

## **Tara Arts**

### **By Dr Alda Terracciano**

Tara Arts was founded in 1976 by five Asian students in response to the racist murder of an Asian teenager in Southall. Starting as a community theatre group only touring out of London at the weekends. In 1982 it became the first professional Asian theatre company to be revenue-funded by the Arts Council of England (at the time Arts Council of Great Britain). The political edge of the first productions represented a non-violent stance against the racism of some sectors of white British society, still obsessed with the myth of imperial grandeur. At the same time the plays produced in this early phase mostly dealt with the experiences of the migrant communities and their negotiation between original social customs and new cultural codes.

A 'double sensitivity' inherent to all members of the company, being caught between two or more cultures, was articulated in a specific formula of 'theatre for all', aiming at communicating to all sectors of British society. Questions of identity, cultural hybridisation and race-relations were at the heart of plays such as 'Sacrifice' by Rabindranath Tagore, staged in 1977 at the Battersea Arts Centre, 'Relationships', a poetry recital produced in 1977 and 'Fuse', the first original production presented in 1978 at the London Drama and Tape Centre in Holborn.

Over the years Tara's political perspective shifted towards a theatrical language which reflected the company's interest in stylistic experimentation. Under the direction of Jatinder Verma between 1983 and 1989, the company's aesthetic research focused on the study of Indian and other non-European theatre techniques, along with Sanskrit drama and anti-realist genres in theatre and cinema, for which Bombay movies provided a source of inspiration. This phase culminated in the production of 'The Government Inspector' in 1989 with the collaboration of visiting theatre director Anuradha Kapoor, from the National School of Drama in New Delhi. Unsuspected similarities and cross-fertilisation between Eastern and Western theatre traditions emerged through the provocative fusion of different styles, which ushered the company in a new stage of development.

From 1989 to the late 1990s Jatinder Verma began focusing on the re-interpretation of European theatre classics as a way of exploring a black identity marked by the experiences of migration and the encounter with dominant languages and cultures. A distinctive eclecticism permeated most of his productions - including the adaptation of 'Danton's Death' (1989), 'Tartuffe' (1990, for the Royal National Theatre), 'Oedipus the King' (1991), 'Troilus and Cressida' (1993) and 'The Bourgeois Gentleman' (1994). The research undertaken during these years was aimed at uncovering unsuspected cultural, historical, economic and artistic connections between Europe and its former colonies. The new historical and geographical contexts in which European classics had been set gave audiences the opportunity to look at received stories and histories from new perspectives. At the same time the style adopted by the actors allowed them to articulate a multiplicity of artistic languages, which creatively reflected the stratification of Asian identity in contemporary Britain.

Tara Arts' latest production, 'Journey to the West', a trilogy of plays which culminated in 2002 in a one-day series of performances, directly focused on the exploration of South Asian diaspora in Britain. Produced over a period of four years, the plays followed the journey of three generations of South Asians from the sub-continent to East Africa and England. The source of inspiration was offered in this case by the testimonies collected by the actors from a wide range of Asians living in Britain. With a successful tour to community venues, schools

# SADAA

SOUTH ASIAN DIASPORA **ARTS ARCHIVE**

and town halls around the UK, Tara Arts closed and re-opened the circle between the artists and the communities allowing them to articulate both on an individual and collective level their responses to questions of 'exile' and cultural hybridisation.

This essay is based on a piece written by Dr Alda Terracciano for SADAA