

Tamasha Theatre

In 1989, friends Kristine Landon-Smith and Sudha Bhuchar established Tamasha Theatre Company in London. In Hindi, 'Tamasha' means 'spectacle' or a 'happening' and can be used colloquially, as in someone creating a 'tamasha' out of nothing which is very apt in this context, according to the two directors.

The company was formed after Kristine Landon-Smith was invited to direct at the National School of Drama in New Delhi, India, under the aegis of the British Council in 1988. Having always visited her family in India, Kristine Landon-Smith wanted to develop stronger links with the region and so began work at the school. With her second-year students, she began work on an adaptation of Mulk Raj Anand's 1935 classic novel, 'Untouchable', which portrays the despair and challenges in the life of a young sweeper boy born into India's lowest caste, the Untouchables, in the 1930s. This was a time when the influence of Gandhi and his drive to eradicate untouchability, was gaining momentum. Upon Kristine Landon-Smith's return to London, she teamed up with East-African Indian friend, Sudha Bhuchar, then a presenter of the BBC television programme Network East. The pair commenced work on the British production of 'Untouchable', whose unique selling point was the fact that a British Asian cast would perform the play in Hindi on one night and in English on the other. This unique language aspect, as well as the fact that contemporary South Asian work was not being presented enough in the UK, held Landon-Smith's and Bhuchar's interest. In 1989, the pair began fundraising from Asian businessmen and friends and formed a new company, Tamasha.

The foundation of Tamasha was built upon the momentum of 'Untouchable' and thus aimed to reflect Asian experiences through theatre. Sudha Bhuchar and Kristine Landon-Smith felt a real desire from audiences for contemporary work of South Asian influence on the British stage. The growing South Asian British audience contributed towards Tamasha's subsequent plays, drawing upon the wealth of stories from British Asian communities as well as the Indian subcontinent. Central to Tamasha's productions is their aim of attracting culturally diverse and middle-scale audiences and presenting stories in their complexity and depth.

Tamasha has collaborated with high calibre production houses and theatre artists. Since the early days of 'Untouchable', personal research has been the foundation of Tamasha productions and has provided the basis from which the company's initial ideas evolve on to the stage. Together with a team of actors, joint Artistic Directors, Sudha Bhuchar and Kristine Landon-Smith interview real life personalities, obtaining first-hand personal and community experiences and stories around the themes, cultures and traditions of the story lines in progress. Along with their designer, Sue Mayes and any other collaborative partners, Bhuchar and Landon-Smith then implement a series of workshops using the actor's imagination to facilitate the development of the factual research into fiction for the stage. Subsequently, the play is commissioned and the final draft is supported and informed by the detailed research that has been conducted, whether it is the transposing of a classic, or the development of a new piece of writing.

Since 1989, Tamasha's body of work has ranged from adaptations of great literary works, such as Mulk Raj Anand's 'Untouchable', to a more popular Bollywood musical such as 'Fourteen Songs Two Weddings and a Funeral' (1998,2000),as well as new British writings such as the successful 'East is East' (1996) and 'Balti Kings' (1999). It was the success of 'East is East' that enabled Tamasha to make the leap into middle-scale audiences. The play received great critical acclaim and after being performed in the West End at the Duke of

York Theatre, it was made into a successful film, also called 'East is East', and featured some of the actors from the original stage play. As a consequence, audiences grew and brought Tamasha Theatre Company to the attention of a much wider public.

Thanks to revenue funding from Arts Council England and London Arts, in addition to initiatives such as Barclays Stage Partners and voluntary donations from charities and individuals, Tamasha have successfully staged eleven theatre productions over the past fourteen years. Several plays have also been adapted for BBC radio. Since 1989, the company has toured all its productions across the UK. The production 'A Tainted Dawn' (1997) opened the Edinburgh International Festival in 1997 and the first run of 'Fourteen Songs, Two Weddings and a Funeral' (1998), won the Barclays New Musical Award in 1998 and the 1999 BBC Asia Award for Achievement in the Arts.

Since 1999, Tamasha has also been playing a key role in the development of intracultural theatre education, with an innovative programme, TIME (Tamasha Intracultural Millennium Education). Sita Brahmachari, Tamasha's Education Consultant and joint Artistic Director, Kristine Landon-Smith developed the programme. It is a professional development partnership for secondary drama teachers and focuses on the development of intracultural drama education. The project's aim is to encourage teachers to challenge what Tamasha considers to be some of the over-cautious assumptions of multicultural drama education of the past and think of ways in which the development of an intracultural drama curricula can shift theory and practice beyond issues of 'black identity', 'minority concern', 'celebration' and 'race and racism', to address the full, critical and creative potential for cultural exchange in British drama education. More recently the focus has shifted back to the students themselves.

In July 2001, Tamasha Theatre Company and Central School of Speech and Drama co-hosted the TIME 2001 conference. The conference brought together theatre practitioners and drama teachers from around the world and featured the results and findings of Kristine Landon-Smith and Sita Brahmachari's two-year research project.

As part of its new writing initiatives, Tamasha is also committed to developing new British Asian talents. 'East is East' was commissioned out of a new writing initiative in collaboration with the Royal Court Theatre and was written by renowned British Asian actor and playwright, Ayub Khan-Din. A subsequent initiative resulted in commissioning Deepak Verma's 'Ghostdancing', which the company produced in 2001.

Tamasha has since expanded on this by exploring new ways of discovering stories and nurturing writers. As well as commissions, the company has been working with performers and artists who are known to the company and who have shown strong writing talent. The company also implements innovative creative writing projects in schools. This programme aims to uncover and give voice to untold stories of Asian lives and other diaspora communities. Nadim Sawahlas' 'All I Want is a British Passport!' (2003) was also a successful play to emerge from Tamasha's New Writings workshop. This comedy is an insight into the man with the most famous 'corner shop' in the UK, Mohammed Al Fayed and deals with his quest to obtain a British Passport. Tamasha's writing programme continues to run parallel to the company's production work.

Another area of Tamasha's work is training. A training initiative took place in 2002 for British Asian theatre professionals. Entitled 'Design Direct', the two-week course, now aimed to be a bi-annual programme, is focused on nurturing the artistic individuality of emerging directors and designers of South Asian backgrounds, who are currently under represented in the

sector. The subsidised course was run by Kristine Landon-Smith and Sue Mayes, and hosted by the Drama Department of Goldsmiths College, University of London.

August 2003 sees Tamasha premier their latest production, 'Strictly Dandia' by Sudha Bhuchar and Kristine Landon-Smith at the Edinburgh International Festival. 'Strictly Dandia' takes the audience into the competitive world of the Hindu 'Navratri' Festival, which precedes 'Diwali', (the Festival of Lights), where regional and caste rivalries abound in a desperate bid to outdo each other with smart moves and step variations, competing for the titles of Diwali King and Queen.