

## **Mán Melá Theatre Company**

Mán Melá Theatre Company was founded by writer-director Dominic Rai in 1993 in south-east London. The name, Mán Melá, is a coined phrase taken from the Hindustani words for 'entertainment of the mind'. Born in East Panjab, Dominic came to Britain as a six-year-old in 1967. His childhood memories, such as his first day at primary school on a snowy day in Birmingham, the morning after he landed from India are distinctly British. Culturally, Dominic sees himself as a British Panjabi and a 'Brummie' which has informed his work firstly as a visual artist in the West Midlands, and subsequently his work in theatre and as artistic director of Mán Melá.

Dominic first encountered British Asian theatre in 1984 through a performance of 'Chilli in Your Eyes' by Tara Arts in Birmingham. The play portrayed life through the eyes of young people in London's East End and inspired him to become involved in contemporary Asian theatre himself.

In 1985, Dominic moved to London to join Tara Arts as an actor. In London, he noticed that there were very few plays engaging Asian audiences or presented in an accessible style. Writers and actors mainly worked in the English language, even though the dramatic contexts were multi-lingual and the performers often bi-lingual. His own experience growing up in Birmingham was of young people mixing various Asian languages with English. For Dominic, drawing on British Asian stories was vital in order to produce culturally rooted and relevant work.

From the beginning of his career, Dominic developed a strong desire to engage young people and community audiences, especially those who were not used to going to arts events, with work that confronted contemporary issues relating to everyday life. Throughout his career, he has worked with a wide range of practitioners and companies to achieve this. The desire to excite new audiences with relevant work became the benchmark for all future Mán Melá work.

In 1989, Dominic co-founded Catch Theatre with Alka Prabhakar. Tara Arts commissioned the pair to write 'Portraits', celebrating the British Asian experience. They began by scrutinising images of British Asians in the media, and then posed the question, 'What is British Asian identity as revealed through history, contemporary events and individual experiences as children of immigrants?' The production reached a wide and responsive community audience. Dominic Rai's first production for Mán Melá came in 1993 with 'Asian Voices'. The piece was rooted in the historical stories of 'Portraits', and became the mission statement for Mán Melá's work over the next ten years.

In the spring and autumn of 1993, Dominic Rai led a series of courses entitled 'Introduction to Spoken Hindi and Urdu through Music and Art', at the Ackroyd Community Centre in Forest Hill, South London. The course was attended by a diverse mix of people, from arts practitioners, teachers and actors to anyone who had or wanted to have a connection to British Asian language, music, art or food. The course participants proved to be a rich source of new talent, one of whom, Caroline Goffin, later became Mán Melá Theatre Company's full-time administrator.

The development of the theatre company has undergone three main phases. The first period dates from 1993 to 1997 when the company was based in Forest Hill and focused its work predominantly in South London.

During this phase, Mán Melá's first production 'Asian Voices' had a four-week run at The Oval and at Tara Arts, and closed 'The Peopling of London' exhibition at the Museum of London. Over the next three years, productions were commissioned containing important health and safety messages, such as 'The Dangers of Common Sense', which was an HIV awareness play aimed at young people, and 'Kya Haal Hai?' (How Are You?) with Asian elders. During this time, the company also organised an annual participatory festival for multicultural audiences of all ages at the Ackroyd Community Centre, in Lewisham.

As literature and language had always played a central role in Mán Melá's work, these components were emphasised in plays such as 'We Sinful Women', which was based on contemporary Urdu poetry written by women, and 'AZADI: The Story of Freedom', which celebrated fifty years of Pakistani and Indian literature and toured nationally with support from the Arts Council. This marked the beginning of the second phase of development between 1997 and 2001, when Mán Melá moved to The Albany in Deptford and began touring nationally in addition to continuing its work locally.

By 1998, Mán Melá was working closely with new writers including stand-up comics and poets. As part of its commitment to discovering new playwrights, Mán Melá organised a series of workshops for new writers led by Dominic Rai entitled 'Write Now!' at the Albany. During this time, 'The Cornershop' project was commissioned and developed. It became Mán Melá's most widely seen production and involved a collaborative process with The Hawth Theatre in Crawley. In its support of new writing, Mán Melá commissioned three new British Asian writers, Ravi Mangat, Yasmin Khan and Ashok Patel to develop their plays for stage over two years. The project included community outreach events and creative writing workshops. As a triple bill production, 'The Cornershop' toured nationally in spring 2001, and was critically acclaimed in The Guardian and on BBC Television. Mán Melá also received praise from local South Asian communities, which led to a significant rise in new audience participation. The enthusiastic response of these new audiences led to the founding of the Eastside Arts Young Writers and Performers group in Whitechapel, and enabled workshop opportunities in Scotland. Members of this young writers group have since developed two full length play scripts.

The 'Panjabi Mehfil' had been an integral feature of Mán Melá's programme since 1994, and was further developed in 2001. It encouraged writers in the Panjabi British community to write and perform their own poetry and 'ghazals' alongside well-known writers from India and Pakistan. The Mehfil toured throughout Britain, and was made accessible to a wider audience through translations into English and Sign Language.

A significant area of Mán Melá's work is the long-term development of major themes relating to the British Asian experiences through workshops, talks, readings, productions and other one-off events. These have included portraying the life and work of Urdu short story writer Saadat Hasan Manto, the impact of Partition on British Asians and of Indian soldiers serving for the British army during World War One. This theme was featured in 1994 and continues to be developed with Queen Margaret College in Edinburgh. Another major theme includes the life and work of the pre-eminent Indian writer, Dr Mulk Raj Anand. Mán Melá adapted Anand's World War One novel, 'Across the Black Waters' and in 1998-1999, Dominic directed two nationally touring shows based on the novel. In 2000, Dominic adapted 'The Untouchable Century', celebrating Anand's life and work throughout the twentieth century.

The First World War theme arose while Dominic was researching the subject for Tara Arts in the 1980s. He has since developed the theme in further productions over the years, including a commemorative event at The National Archives in Kew on 11 November 2003.

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Further workshops and events are planned for 2004 with Spectacle Theatre, in Wales, and the Nehru Centre in London to celebrate the work of Mulk Raj Anand and featuring the role of soldiers in Flanders. There have also been a number of radio and television productions relating to this theme over the years to which Mán Melá Theatre has contributed.

Since 2001, the company has been working in partnership with other organisations and individuals rather than as a theatre company dependent on core arts funding, which in fact it has never received. This resulted from a decision to focus on creative work and not on building administrative structures, allowing Dominic a creative space to develop both as a director and writer.

Several new areas of work have since emerged, such as writing a libretto for a multicultural audience for the BBC Singers entitled 'The Ballad of Bethnal Green', and directing a national touring show for young people called 'The Ghost Lesson' for Chol Theatre at the 2003 Bradford Festival. Other 2003-2004 directing projects included a video project exploring family life followed by 'Akosua' (Sunday Born) by playwright Robin Graham, and 'The Bloodstone' by writer Jamila Gavin.

Several recent project partners of Mán Melá Theatre include Queen Margaret College in Edinburgh, South Street Arts Venue in Reading, Charnwood Arts' Kala Kahani project, Tower Hamlets College, Spectacle Theatre, The Nehru Centre, The National Archives and the Victoria and Albert Museum.

During 2004 Dominic will be collaborating with Context Theatre on 'Vatandara', an exchange between theatre artists, young people and the public on the future of Pakistani theatre, and acting as an advisor for the week-long Hoxton Festival in October. In addition, Dominic will also direct 'Totarama', a Panjabi play by screenwriter Sarmad Sehbai and will also develop the play for British audiences.

Currently, Dominic Rai is also working on a book entitled 'Chilli In Your Eyes' which looks at the development of British Asian theatre and writing from 1985 to the present.