

**South Asian theatre in Britain**  
**By Dr Alda Terracciano**

**The early 1900s – dramatic beginnings and “exotic” imports**

The development of South Asian theatre in Britain reflects the wider sociological dynamics of South Asian Diaspora and migration to the Mother Country. While in the eighteenth century maritime journeys to and from the subcontinent had brought to the British shores “ayahs, lascars and princes” – to quote Rozina Visram – by the nineteenth century street players and visiting dance companies had become the exotic entertainers respectively in town centres in London West End theatre houses. At the same time, group of theatre amateurs (mostly students and professionals) produced work that drew both from Indian and European theatre traditions. Among them was the Indian Art and Dramatic Society, (on 4 November 1915 the group presented the *Grand Performance in Aid of the Wounded Indian Troops* at the Town Hall in Chiswick with a mixed cast of Indian and white British performers), and the Indian Players, whose production of Niranjan Pal’s *The Goddess* had an all-Indian cast “speaking in accentual English”, as the programme of the show states. Such an interest in exploring similarities and connections between the European and South Asian subcontinent anticipated the research of later theatre groups, which emerged in the 1970’s mostly in London and the Midlands.

**Politics and theatre – the years after WW2**

The years after the war witnessed an increase of political activity within the various South Asian communities settled on Britain. At the same time, organisations of selfhelp and support, often set up in conjunction with white liberals and radical activists, provided a space for social activities and various forms of entertainment. By 1945 – the year in which Asians, Africans and West Indians living in Britain united in a Subject People’s Conference and in the later Fifth Pan- African Congress on Manchester - nearly all associations in Britain were leaning towards a common front for the colonial independence of their countries of origin and international black struggles. In particular, the many Indian leagues and workers associations, which after Indian independence started to concentrate their efforts for the improvements of their living conditions in Britain, were pivotal in bonding their people’s struggles to those of other African and Caribbean groups. Within such organisation different forms of entertainment also started to thrive – in the case of the India League it was the newly emerging Indian film industry. Conceived initially as what Dilip Hiro termed “the spearhead of the Indian Independence lobby”, after 1947 it focused its activity on easing the relationship between Indian and British people by the distribution of the films imported from India. As the Asian population grew, so did the amount of import and the number of cinema halls built in the country, which in turn prepared the ground for the Bollywood explosion following in the next decades.

At that time white leftist theatre companies showed an increasing interest to include in their repertoire African, Caribbean and Asian plays. Unity Theatre, a radical, left wing Company founded in 1936 with a distinctive communist and anti – imperialist agenda, was one of them. Their production of the documentary drama *India Speaks*, by Mulk Raj Anand in 1943, featured a cast composed entirely by South Asian people living in Britain – a rather remarkable step in the light of the casting policies followed by the majority of theatre houses at the time.

## The language theatre movement

In the early 1960s an increasing number of community theatre groups started to perform in original languages, such as Hindi, Urdu, Bengali and Gujarati. Plays directly imported from the original countries were produced for South Asian audiences throughout Britain. These include the Maharashtrian Theatre Group and the Asian Artists Association in London. The East – West Community Theatre Group in Birmingham and a number of other small groups especially active in the East Midlands.

Drawing-room comedies, melodramas and thrillers, whose dialogues were often interwoven with songs and dances started to be represented in a number of community halls. These genres generally tended to reinforce values and customs imported from home which institutional funding bodies considered less worthy of support than the plays produced by English speaking groups.

What institutions seemed to overlook was the cultural *trait d'union* that these forms of entertainment aimed to offer both to the older and younger generations. Tendencies towards a homogenising cultural policy alienated non-English speaking audiences from the arts and reinforced a feeling of isolation already experienced in work places, schools and other public sectors. It also prevented the younger generations establishing a creative contact with South Asian languages, only spoken at home and rarely experienced in an artistic context. At that time no institutional effort was made to popularise community events because of such linguistic boundaries. However, as in the case of *Mushairas*, the Urdu poetry readings very popular within the Pakistani communities, it appears that differences could be bridged through the use of non-verbal mediums such as music and the performing abilities of the readers, stimulating a creative approach for English only-speaking audiences to diverse cultures and histories.

## Urban theatre – the 1970s and 1980s

In the early 1970s few emerging theatre groups started to look at history as a site of creative reinvention and at the stage as an ideal space to articulate shared experiences of exile and diaspora. Fringe venues, community centres, temples and private houses became the most immediate platforms for these young artists, among whom the Tara Arts Company soon emerged as a leading force. Founded in the 1976 in response to the racist murder of an Asian teenager in Southall, the company directed by Jatinder Verma expressed its radical, political stance by producing plays which explored, among other themes, racial tensions between newcomers and the indigenous community, generational conflicts, communalism, immigration laws and the changing roles assumed by Asian women in the new culture environment. They stirred discussions within the visited communities, clashing on some occasions with the conservative views of their elder members. At the same time, history became a crucial subject of exploration, as hidden connections between the histories of the Subcontinent and Europe became the focus of most of Verma's later adaptations. His search for a "black aesthetic", which occupied most of the 1980s and early 1990s, encouraged him to draw from his "multi-cultural" background to create a stylised theatrical vocabulary whose eclecticism was translated in the use of Bollywood melodrama combined with Brechtian staging techniques, Indian popular theatre forms with the Italian Commedia dell'Arte.

It is also important to note that following the acquisition in 1983 of a building in Earsfield- which opened in 1985 to accommodate the office and a rehearsal/performance space- Tara Arts became one of the few places in London where actors could be trained in non-European theatre techniques. Most of the new emerging voices of Asian British theatre were

fostered at the centre (including Sudha Buchar, co-founder of Tamasha Theatre Company's Ayub Khan-Din, author of the successful *East is East* later adapted for the popular TV series *Goodness Gracious Me*). New theatre groups, such as Kali Theatre Company, were also supported in their endeavours, together with a new breed of writers slowly emerging on the London theatre scene.

Collaborations with external artists ranged from co-productions with Theatre Taliesin Wales, CULT (the Calicut University Little Theatre notorious for its creative use of traditional martial arts) and finally the director of the Theatre Union and professor at the National School of Drama in New Delhi, Anuradha Kapoor, who ushered the company into Indian popular theatre traditions and techniques.

While the Tara Arts Centre offered a breeding ground to many Asian artists, questions of identity and black theatre aesthetics were also explored by other Asian companies emerging in the early 1980s. Among them were the Hounslow Arts Cooperative, a company founded in 1981 with the aim of exploring contemporary issues in a realist format, but with the use of poetry, music and visual arts. Asian Theatre Co-operative was founded in 1983 to support young Asian playwrights and directors. Amongst its members were Harmaje Kalirai, Farrukh Dhondy and H. O. Nazareth. The group produced plays dealing primarily with the Asian experience in Britain in a style that combined Asian theatre traditions with an awareness of Shakespearian verse, using a language infused with the rich South Asian Linguistic universe and its cultural references. More or less at the same time, the work of Madhav Sharma's company, Actors Unlimited, aimed at creating a space where in his own words, "eventually people are employed irrespective of race, colour, creed, sex, nationality, political or religious affiliations and which would also experiment artistically using traditions from different cultural forms". His production in 1983 of *Hedda in India*, an adaptation from the original of Henrik Ibsen positively greeted by audiences and critics, offered a seamless parallel between nineteenth century Norway and twenty century Indian together with the rare opportunity of seeing a talented group of Asian actors engaging with a European theatre classic.

During the 1980s a number of different trends also started to emerge on stage, combing the need for social realism and the urge to experiment between various stylistic formats and mediums. A good case in point is the work of the British Asian Theatre Company, which emerged out of the Star Productions film and video workshop in 1982. Directed by Raj Patel, the group was specifically keen to blend video technology and live theatre, using Asian music, dance, language and "exotic" sets and costumes. *Anarkali*, one of their early productions, referred to the legendary story of the courtesan Anarkali in Moghul time to tell the life of a young Asian woman pursuing a dance career in contemporary London.

While similar developments were in other areas of the performing arts – in the dance sector Shobana Jeyasingh's choreographies displayed a unique language, encompassing both European ballet and classical Indian dance techniques – it is noteworthy that drama offered itself as an exceptional medium to convey the changing modalities of British Asian identities, well before the film industry took an interest in this area of British urban life. Hanif Kureishi's characters reflected, indeed, a new generation of Asian people born in the country and therefore ready to engage with British society and its institutions in ways that differed significantly from those pursued by their parents. Shrugging off the label of black writer and with it the burden of explaining Asian people to the white, he inventively appropriated the 'beautiful English', which his father and a whole generation of Asians of a certain class rated as distinctive of "people who were good, magnanimous and polite", startling audiences and critics alike.

Such an attitude was inevitable bound to produce different reactions within and outside the communities, as in the case of his *Borderline*, a documentary drama in which a group of young Asian characters re-asserts its right to individual choices within a chilling political climate of repatriation. Presented at the Royal Court Theatre in November 1981 by the Joint Stock Company with a mixed cast of actors, the play was criticised by some members of the Asian community because of the director's choice to cast white actors in some of the Asian roles. While the criticism was probably supported by the unequal casting policies plaguing the entertainment sector, it is important to note that Kureishi's plays, as his later film scripts, significantly contributed in shifting the perception of "Asianess" for mainstream audiences by representing characters and stories outside the "problematic" sociological box in which other writers had set them. The opposition provoked in the black press by plays like Karim Alrawi's *Aliens* (produced at the Soho Poly also in 1981 and focused on the introduction of immigration laws in Britain) reinforced the need for such trend, as the reviewer suggested that "writers should not be limited in their approach to issues already popularised by the left which portrays the Asian or Afro-Caribbean community in a particular way". Also in contrast with such expected views of Asian life was the work of the playwright, novelist and TV producer Farukh Dhondy – his play *Vigilantes* brought the quest for identity of a young group of Asian men and women at the Arts Theatre as part of the Black Theatre Season in 1985, while uncovered aspects of Asian life were mainstreamed through his television series *Tandoori Nights* (a sitcom produced by Channel 4 in 1985) and the controversial *King of the Ghetto* (a four-part drama serial produced by BBC in 1986) which was not unscathed from the criticism of members of the Bangladeshi community he had chosen as subject.

### **Moving centre stage: the 1990s**

The last decade has witnessed the rapidly increasing achievements of a number of British Asian playwrights, directors and actors – a trend fostered by the support of venues such as the Watermans Arts Centre and Royal Theatre Stratford East in London, The Haymarket Studio in Leicester, the Drum and the Birmingham Rep in Birmingham. At the same time the diversification of artistic offer expressed by new companies like Tamasha, Kali and Moti Roti, has been an indicator of the intrinsic variety of voices subsumed under the label of Asian theatre. Tamasha has revealed a particular talent in hitting mainstream audiences – the company was launched in 1989 by Sudha Buchar and Kristine Iandon-Smith with the adaptation of Mulk Raj Anand's classic novel *Untouchable* at the Riverside Studios. It has then continued to produce highly successful such as Ayub Khan-Din's *East* in 1996 and *Fourteen Songs, Two Weddings, and a Funeral*, a musical featuring the classic Bollywood film ingredients of romance, drama and comedy. Kali Theatre Company, formed in 1990 by the writer-director team, Rita Wolf and Rukhsana Ahmed, has been particularly effective in stimulating debate through challenging and innovative drama, exploring the social, cultural and political perspectives of Asian of Asian women in Britain. Moti Roti artistic directors Keith Khan has been drawing from his Indian Caribbean background to create a unique style which fuses Carnival, street theatre, Indian classical traditions and techniques.

It is also noteworthy that while the 1990s witnessed to an unparalleled affirmation of Asian women as writers and directors, comedy and satire also made their entry both on stage and the screen, soon gaining the enthusiastic favours of varied, viewing audiences. In particular the comedy circuit benefited from the support of venues like the Watermans Arts Centre (its regular events *One Nation Under a Groove...Innit* offered the opportunity to a number of emerging Asian comedians to exercise their skills before being cast in proper comedy dramas). Both radio and TV series have been important in popularising Asian comedy and make it accessible to mainstream audiences – series like *Goodness Gracious Me*, first

produced by Radio 4 and then broadcast in 1998 by the BBC, has contributed to defy stereotypes about Asian life precisely by putting them centre stage.

At the same time the policy followed by venues like the Theatre Royal Stratford East and Oval House in London has contributed to revert the unevenness experienced by Asian theatre practitioners in the London theatre circuit. With renewed confidence and determination the new voices of the diaspora, including among others Ayub Khan-Din, Parv Bancil, Tanika Gupta and Meera Syal, have enriched the cultural landscape of Britain with bright and bold colours, fusing rhythms, music, realist drama, folk theatre traditions and comedy. They have built on the successes and struggles of their predecessors, steadily moving from small theatre houses to television and West End musical venues, like Meera Syal's first musical *Bombay Dreams*. It is now the role of major institutions and theatre organisations to absorb in their structures such changes and best interpret the unique intercultural stance articulated by South Asian artists in Britain.

### **Useful background reading**

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