exclusion**  
Black British Theatre

## Patricia Cumper, Artistic Director, Talawa Theatre

Patricia Cumper has been writing for the theatre in the Caribbean and the UK for nearly thirty years. Her work has been produced throughout the Caribbean, in Canada and the US, and her first work to appear in the UK *The Fallen Angel* and *the Devil's Concubine* was at the Almeida in the late 1980s. Her 2002 play, *The Key Game*, commissioned by Talawa and produced at the Riverside, was included in *Time Out's* Critics Choice and won four star reviews. Her work for radio includes a RIMA winning drama series, adapting Rita Dove's *Darker Face of the Earth* for the BBC World Service and most recently a fifteen part serialization of *Small Island* for *Woman's Hour*. She has also worked as a critic and commentator on *Radio 4* and the BBC World Service, as script reader and dramaturg, and has had a novel and several short stories published.

### **How do we simultaneously create space to nurture emerging new talent and make room for classic Black writers and their work?**

I would propose another way of looking at the question that has been posed. Nurturing new work while continuing to produce, examine and celebrate established work speaks of a healthy theatrical tradition. I would suggest to you that chronic under funding of the Black theatre sector over decades has not produced anything so robust. Instead, what we have is theatre that seems to get closer to success every fifteen or twenty years but then dies away. In the sixties, it was the plays of Barry and Lloyd Reckord that were playing at the Royal Court and in the West End. In the late seventies, it was the work of Michael Abbensetts and Mustapha Matura. In this decade, it has been the work of Kwame Kwei Armah, Roy Williams and to a lesser extent, Debbie Tucker Green. The question then must be: have we made any

progress? Are we just producing essentially disposable theatre? If so, why? And what can we do about it?

Recently, Talawa Theatre Company has been through a difficult time. The company's ambition to have its own theatre was shattered when funding was withdrawn from a capital project that might well have destroyed the company. The company was threatened with closure. With so few Black-led companies left after the culls of the eighties and nineties, Black theatre practitioners united in protest and Talawa was granted a stay of execution, a chance to get back on its feet. This opportunity prompted much soul searching. Talawa had to strip the company right back to its basics and look at the very fundamental assumptions it was making. We had to ask the question, is there a need for a Black theatre company? Our actors are on stages around the country. We have half a dozen directors making a decent living. Diversity is on every agenda.

And yet Black theatre is not as healthy as it seems. Our leading actors are leaving for the US in droves. Much of the writing that is produced and promoted feels as though it is telling the same stories over and over again. Audiences for Black work and Black audiences are hard to come by in the subsidised sector. Sponsorship that used to support Black work has now moved on to new causes.

And this convinces me that there is a need not just for companies like Talawa and Nitro to continue to exist, but that there should be another four or five such companies. I will use the example of London because that is what I know best. People from visible ethnic minorities (don't you just love the language of administration?) make up 28 per cent of the population. The funding given to Black led companies i.e. Black, Asian and those producing predominantly

Black work, is just four percent of the funding. Twenty eight to four. No wonder Black companies feel as though they are sinking under the burden of expectation.

**So many stories to tell, so few stages to tell them on.**

Why do I focus on funding? Simply because at the core of the issue I've been asked to talk about today, is the assumption of existence of a kind of theatre, Black theatre, that is somehow different from any other kind of theatre. It isn't. It is part of the mainstream tradition. It just has different stories to tell. It also assumes that somehow we have to choose between classic Black theatre and nurturing new talent. A healthy tradition must do both. It assumes that work of African, Caribbean, American and Black British origin can be lumped together under the heading of Black theatre. It should not be, not without some understanding of the inherent differences.

But why are these assumptions made? Are we seen as united by a common history forged by the Transatlantic slave trade? Not all of us are. Is it that all of us suffer racism when we live in the UK? Perhaps. I would like to suggest that it is just a convenient way to lump together people who are 'other', that our narratives do not fit comfortably into mainstream theatre's image of itself. The overarching theme for this conference is 'Born of Exclusion' and for good reason. What has united all the work that is grouped together under the banner of being Black is that otherness.

So how does this affect the work that we do? It affects it profoundly, simply because most of the work that we do is in reaction to this assumption. We are expected, consciously or unconsciously, to create soas to explain our otherness, to be accessible, to overcome the

barriers to the mainstream. And it is this reactive-ness that I feel has meant that Black British work has not yet come of age, has not yet produced classic work. When we talk of classic Black work, we still look to the US, the Caribbean and Africa. Hansberry, Soyinka, Walcott. Think of what is happening now. Caroline, or Change at the National. An American production. Porgy and Bess, an American opera now reduced to a musical. Black British writers don't really figure in the same way.

So to return to the question I have been asked to examine: I would like to answer it this way. There has been in mainstream theatre a real effort to include what they consider Black programming and Black practitioners in the theatre that they produce. For a great many, their funding depends on it. In the larger conurbations, it makes sense financially too. To some extent I feel what we might regard as classic theatre is pretty safe in the mainstream. It was forged by big events and is strong enough to stand on its own.

What interests me is how we as Black British theatre practitioners respond to the challenges we are facing now. We are an increasingly culturally complex people. Like the image that could be either two faces or a goblet depending on how you look at it, we the other that help Britain define itself. And yet we are part of the same picture, neither existing without the other.

There will be more Black Britons of Nigerian than of Afro Caribbean descent by the end of this decade. We have not yet begun to hear from those of Somali descent, or the many who have connections to Southern Africa. What we need to have is theatre that has been given the space, critical and intellectual support to develop its own voice, to experiment with form, to celebrate those synergies. Not in community centres or as part of youth work, but on mainstream stages. And not just exploring what are perceived as the major problems in

our communities or the common stereotypes of the oversexed Black man, the earth mother Black woman, or the talented intuitive artist or athlete. We need love stories, coming of age stories, science fiction, horror, surreal work and musicals, the lot. Most of all, what we need is space to grow as theatre artists, designers, administrators, producers, working throughout British theatre.... And that is why we continue to need companies like Talawa. British companies, dedicated to providing that creative space, willing to tell those stories of the other until they become part of the mainstream, investing in the vision and talent of those that create all aspects of theatre.

## Martin Glynn 'SHADOW VOICES' (Achieving cultural equity – a perspective)

### **Context**

The Arts is one way we engage, share, and celebrate life, from our own unique perspective. Having a strong, vibrant, and potent creative spirit liberates the mind, body, and soul, allowing for new possibilities of self-discovery, as well as providing a platform for the individual or collective to speak to the world. 'SHADOW VOICES' is a perspective coming from one practitioner, who has a total of 25 years professional experience, ranging from holding positions on numerous arts boards, designing and delivering arts policy, as well as being an established practitioner both here and abroad. My worldview like all artists is unique and requires constantly reframing and evaluation. Unfortunately my worldview, that comprises of multiple components; Welsh, Jamaican, African, British, and male are couched in many rhetorical policy postures that limit and inhibit my practice.

Things are further complicated by those arts agencies/institutions who place the responsibility for the delivery of arts policy in the hands of 'Street Level Bureaucrats' who use discretion, have limited resources at their disposal, and have the power to determine how those resources are allocated. This flawed systematic approach to the delivery end of artistic policy continues to stifle Black self-determination, independence, and ultimately liberation from a system that tends to serve it's own needs. The net result is a Black artistic community that becomes trapped, disillusioned, powerless and ultimately controlled. There are arts organisations, institutions, and agencies, who will use their current track record pertaining to Black art/ists to diffuse, confuse, and divert attention from some of the fundamental issues affecting the

creation, production, and distribution of arts from the Black community. A new questioning of how arts policy is framed, formed, and implemented goes right to the heart of any analysis that should be undertaken by both policy makers and practitioners, whose needs are interrelated but distinctively different. Some of those questions being:

- How are contemporary arts policies governing Black creativity framed?
- What theoretical basis or understanding informs those policy values?
- How are those policies evaluated and by whom?
- Does contemporary arts policy advocate and support sustainable development within the arts?
- Where are the infrastructures designed to enable the production, distribution, and promotion of Black-led ideas that stand outside the so-called 'mainstream' arts institutional remit?
- Where is the current contextual understanding of Black-led Third Sector (Sustainable Arts within a social context) arts practice?
- Where are the international arts policies that place Black-led work within an international context and market place?

The current situation facing many Black practitioners is not one of **what's happening** but more

about **what is not happening**. It is also about decisions, power, resources, notions of diversity, interpreting reality through shared cultural experiences, as well as becoming equal partners and stakeholders within shaping the cultural life of the UK. It is this practitioner's opinion that Black artists themselves **must be** concerned with changing their own positioning with **support** not **control** from arts agencies and institutions.

There are those critics who will see the need for independent development for Black artists as wrong, divisive, and in opposition to the 'so called' inclusive remit, which is supposed to treat everyone equally regardless of race, culture, religion, etc. But in order to be equal, one must first have a sense of **inclusion** and **belonging** within the design, development, and delivery of arts policy. The lack of visible black led profile within policy, production, management, distribution, and resourcing within the arts, combined with mono cultural and euro centric value judgments and perspectives operating throughout, the problems are clearly visible. We must therefore accept that Black arts practitioners are already starting from an un-equal position. The underlying premise here is one of **redressing balances**, not in the **creation of problems**, as so often is implied by those who see an assertive response from Black artists as threatening.

The issue of **race** is always seen as a problematic paradigm in the formulation of arts policy, rooted in fear and emotive responses that are both counterproductive and ignorant. The **fear of race** seems to be at the core of many of the problems institutions face in dealing with this complex and difficult issue. This is usually compounded by either **knee jerk** reactions or poorly thought out policy interpretations that result in Street Level Bureaucrats operating with little or no credibility in the community or art form they are designed to serve. There is a need not only for fundamental change, but a clear and focused strategy of intent, that will provide a framework from which to build confidences amongst arts managers, Black artists and the

community at large if solutions are to be found.

How are we to move forward and be proactive, positive and efficient in delivering a new vision for Black artists? In my opinion there needs to be a way for Black artists to generate and create their work, through the development of an independent infrastructure, that feeds into the arts landscape, but directed by the needs of the artists, not the agenda of funders, agencies, and institutions.

### **Strategic vision:**

To frame any new policy through to implementation requires a Strategic vision

**1. Ideology:**

The incorporation of Black-led artistic, philosophical thought and ideology within all layers of arts policy is essential in making any notion of cultural equity real in the eyes of both practitioners, community, and audience. The failure to validate diversity within arts philosophy, ideology, and policy, is not only discriminatory by default, but limits the overall visioning of the arts.

**2. Holistic approach:**

Existing Arts agencies should be holistic in orientation, and should address CORE and not just SYMPTOMATIC aspects of the Black artistic reality. Before any programmes can be developed the fundamental questions raised above must be addressed, in consultation with the various constituent arts groups and individuals, which makes up the Black arts sector. Those flagship organisations that are struggling to engage in a meaningful dialogue should be made accountable for the inability to realize a vision

that should have been thoroughly researched, piloted and tested.

**3. On-line agency:**

The development of an on-line Black arts register would enable promoters, and agencies to access Black artists directly. This interactive on-line forum would include everything from on-line mentoring for black artists, who are either not visible or unable to participate directly in the community. This agency would have relevant culturally specific and race related resources, contacts, artists, etc, which could be accessed throughout the current arts landscape. Hopefully eradicating the current sporadic 'BOLT ON' mindset, which currently exists. Having several arts register located all over the place, provides no central focus or networking opportunities. This agency should be managed and run by the artists themselves with resources and support provided by a consortium of agencies/institutions.

**4. Academy**

Black led arts practices are rooted in cultural traditions that are at times excluded, sidelined, marginalised, and related to the margins of the so called mainstream arts landscape. Black people have created genres of arts practices that have shaped contemporary cultural life within the UK. An academy would not only enable new and emerging practitioners to be influenced by those arts activities, but the preservation of those traditions ancient and modern is crucial.

**5. Research agenda**

The research agenda into Black arts practice and practitioners should address itself to the de-construction and dismantling of those forums that have become too centralised,

talk shop orientated, and veer away from any new strategic visioning. This paradigm shift should give way to an artist led agenda, using action and participatory research methods.

Policy should be framed less through focus groups, discussion forums, institutional self-serving needs, and more by the politics of artist needs. Research needs to address itself not just to audience development processes, creating more space within existing agencies, etc, and more towards a self-determined and sustainable Black arts infrastructure that serves a range of needs, but not to the detriment of it's own. The days of Black artists propping up failing infrastructures and those agencies who continue to tick boxes without any real commitment to fundamental change should be confined to the pages of an era that has long since past. Seminar and conference formats need to be replaced by pro-active think tanks with power, combined with resources to shape and direct new policy initiatives, as well as strengthen existing ones. Think tanks should be equipped with minds that think strategically, politically, culturally, artistically, and can exercise critical thinking within a community centred context, that is appropriate, relevant, and accessible to all sections of the community.

## **6. Cultural entrepreneurs**

Cultural entrepreneurs should work with funders, sponsors producers, distributors, in exploring how the current networks can work more collaboratively, and reduce duplication. This would include close liaison with social agencies and service providers in identifying new markets for Black artists to occupy, as well as employing Black artists in a consultative role investigating how the arts can be utilised in improving social agency service delivery. Black-led businesses and community organisations

should be encouraged to tender for contracts pertaining to the supply of goods and services within the mainstream Arts sector. This would create space for models of training that are truly diverse and would not tag Black artists training needs purely into the category of race relation or equal opportunities.

7. Sustainability:

A new paradigm should inform those artists who do not feel confident inside the confines of an infrastructure that fails to prioritise artist's need over maintaining institutional status quo. The core values of such a paradigm should include:

**Infrastructure:**

- Socio-economic sustainability
- Collective and Cooperative ways of working
- Leadership training
- Capacity Building
- Enterprise development

**Research methods applied:**

- Participatory
- Action
- Community centred

**Outcomes:**

- Toolkits (Aimed at those agencies/institutions who access the community)
- Training packages (Aimed at those agencies/institutions who access the community)

- Research strategies (Community centred researchers)
- Interactive media (CD Rom, Websites, IT, etc)
- Educational resources (Alternative forms of education, cultural, arts, etc)
- Awareness raising tools (Drugs, Sexual Health, Mental Health, etc)

**Community training programme to include:**

- Socio-economic sustainability
- Collective and Cooperative ways of working
- Leadership training
- Capacity Building
- Research methods
- Organisational development
- Intergenerational engagement
- Community Well-being

**Income generation methods should be:**

- Funding
- Sponsorship
- Investment
- Enterprise development
- Philanthropy
- Entrepreneurship
- Community/Social enterprise
- Partnership working
- Altruism

**To achieve the above requires:**

- A shared vision
- A strategic plan
- Grounded risk strategy
- Socio-economic premise
- Informed human resources
- Commitment to change
- Strong and inspired leadership
- Holistic delivery (Mind, body, and soul)
- Culturally/Socially relevant philosophical paradigm

**Conclusion:**

Any fundamental shift in arts policy and its journey to fruition will involve re-focus, re-invention, re-claiming, re-discovering, and re-programming the artistic landscape. For Black arts practitioners to seep into the institutions ethos, they need to be given time to grow. If Black artists stand any chance of incorporating themselves into a meaningful and goal orientated life, those who 'have' must strive for new ways of engaging those who 'have not'.

Black artists must be placed in environments currently under represented in the wider arts landscape, either through mentoring or apprenticeship type initiatives. This would empower, regenerate communities and create possible new audiences. Agencies, funders, institutions, should provide investment and sponsorship possibilities. built on partnership and collective responsibility. Of course there are issue of artists integrity, standards, and a whole series of

variables. Black artists are not substandard, but occasionally non-standard.

Black artists do not require special privileges, but do need space to experiment, devise, take risks, create new works, research, and so on, as well as making a profit. Black artists also do not want special treatment, merely the right to bring some special magic to the table. Most of all Black artists want to be judged for the quality of their work, and the opportunity to be more visible and raise their profile within the cultural life of the UK or wherever they may want to share their work.

To succeed any package of measures must be resourced properly, and managed in a clear and focused way. If we can do this we stand a good chance of making a difference, but there needs to be several ingredients ... TRUST ... SUPPORT ... A WILLINGNESS TO TAKE RISKS... AND A BELIEF IN THE PRINCIPLE OF THE RIGHT TO SELF-DETERMINATION.

To close we will allow Kwesi Owusu to have the last say...

"The future of Black arts in Britain lies in building an independent, organic, cultural infrastructure that combines production and consumption"

**Child's Play:**  
Theatre for Children & Young People

## Ellen Bianchini, The Spark Children's Arts Festival

What is the role and state of children's theatre today? Is it valued and attended?

Paper for 'Serious About Theatre' Seminar, Peepul Centre, 2006.

This paper is a transcript of a presentation delivered as part of the Serious About Theatre workshops. The slides refer to the associated presentation which can be download from <http://www.peepularts.com/childrenstheatre.pdf>

### **Slide 1 – where's the bear?**

The line of enquiry I've been asked to investigate is "what is role and state of children's theatre today? Is it valued and attended?"

This is a Big Question – I have found it a slippery one to find a final answer to, so will give you my impressions based on experiences of programming work for The Spark Children's Arts Festival, and look forward to hearing your views during the course of the day – perhaps we will come to some hard and fast conclusions

As a preamble, I need to underline that I am a relative newcomer to the Children's Theatre movement – and it can only be described as a movement – and I come first and foremost as an audience member and programmer, rather than an artist or creator. Children's theatre as we understand it has been going since the end of the second world war, whereas I have worked in it seriously for a mere 5 years. I have never studied it, or trained in it, so my impressions are entirely pieced together from observation over a relatively short time, rather than a tried and tested thesis.

## **Slide 2 – hidden treasure**

I want to talk firstly about the state of children's theatre – and my first impression is still one that was the reason we set up The Spark Children's festival in 2003: that children's theatre is still all too often hidden away, a narrow preserve of those schools where teachers value it, and of audiences who have discovered it and once they have, they remain enthusiastic supporters. It is rarely reviewed in national newspapers, rarely featured in magazines or on TV and radio, its main exponents – companies, writers, directors and actors are all but unknown outside to the sector itself.

This seems to me a huge shame. We set up The Spark festival in order to give a platform and a profile to some of the excellent work that is out there, and I hope that with audiences of around 10000 each year, children's theatre in Leicester at least has become less hidden.

The Spark is one of a growing clutch of children's festivals across the UK, some local authority funded like Sheffield and Glasgow, others independent like Imagine in Edinburgh. Ciao in Oxford, and Young at Art in Belfast. Considering also the growing number of venues programming children's work alongside adult theatre, and the number of dedicated children's theatres (3 in London, plus the Egg in Bath) it seems strange that it should not play a greater part in our perceptions of what makes up our cultural life.

Part of the answer lies in its nature – children's theatre tends to be generally a more intimate experience – smaller companies, shorter plays, smaller audiences; and frequently, because of funding peculiarities, shorter runs. Blink and you'll miss it; and audiences and reviewers often do.

But this hidden nature is also tied up with the history of the sector, with our attitudes to children and with the value that society and government places on the theatre for children.

### **Slide 3 – bare facts**

In considering the question of state and of value – it is interesting to compare UK investment in children's theatre with that of other countries:

There are 161 children/young people's companies who are members of ITC

Regularly funded organizations number:

- c.38 in UK (pop.60M)
- 6 in Wales (pop. 4M)
- 6 in Scotland (pop.5M)
- 120 in Germany (pop.82.4M)
- 60-70 in Denmark (pop.5.5M)
- 40-50 in Belgium (pop. 5M)

The number of UK companies has not increased in last 20 years or so. It compares less favourably than Germany, Belgium or Denmark, but puts us in a better position than say Italy, France or Spain - so what do we conclude?

### **Slide 4 – Danish gold**

As an aside which is revealing of how theatre is valued elsewhere in Europe: in the last 20 years the Danes have developed a system of evaluating the quality of their theatre productions, and subsidy is automatic against whether productions reaches criteria.

### **Slide 5 – other attitudes to children**

It's also interesting to reflect on attitudes to children in other countries, to child development and education, as the state and role of children's theatre inevitably reflects wider social concerns. Gill Robertson, Artistic Director of Catherine Wheels, makes this point "I think much of Europe is 30 years ahead of us in terms of what they think children can handle. They believe in exposing children to everything, letting them learn to deal with it. We believe in teaching them the rules and protecting them from the world."

I think it's true that in UK we have a massively complex and increasingly protective and fearful attitude towards children – what they should and shouldn't do/say/see, what might be done to them, what they might do to others. Safeguarding legislation reflects these complicated and restrictive attitudes, that ultimately wants to control our children's experiences of growing up and of the world around them. This in turn has become inextricably linked to funding patterns, and therefore to the content and quality of the theatre we produce.

### **Slide 6 – back to the UK**

So what of these 161 companies? What do they collectively tell us? My impression of the overall state is that children's theatre provides quite a rich and varied menu and has developed a multi-faceted role that has been shaped by its history.

#### Education policy

To understand the role of children's theatre today, it is helpful to go back to its modern roots: it grew from the two diverging schools of thought that broadly developed in the 50's and 60's, out of the post-war reconstruction and the changes brought in with the Education Act of 1944: one school of thought wanted to create children's theatre as an artistic experience,

presented with the same, if not better, standards of craft and skill as theatre for adults but for a young audience. The other school conceived theatre as an educational tool which could inform, could challenge intellectually, socially, and emotionally, could raise awareness and debate of moral or social issues, such as pacifism, the minimum wage, sexuality, or be a vehicle for communicating particular messages on road safety and contraception. In the 60's and 70's, this Theatre in Education (TIE) had the upper hand, largely due to the Arts Council's perception that children's theatre was the responsibility of the Minister for Education. It was funded through local authorities until the Local Management of Schools act of 1988 handed back budgets to individual schools. This was another funding earthquake which changed the landscape of children's theatre again.

Now the role of theatre for children within education is wide open again – it still maintains its focused educational role, and TIE companies still flourish, but the wind of creativity is blowing through the national curriculum once more, so where companies touring into schools used to have to align their productions very tightly within curriculum areas, there is now a sense of more breathing space, with recognition that theatre can be a creative stimulus to all kinds of learning – a welcome loosening of boundaries for both artists, and audiences.

#### Its own practice

In 2006 the old schools of thought are no longer so clear cut though they are still present under the surface, but the landscape looks much more varied, much greener, more exotic: the best theatre for children is magical and sophisticated, having grown and developed over the last 40 years with its own passionate practitioners and proponents, fertilised also by contact with international artists and companies, and with culturally diverse traditions within the UK, through international touring and festivals, through organisations such as ASSITEJ

and the Children's Theatre Association. Children's theatre is equally comfortable in a school or in a professional venue, it offers a mine of artistic experience that can be appreciated just as it is, or quarried more deeply with workshops and resource packs.

#### Parallel growth of cultural products for children

Its audience is also more sophisticated, shaped by a parallel massive growth in children's literature, in film and media. This is not to say that all is well all over the garden – at the other end of the scale there are, unfortunately for our children, plenty of poorly written and performed productions touring into schools, simply because it's easier to get a foot in the door in children's theatre than in mainstream theatre and can still - and still wrongly - be considered a stepping stone for actors and directors into the adult theatre world.

#### Social policy

The raft of legislation since the 1980's around child protection has had the effect of making everyone very careful in what they do, principally in the operational logistics of presenting theatre (CRB checks for all actors, child protection policies, issues over photographing children, and initiating physical contact with children, risk assessments for theatre trips, insurance etc). I think it also makes audiences careful and conservative, sticking to traditional tales and the guarantee of happy endings, and programmers too, needing to guarantee box office. I think what is interesting is how companies have risen to this challenge and created masterpieces with them (Big Telly's extraordinary Little Mermaid performed entirely in a swimming pool springs to mind) Old tales are old and worn precisely because they have so much resonance that children (and adults) don't tire of them, they fulfil some basic need in our psyche as Bettelheim famously described in his book the Uses of Enchantment. But the challenge for children's theatre makers – and programmers and funders - is to break through the adult

gatekeeper's fear of the unknown and win their trust to try new work telling new stories. This is already happening: children's audiences, once hooked, can be fiercely loyal. There are many venues building such loyalty across innovative programmes, such as Lyric Hammersmith, Polka, Warwick Arts Centre and Half Moon; children's festivals can also have an impact in building a brand that audiences will trust and take a chance on, and buck the trend of sticking to the familiar. This has happened with Imagine in Edinburgh and is certainly what we hope to achieve with The Spark audiences through the years.

#### **Slide 7 – multifunded, multi-tasking**

Children's theatre has created over the last 20 years a multi-faceted role for itself, and that is because its power is increasingly recognised and valued by teachers, youth workers, policy makers and different agencies such as the police, and primary care trusts.

#### **Slide 8 – still two camps?**

Within this multiplicity, I think the roots are still visible – theatre in education and theatre as a 'stand alone' experience – a story and a spectacle shared. But I want to give a quick example of a production that I think does it all

#### **Slide 9 – CTC**

Wolfgang Schneider, president of the international association for children's theatre ASSITEJ, has given some perceptive pointers in his introduction to a new publication (highly recommended) which chronicles 50 years of professional children's theatre, from the 50's to the present day. One of theatre's functions, says Schneider, is as 'a medium of social imagination': the stage creates another world where other lives are possible – other lives which we can bear witness to, be involved with without sharing their burdens. These other

worlds are a rich and endless vein of experience for children: they push boundaries of emotional experience, by enclosing us all, actors and audience, in wonder, anger, celebration, hilarity, grief.

Young Hamlet, an adaptation of Hamlet created for 9-11 year olds, came to Leicester as part of the first Spark festival. It was a one man show, by CTC Theatre Company from Darlington and I saw it at Sparkenhoe Community Primary School, watched by about 60 children from Year 5 and Year 6 classes that were largely a mix Asian and African- Caribbean children, with at least 4 children who were recently arrived and whose English was still poor. It went down a storm. The actor had set the hall up as a crime scene where many people had died, cordoned off by police tape. We sat inside, became involved with the actor trying to work out who these people were, how they were connected with each other, what was the sequence of events leading up to the tragedy. Once the story was established, the actor went back to the beginning and retold it, using Shakespeare's words. The children were completely absorbed by this tale of family strife and in the afternoon session, they wrote their own dialogues between Hamlet and Gertrude which they shared at the end of the day.

What was happening here? This was theatre as medium of social imagination – a world where it is safe to witness, and thus to understand better, those things that we all fear. The children were entering, guided by a careful and trustworthy actor, a world of terrible loss, and violent death, deception, betrayal and insanity, a world of human frailty and chaos, but also of love and redemption, told through some of the most beautiful dialogue and poetic language ever written. Is this the stuff of children's theatre? Teachers, parents, programmers, directors can be uneasy about Shakespeare for children, let alone Shakespearean tragedy, but here was a company who tunnelled fearlessly into the heart of the play, with all its pain, and

created a pathway for children to come in, explore and understand.

### **Slide 10 – Phillip Pullman – theatre as ‘fresh air’ for children**

This observation by Phillip Pullman appears with great regularity on websites and publications to do with children’s theatre: not surprisingly, because it’s an endorsement by one of the best writers in the world, and he makes it sound so obvious. I also believe it to be true. But in place of the word ‘theatre’ could we substitute dance, music, literature, or the whole panoply of visual arts? Or is there something about theatre that makes it objectively essential to our internal growth? Can we argue that children, as they grow and develop and try to make sense of the world, need theatre more than other art forms?

Theatre, as everyone knows, helps children to connect with each other and with adults, feeds their imagination, stimulates language and listening skills – this all helps children to live on the inside. I think it also fulfils another need for a child which is as necessary now as it always has been: the need for collective ritual.

I don’t mean this in a religious sense. Though it is true that the actors, for the duration of a performance, are invested with a mysterious power that sets them apart from the audience. They are the creators and inhabitants of this other world, and they know its beginning, middle and end. We are, in this sense, in their power. For a child this can be immensely thrilling – exhilarating or scary. And actors have huge responsibility to use this power appropriately. Improper use – getting too close or too distant - can put a child off theatre for life. But apart from the heightened emotion of being near an actor, I think children also gain a huge amount from the ritual in the relationship between stage and audience, whether it’s silent watching, or physical or verbal interaction: the play sets up a dynamic of exchange

which is unlike anything else in any other part of a child's life. It combines a strong framework of ritual behaviour (taking your seat, watching & listening, entering into another world and returning to your own world at the end, the collective act of applause) with an extraordinary unpredictability of content – the play where anything might happen. It also provides a kind of liberating revelation that adults can have another role to the nurturer or teacher or authority figure – playing and pretending, sharing a child's emotional world in an immediate way.

**Slide 11**

“Stock you mind!” exhorts Mr O'Halloran to his ragged and impoverished class of 10 year olds, in Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*, “it is your house of treasure and no one else can interfere with it.” In the end, children are natural hunter-gatherers of experience and British children's theatre today can and does provide that fodder for the mind that feeds the child on the inside.

**Community Theatre:**  
Finding a Local Audience

## Anand Bhatt, Desi Masti

Leicester is the centre of the universe I once heard Patricia Hewitt MP saying. And the truth about that comment was somewhat proven scientifically when they found that if you wanted to find the centre of England, then you would have to put a pin underneath Leicester. Where the pin allows the whole country to balance would be the centre. That pin position was in West Leicestershire.

A city of c. 300,000 and a county of a million, within a region of 4 million.

I count De Montfort Hall, Peepul Centre, Curve, Y-Theatre and Little Theatre, Education owned theatres and society owned theatres (e.g. Wheatsheaf Theatre) and we seem to have quite a lot of theatre space for a small city like ours. Granted most of these double up for other things, but we still have capacity.

Named above are only City based venues. Leicester's BME population is around 40%. Indeed, it is Leicester's older people which is keeping the City's population "majority white". It is known that for under 18s, there are more children from BME communities than the indigenous British community. So when I think of the future of theatre I can not ignore Leicester's demographic or how it will continue to change in the future. Desi Masti is a local provider of dance and drama mainly to children from a South Asian background. It is a relatively new provider, offering regular workshops since 2003. Since 2004, Desi Masti has developed in house production, some of which have been challenging since they involve relatively young artists.

The quality of these productions lie somewhere between school productions and a professional show, and sometimes we engage professionals to help up the standard of the people our young people work with.

Our audience is mainly made up of family and friends of the people who are in the show. A very small number is made up of people who do not know anybody in the show. This may be because we put on “school” productions. A few shows we have done e.g. Shaadi Ke Rang, Michael Jackson 50 have brought audience members who were previously unknown to us. In the case of Shaadi Ke Rang, this was perhaps due to the marketing which Leicester Theatre Trust offered and for Michael Jackson 50 it was the internet which told fans of Michael Jackson about the show.

Desi Masti parents are mainly from Gujarati families and from working class backgrounds. Dance at Desi Masti is indeed, one of the many activities which the students at Desi Masti do. It's almost like we compete with badminton, tennis, tuition, religious activities.....and so on. Unlike the Western ballet school model, very few children start dance at 5 and go on until they are 18 +. When we observe the scene, there are over 60 “ballet, tap, modern, jazz” schools in Leicester. Students tend to stay on for a while and take part in structured training and they improve their technical skills. It is from this that even if an individual chooses not to go on to further education in dance, they gain an understanding of dance, theatre and production just by being engaged in it. In these schools there is almost a culture of going to theatre. Annual shows, festivals and trips to see productions. Children usually train 3-4 times per week, and this shows a lot of dedication also on the side of parents.

When we think about this “under 18 population” in Leicester being BME – the sad truth is, that South Asian children are not the sorts of children that go to these western stage and dance schools. So the South Asian providers pick up most of this market.

With the added difficulty that South Asian children do not train 3 times per week and do not appear to be prepared to pay as much money as children who go to traditional stage schools.

I have been told by many parents who come to Desi Masti that we are merely an after- school club, there to keep children occupied. I am also of the opinion that my local colleagues in the dance world find the same opinion amongst the families of their students. What is unclear to me is what parents expect to achieve having invested 1 hour a week perhaps over 35 weeks of the year and paid £3.50 for the class. Where an equivalent student in a ballet school would perhaps pay £5 for an hour for one off classes and maybe do 11 hours per week if they are on a pay monthly scheme.

My gut feel is that the expectation of South Asian parents is not very high. They don't believe their children need to invest so much time in dance because it is not a serious career option. For this reason, I also believe engagement of parents is very low. As I shared our studio with the ballet school, I found that parents were happy to hang around the studio for a couple of hours, getting to know other parents, help out the school, make costumes, plan performances. On the flip side, there are many parents of students at Desi Masti I have never met. They simply drop off children outside the door and pick them up at the end without too much care about what we have to say or do upstairs. They do not want to engage, their due is done by paying us a fee to “teach dance” for a session. This has a profound impact on the way we engage audiences. Usually in the run up to a production, we have a few parents coming in

more often, and it's them we rely upon to watch the show. The recent Michael Jackson 50! Show was very interesting. A group in Oadby had 14 students perform one of the dances in the show. Seven of these 14 children had nobody to come and watch their dance. I will note here that these children are aged 13- 19 and it is usual to find that younger children tend to have more people to come and watch them.

I am of the opinion that a parent's lack of interest in our work, and the relative unimportance of their child engaging in dance has disastrous consequences for trying to engage South Asian people into theatre. I kind of hope sometimes that our alumni (those people who were once students of Desi Masti) and/or their families would continue to come and see our shows once they have moved on. Perhaps we have not been round long enough to analyse this too much. Some students who have recently left for university have since left Desi Masti. Although we have emailed and posted show details, we have not found that these very same people who used to come and see shows will now not watch the shows since they/their child has left. Perhaps once this alumni goes through university and if they are settled in an area where we might do a show, it might be different. Only time will tell as we age.

I also ask the question, "What opportunities did we miss whilst parents and students were with us to get them coming to a performance?" Desi Masti does not have a reputation of putting together high quality entertainment products that people will come and see out of choice. Hence we rely on parents to sell tickets for our shows.

Typically we notice that for our annual show each student sells about 5 tickets and less for other performances. Sometimes I am told that ticket prices prove to be prohibitive. At £14 for De Montfort Hall show and £5 for Y-Theatre I suppose it depends on who is asked. Or is that

£14 is too much to pay for your own child when we compare that tickets to go and see Amitabh Bachchan live can cost c. £100 and the Asian channels on TV can cost around £30 per month. Major South Asian performances are often promoted at De Montfort Hall and these tickets can also sell for £30, but their audience base is likely to travel to watch these shows. Typically these are made by Indian production companies and promoted locally. They have a good following since they are specific to the market. However, South Asian material produced locally tends not to have the same following, perhaps because it is in English. Or perhaps we second generation Asians are producing work which is limited to a younger audience.

The middle aged South Asian population and older have embraced the advent of Asian channels on television. They often subscribe to these channels for £30 per month and are content sitting in front of the TV for hours, in the warmth of their home watching serials. That's a £1 per day for maybe 5 people! How can theatre possibly compete with this when it has to compete on price, force people outside their homes in a cold wet Britain? It is a well known joke amongst the Asian community that we are frugal. And why would that generation not be? They came here from Africa with little or no money and for 20 years worked harder than hard to make savings and investments. 20 years of work and save culture is not easy to change – and perhaps some of this was passed onto their children too. First generations Asian parents did not have the luxury of money to take their children to theatre, and so as a community we have not been going to watch it, like the English go and watch panto. Perhaps 25-35 years ago, there were not as many products either. But if my generation did not grow up watching theatre, then it's simply becomes something we don't do – and something we won't do with our children.

But surely Asian families spend money on entertainment? Yes they do, only it's not on theatre. You might recognise the many adverts and posters around for dinner and dances. People are happy to pay between £10-£30 to have food, listen to music and dance themselves. Dozens of venues in Leicester pack themselves out, for this cabaret style entertainment. But it would be hard to get them to spend the same money on theatre. Because for the same price, they are being fed, the experience lasts longer and is more interactive with friends.

But the wider loss to our community may not be understood by this generation or may seem irrelevant. When you watch theatre you see creativity, you see stories, you see art. But it may not feel important to our community to watch this. A couple of conversations with people in the arts world suggests that South Asian work focussed on identity and marriage has been done to death. And perhaps these topics though important to a writer or director does not really capture the imagination of the viewing public. And perhaps the divide occurs here, where contemporary issues facing 2nd generation Asians and being the subject matter of theatre, is something the first generation does not care much to see.

Then we ask, how many second and third generation Asians are coming to watch theatre? Probably not a lot. Again for reasons mentioned earlier, that because parents don't take children to theatre, there is no appreciation for it, and so come a time where young people are old enough to go by themselves, they choose not to.

What are we competing with? Young people spend money on clothes, music and going out right? They don't have as much money to spend as adults. When a ticket to go and watch a show costs £30, should they spend it on this or something else? But then these same children may spend £30 to watch Kanye West in concert. They spend time on Facebook and other social

networking sites. We also live in a society which worships fame and fortune, and local theatre productions will not offer them a blinging celebrity. Then I ask how cosmopolitan is Leicester and it's people? And are we producing/staging the sort of work which people from the region are prepared to travel and see? For young people, not if there is not a celebrity magnet, and not if they have to pay too much for it.

I remember organising a trip to watch The Lion King and we got 72 people on a bus to London. Part of my guess here is that for many it was not just a trip to theatre but a day out for people with their mates and a chance to mess about a bit. We were then offered 50 free tickets to watch the Fortune Club at Haymarket Theatre, which went down well. We had a successful trip to go and see East is East, possibly because most people had seen the film. We then had fewer but significant people to go and see Richard Alston Company, about 25 people. The comments this time were, I didn't know what it would be like, but it's not my thing. And hence a future trip planned for Anima Dance's show did not have much take up at all since after watching one contemporary dance show, they did not want to go and see another. We've not organised a another trip since. We were thinking of Quidam by Cirque Du Soleil in January 2009, but at £45 per ticket, I am not sure this something we could organise a trip for.

I am also not sure how much work agencies are doing like Akademi or Milapfest, to attract young people to high quality shows – when was the last time an agency gave away 25 tickets to go and see Akram Khan company?

## Rena Dipti Annobil

Rena Dipti Annobil is one of Caste Away Arts' Artistic Directors and co-founded the organisation. She graduated from Aston University in 2001 with BSc (Hons) in Managerial and Administrative Studies. Whilst at university Rena trained in Indian Classical and Contemporary Dance, focusing on the ancient dance form Bharata Natyam, and performed at various theatres around the Midlands as part of Coventry based Mrityika Arts Dance Company. Rena has worked in broadcasting for 6 years, her experience includes producing live radio programmes, TV presenting and narrating the Sony Award Winning BBC 7's Chain Gang in 2007. Passionate about poetry, music, dance and drama, Rena has carried out several performance workshops for children and teenagers over the last few years. She turned her hand to play-writing in 2004 and co-wrote and co-directed The Fifth Cup with Reena Bhatoa. The Fifth Cup sold-out in Birmingham in December 2007 and successfully toured nationally in 2008. Rena has several other projects in the pipeline for Caste Away Arts.

### **Community Theatre**

Community theatre has an extremely important place in the arts world. It's an avenue for self-expression and interactivity and you don't have to be a "professional" working in theatre to do it. I'm a relative newcomer to the field, having co-written one play and now in between productions. The whole reason I co-founded the theatre group Caste Away Arts and wrote the play, The Fifth Cup, was because my co-writer and I joined a charity called CasteWatchUK and wanted to do something to raise awareness of the problem of caste discrimination within the British-Asian community. Having both experienced caste discrimination we had strong feelings about the issue. We both had an interest in writing and drama and thought it would be great to explore the issue of caste discrimination using theatre. It was important to us to have a cast,

production team, and audience that included victims of caste discrimination. It didn't matter to us how experienced our actors were, we were looking for talent and passion and we were successful in discovering some gifted performers. The first performance of *The Fifth Cup* was staged in 2007 at The Drum in Birmingham as part of their Stage-It initiative. This gave us the help and confidence to go on to take the play on tour the following year.

I feel that theatre has a great deal of potential as a tool for tackling social injustice. It's the treatment of the issue and the way the production is marketed that makes all the difference. I don't believe in using theatre to lecture or preach to people. If you do that, you end up lecturing and preaching to people that already agree with you. Most people want to be entertained when they spend money on a night out at the theatre. If you can make them laugh or cry then it means they've listened and they relate to what you are showing them. It was really important to us to get feedback from the audience, we did this by getting them to fill in feedback forms and having Q & A sessions after every performance of *The Fifth Cup*. It was encouraging to see that around 70% of the audience stayed behind for these sessions and the comments and questions were flowing until well over our allotted time. We marketed *The Fifth Cup* mainly at British Asian community, particularly those who felt that theatre was not for them. It is never easy persuading people to spend money on something that they think doesn't concern them but the hard work paid off and we managed to pull in quite a few first time theatregoers. Caste Away Arts main aim is to eliminate discrimination through theatre, so community theatre is at the heart of what we do.

Community theatre is more about the community than the art form because you're doing it for them. However, high quality productions with high artistic value can be staged in community theatre and the audience should never be under-estimated, even if they are first time

theatre-goers. As long as the audience can relate what you are showing them, you can be as creative as you like.

I think we can continue to nurture and develop community theatre by creating more schemes where ordinary people get a chance to do something extraordinary. We also need to get into the heart of communities and seek out stories that need to be told. Keeping a dialogue with the community is so important and any productions which highlight social issues need to be thoroughly researched. That is what we are doing at Caste Away Arts at the moment. Our next project, "Mirrors" focuses on Asian women who are victims of domestic violence. We hope to use community theatre to stage this production.

## Clair Chapwell and Arti Prashar, Co-Directors of Spare Tyre Theatre Company

### **Is Community Theatre more about the Community than the Artform?**

***Clair:***

Yes it is. Now I'm going to talk about something else.

Once upon a time there was theatre which largely consisted of scripts written by dead white men. Radical things that were done to the scripts included: playing them with no set, in unusual venues, naked or with a black person in the cast.

So when I came to England the Women's Theatre Group was very radical indeed. Women could tell the story of life! We were a community and together we could create and communicate the struggles of all women and by implication all people. Never mind that we were all straight, white and middle class. Together we took on: the struggle for contraception, abortion and equal pay. Of course to do this we had to use cod London working class accents to show we were truly representative. I, as an American, couldn't manage this most complex of accents so I ended up doing many dreadful Irish accents. But one incident is breathtakingly shameful in its retelling. We tackled the Trico strike – the first women's equal pay strike. Discovering that a huge percentage of the workers were Asian, it was decided that one of us would “black up”. It almost seems inconceivable today.

When I left the WTG I thought it was because I was just ready to move on – in fact it was more about finding the community I did feel comfortable representing and creating theatre about. And also I wanted to actually be a part of the community myself.

I started Spare Tyre 2 years later and the ad in Time Out read “*Women interested in putting together a play based on Fat is a **Feminist Issue write to Clair***”.

Oh we did shows about

- a woman bingeing on chocolate because she was depressed
- a woman bingeing and making herself sick
- the slimmer of the year contest – won by me – that tells you how long ago it was

and we

- had discussions after each show
- started compulsive eating groups all over London

and everything we did we could all say – I’ve done that – I’ve been there – I know how that feels – and then I suppose we ran out of things to say.....and we also began to think – I am more than my compulsive eating.

Spare Tyre had started being asked to run workshops with young unemployed people – Britain’s growth industry in the mid 80s, mid Thatcher world.

I spoke the other day to a former participant in one of those groups called Upfront. She said “We came in as young unemployed people – we went through the process and found what our communities were.”

The theme of the Upfront project was “sexism in schools”.

Five out of that group of 15 were gay, only one was out. We inevitably ended up with scenes about coming out, being out, kissing in the changing rooms. By the end all five had come out.

During discussions with the Upfront women many revealed stories of rape and abuse and as the process went on a huge chasm opened up between the five men and 10 women. The women wrote a song about their experiences and the men threatened to walk out. “I’m no rapist – I’m not sitting here listening to that shit – it’s nothing to do with me”. An afternoon of discussion and many tears led to the men talking about how it felt to be a man in a world where violence against women was rife.

The group – now incredibly strong and motivated - stayed together for 18 months and toured schools round the country. For the group it was a combination of finding themselves, their culture and their communities.

Just after this I was invited to Belfast to work with a variety of small drama groups.

The most fruitful proved a group of 11 women and 1 man all from the Ardoyne, a working class Catholic area which had been devastated by the troubles. I was expecting the opportunity to work on something grassroots and highly political.

On the first week they decided they wanted to do a show about “prostitutes, a hen party and a slimming club”. On the brainstorm there were several suggestions to do something a little more political but they were shut out by the majority.

I was frantic. Our drama sessions lasted approximately an hour and a half per week and sometimes even less. – I had 6 weeks and about 9 hours contact time with them. It sounded like any old Carry On script would do.

Every session ended up with a good old couple of hours in the pub and of course gradually the real stories poured out. Effortlessly they flicked back to the 70s in Belfast - this person shot, this house raided or burned, the housewives beating on the bin lids to announce the arrival of the British Army. And then equally as effortlessly, when I sat there gobsmacked with the level of violence they’d lived through, they flicked back to the 80s, the everydayness of now. It was as though they lived in two decades simultaneously.

It became apparent why they wanted to do a show about prostitutes, a hen party and a slimming club. Wouldn’t you? Their lives as Catholics in an area which had been totally destroyed by tear gas and petrol was one which was a daily reminder yet of course something to forget.

The show itself like the talk in the pub relied heavily on flashback. Here are our lives now – but just at our elbow, are those memories. And anything can trigger them off. Ultimately it tried to convey the texture of just getting on with it with energy and humour and coping with the horror that was still lurking below the surface.

At the end of the 90s Spare Tyre took on a massive 3 year project with young people who were or thought they might be, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender.

I had spent many years as an outsider working on community projects. I

WASN'T young

WASN'T British

WASN'T Irish

WASN'T black

WASN'T Asian

WASN'T over 60

DIDN'T have a learning disability

Over the years I had developed the skills to be that interested outsider who would elicit stories, hear the things that had never ever been told, making the structure that would hold the stories in a colourful shape, just changed enough to protect those who wanted protecting but creating an event that would honour the stories.

With the Pink Project, again I was looking at my own community with other much much younger members of it. It began as a timid affair. At that time Section 28 was still in place. The Age of Consent had been reduced from 21 to 18 yet still there was a cautiousness about the young people we worked with. There was still a sense that gayness was a shameful thing, about toilets and furtive clubs –it wasn't really the 50's and there was an emerging sense of a gay identity but still there was a feeling of uncertainty.

We asked people to look at stereotypes, play with them look at ways of answering back to

societies giant foot all too ready to judge and reject gay people. We looked at ways of uniting and supporting one another. We looked at the joyousness of gay life as well as its other side.

Finally we brought in role models. Jackie Forster came and talked about life in the 50s in the Gateways, the first lesbian club in Britain. She talked about being brave and being out. She was elegant and undermining, couldn't give a toss about the rules -- and utterly charming. Peter Tatchell came another day to talk about bravery, making a stand, making a splash and being arrested many many times.

Through the work and the talks a confidence grew, a sense of "this is who I am – who we are". In cheap t-shirts dyed pink in my washing machine we marched at Pride. We were a group. We were a community. Pay attention to us. We exist.

### **Is Community theatre more about the Community than the Artform?**

#### ***Arti:***

Well what a question! It had me stumped for days. Backwards and forwards I went with what does community mean? What does artform mean and what do they mean together? I am still not sure I have an answer but my passions did surface as I mapped out this presentation and so I find myself on my soap box!

So let's ask that chicken and egg conundrum which came first? Well community will always come first – surely - and artform, by its very nature, is defined by community. And as soon as the artform is established it is open to re-interpretation and challenge. And the cycle starts again.

A community – so says the wikipedia definition - usually refers to a group of people who interact and share certain things as a group. Human communities share belief, resources, preferences, needs and risks affecting the identity of the participants and their degree of adhesion. A very useful resource that world wide web – spawning several communities and artforms. I'm from the internet community that corrupts or seen another way made my own – but then that's my job as a community artist I feel – to challenge, to create new meaning, to present and reflect society back to the world. I digress. So having finally got my inspiration .....I started casting my mind back to my life experiences as a community theatre artist and in every instance before I could get to the 'art' – or the theatre - I had to understand the community that I was a part of or was working with - be it young people in Liverpool or Greenwich, Asian, Black, mental health, learning disability, homeless, Eritrean, Indian slums, Nicaraguan Sandanista villages etc. You see their need always defined the way or the artform they were going to use to express themselves. The community defined the core beliefs, the identity, the risk, the cohesion, the challenge. Once that was established then came the task of teaching a theatre language to this community. Once the rules of the genre had been learnt then began the breaking of these rules making it their community's artform.

In my time, spanning twenty five years, I have directed a lot of community theatre shows and they have un- intentionally always challenged the norm of theatre practice. About 20 yrs ago a local rag criticised me for allowing Indian epic characters to have local Lancashire accents. But it made sense to me – we were in Bolton – why alienate an audience with RP accents or did they want Indian accents? In London a verbatim project with young Asian girls turned into performance art – it was not 'youth theatre' and certainly not 'verbatim theatre' in its strict sense but it was community theatre – stylised performance art reflecting the views of that one small community.

Working in the world of Learning Disability Theatre has taught me a powerful lesson - that every community has its own internal logic and we shouldn't be afraid of it, we shouldn't constantly try and make all communities adhere to a perceived norm that is mainstream theatre/arts in Britain today, that we should be open to a range of community artforms in this age of globalisation, that we shouldn't ghettoise and give community theatre a lower status than mainstream or experimental theatre.

So critics don't scowl and say 'its only community theatre' or 'could do better' – like a patronising school report, try not to measure it by the traditions of western art even though it is British, but measure it by its own merits after you have an understanding of its form, of its art, of its community.

Community theatre provides a sense of community – where you have a sense of belonging and ownership, you have a voice, there is achievement and emotional connection.

As a community matures from babe to adolescent to adult so does the artform and thankfully there will always be a wealth of raw ideas, talent and opinion in the community that will keep theatre vibrant. The pebble is cast and the ripples extend to the fashion houses, music industry, theatre, dance, visual art, film .....

So why does it happen in and amongst the grassroots? Because that's where there is fire in the belly, that's where you can have an effective voice, that's where risks can take place as it is affordable and not policy or money driven. It's where you can afford to be political with a small 'p' and not be ghettoised by funding policies or silenced by your community. It's where society is reflected, challenged and represented in its current thinking and etiquette and morals.

And that's when an artform defines a community: the traditional stories of the native Americans, Aboriginal art, Bhavia Theatre, sacred music and dance in Eastern cultures.

Oh, look I think I've gone full circle. Is community theatre more about the community than the artform? No they go hand in hand, like Shiva and Paravati, one cannot exist without the other. There has to be a balance - an equality - and we should all be aspiring to that.

**Summary.....**

*Clair*

**So where are we now?**

As you can tell Arti and I have both been around the block a few times. We have run one off workshops, one month community projects, three month community projects, year long projects and three year projects.

With projects, you get what you pay for. If you run a two hour workshop you know it will have impact, but the resonance will be limited. As much as funding bodies would love us to do loads of 2 hour workshops to 60 people, in your heart of hearts you know it will be a laugh and quickly forgotten.

The longer the project is, the more it beds in, the more effect it will have on people's lives. Of course. People come in, unconfident, unconnected, they connect, they make friends, learn skills.

***Arti***

I joined Spare Tyre 5 years ago and Clair and I have been working on different project during that time. Astonishingly we've discovered that having gone very different routes we've ended up in similar places.

Clair has been working with elders and I have been running a course for people with learning disabilities. Each year we would watch people grow, develop, change – but then again as the funding bodies demanded, we would have to let them go – off to Tesco to stack shelves, off to a resource centre to play Bingo.

But they demanded to come back. They had more to give, they had more to learn – and they knew that for them, this was their place.

***Clair***

We realised – almost at the same time– that what we had knocking on our door were groups of people who were growing in skills, owning the process, demanding to stretch the definitions of funding agreements. “No! We don't just want to stay here for 2 years! We belong here!”

***Arti***

We realised that what we both wanted was a repertory company. A company which would own the process, take on the work, make it their own and would carry on being a voice for their communities as well as continuing to develop themselves. We'd like to show you some material from each group and then we'll open it up for discussion.

## Janice Connolly, Women & Theatre

Women & Theatre is a Birmingham-based company with 23 years experience of creating illuminating and accessible new theatre about things that matter.

We create engaging theatre and use interactive drama to promote the mental, physical, emotional and spiritual well being of the whole community. Our work reaches audiences in a huge variety of settings including conferences, schools, community centres and small scale theatres. Our audiences experience focused, sensitive and complex dramas tackling issues which are relevant to their personal and professional lives.

Women & Theatre was one of the companies that pioneered Theatre in Health Education in the mid eighties and has retained a national reputation for excellence in the field. The Company was overall winner of GlaxoSmithKline's 2004 Impact Awards – a national award rewarding excellence in community healthcare. We have built up a wealth of experience of using close anecdotal research with diverse communities to create new pieces of theatre which can be used as health promotion tools when performed within the community accompanied by facilitated discussions to further explore the issues raised.

We hope that by outlining our experiences, a wider light will be shone on the background and development of the British Theatre in Health Education movement, and the essential place that companies such as ours hold in informing, inspiring and empowering communities.

Women & Theatre began work in the early 1980's. The Workers Educational Association funded a series of workshops entitled "Women and Theatre" and from this course a core group was inspired to form the company.

The first piece of theatre that we toured explored teenage pregnancy and was performed for girls groups across Birmingham. Our next major work "All The Way Home" was about the experiences of girls in care. We then developed "Swings and Roundabouts" a piece exploring the over prescription and mis-use of tranquilisers which was researched with women's survivor groups and health professionals. The company had established a successful and artistically fulfilling model. They identified issues that impacted on the quality of women's lives and researched them thoroughly by talking to individuals and professionals. The company was steering an independent path and was becoming increasingly committed to highlighting inequalities and encouraging positive social change.

In the late 80's the government was facing the biggest health threat to the nation for decades. AIDS was the spectre that loomed large. Women & Theatre responded with interest, raised funds and created "Putting It About " which toured regionally and nationally. Public sector interest in H.I V was high and no one knew the impact it would have on the national health resources and considerable monies were devolved to Health promotion in order to "Head things off at the pass". For the first time in Women & Theatre's history, purse holders approached the company to assist them in realising their agendas.

Staffordshire Health authority was groundbreaking in its speed in commissioning what would prove to be the first in a national raft of theatre and drama based programmes with a remit to "spread the word" about how HIV was contracted and how to keep yourself safe. We created

“Someone like you” and toured to secondary schools county-wide.

The success and efficacy of using theatre in health promotion began to be taken seriously. Although “hard to measure” it was generally accepted by professionals that it had the power to impart hard facts as well as encourage attitudinal and therefore, potentially the all important behavioural change.

From our very first projects, we began to formulate our unique approach to research led script creation that was to become the Women & Theatre hallmark. We share stories with individuals (both public and professionals) and communities in a process, which is both respectful and participatory. Our resulting dramas are therefore both funny and moving because they connect with people’s real life experiences. We ensure our story lines and scripts accurately reflect the research but do not “preach”. We aim to reflect the complexity of real lives and set ourselves high standards in terms of creating engaging, moving and thought provoking drama.

All of our plays are accompanied by a facilitated post show discussion in order for audiences to engage further with the characters, discuss issues raised and receive accurate information and resources. We ensure there is a health professional present at performances to respond to specific medical questions and concerns in a more informal setting than a consultation can ever allow. Discussions can also be very informative for health professionals about barriers that exist for people accessing services and so on, thus discussion points can often give rise to developments in service provision.

The value of taking well pitched and engaging theatre into accessible community venues is that we are able to engage traditionally hard to reach groups with positive health messages

and information. It provides a unique, memorable, deep experience that stays with people. The discussion element of the performance also provides audiences with the opportunity to speak freely in an environment that they know and that they feel comfortable in. We work in partnership with health authorities and other public bodies to ensure our work is delivered in its appropriate context for the target audience. A theatre space can be created almost anywhere and Women & Theatre have taken their work to a range of venues ranging from Bingo Halls to Gurdwaras.

We know from experience that theatre is an effective intervention for the promotion of healthier communities and social inclusion. Health professionals are constantly battling with the gap between what the public knows e.g. the importance of five fruit & veg portions a day, and what they do. Well researched, well written and well performed theatre about people like them, can really help communities deeply engage and identify with the characters' health dilemmas. An example of this is our experience of delivering our breast screening awareness play Touch Wood. It was commissioned by Walsall Health Authority in response to the low uptake of screening services within that area. Our research showed that there were a wide range of factors impacting on women's uptake of breast screening, from poor self image to deep seated fear of a family history of cancer. Once these underlying issues are aired, discussed, and facts and stories shared, there is a far greater chance of behaviour being changed and the gap being bridged.

Experience has proved that the most effective way of facilitating behavioural and attitudinal change is through engagement and identification with the characters in the plays not through dry facts and figures. However the support of health professionals in clarifying facts and current NHS guidance during post show discussions is invaluable for reassuring audience members and dispelling myths.

“My illusions about breast screening were clarified and it was great to have some positive points re breast cancer stats – early detection treatable, support is there etc”

Audience Member

We believe that theatre has the power to:

- Entertain people and bring communities together
- Promote positive health messages and raise awareness about contemporary issues
- Stimulate discussions, information sharing and peer group support
- Facilitate lifestyle changes by applying advice to people’s real and complex lives
- Give a voice to excluded or marginalized communities
- Support needs assessment studies and community consultation
- Explore sensitive issues and allow audiences to discuss scenarios and circumstances through the protection of fiction.

We believe the basis of effective Theatre in health work involves:

- Strong partnerships with health partners through which broad areas of need are identified, information around emerging health trends and health inequalities accessed, and projects developed through a shared vision. It also ensures the attendance of

- health professionals' at performances.
- Strong partnerships with communities through which effective research can take place, ensuring plays are rooted in the experiences of the relevant communities. This not only impacts on the content of dramas but also their delivery. For example, the Company has developed a number of bi-lingual plays targeting South Asian communities and last year developed a non-verbal piece of theatre Un Kahi (Unspoken) that was accessible to audiences irrelevant of their spoken language, transcending linguistic boundaries by telling its story through a rich mixture of visual theatre, music and movement. Community partnerships are also vital for ensuring good audiences as they can support marketing efforts with invaluable word-of-mouth. The work began by the performance can also be continued long after we have packed the van and gone by the community leaders and workers who have seen the performance and joined in on the discussions.
  - The engagement of excellent artists who have facilitation experience, respect for the work they are doing and the people they are doing it for. In our casting we aim to reflect the multi cultural society in which we live and work.

Women & Theatre remains committed to its work within the theatre in health sector and is as excited and convinced as ever of the role that high quality theatre plays in the evolution of social change.

### **Project Examples:**

#### ***The Cervical Monologues***

In 2002, the Women's Nationwide Cancer Control Campaign granted Women & Theatre funds

to develop a new piece raising awareness around cervical cancer. The Company decided to research their own version of the famous Vagina Monologues – and do for the cervix what Eve Ensler had done for the vagina! The Cervical Monologues was developed through in-depth research with a wide range of people including patients with diverse cultural backgrounds and opinions, GPs, practise nurses, lab staff and Boots Walk-in Staff. As a result the play encompasses an entertaining mix of characters and opinions.

The piece promotes cervical health through exploring life, love, sex & sexuality as well as demystifying the screening process through the sharing of stories and experiences of real people. All the monologues are written and read in English, except one – the experience of a non-English speaker, which has been translated into Punjabi.

The piece was devised, and has proven to be, equally effective for both health professionals' training and health promotion in the community, as well as being an entertaining and thought provoking piece of theatre.

Following the pilot tour The Cervical Monologues has been regularly booked for one off events including staff training, health conferences, International Women's Day and community events. It is a piece that involves minimum set and little technical making it a very adaptable piece that can be performed in a range of spaces from a traditional theatre space – community room – one end of a classroom.

### ***Talking Balls***

The Company has been eager to create a men's health piece for years. So, in response to recent and numerous enquires W&T researched, wrote and performed a 20 minute preview of Talking Balls at this year's Artsfest in Birmingham. This piece is our companion to The Cervical Monologues and is very similar in format, style and approach.

Following our preview event the Company is working in partnership with an organisation called the Federation of Stadium Communities (FSC) to develop a full length version of Talking Balls and tour it to football stadia across the West Midlands in March 2007. We will target staff, supporters groups and the wider fan base. It promises to be a great partnership as obviously helps us develop male audiences, supports FSC in their 'Healthy Stadia' and 'Reaching Communities' initiatives and provides us with a great starting point in reaching traditionally hard to reach male groups.

The preview event was a triumph and bodes well for the full length version for which there is already plentiful material and plenty more research possibilities.

### ***Un-Kahi (Unspoken)***

Un-Kahi is an innovative piece of non-verbal theatre that Women & Theatre developed in partnership with sampad South Asian Arts. It premiered at Mac in November 2006 and subsequently toured to health and community centres over 4 weeks, taking the magic of quality theatre with high production values out into the community to connect with new audiences.

Un-Kahi explores sensitive or 'unspoken' issues, telling a story that happens nowhere and yet everywhere. It follows a young mother struggling to keep her head above water in a country that is not her own. Suffering post-natal depression and domestic abuse, just when she feels she is going under she finds the courage to break the silence and speak out.

Un Kahi transcends spoken language to tell the story through a rich mixture of visual theatre, film, music, movement, human sounds and gestures. It is also relevant to people of different backgrounds as presents universal themes and experiences which resonate across cultures.

The play was developed through extensive research amongst various communities in Birmingham and Walsall with a range of health professionals, new mothers and domestic violence support groups.

Central to the play's impact were the facilitated post-show discussions, led by the cast with community interpreters where needed. These allowed further exploration of the play's themes, stimulating discussion and providing a safe and supported platform for women to discuss sensitive issues and share their experiences. Professionals present at all performances provided further support and information with specific reference to post natal depression and domestic violence.