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**Hybrid Forms, New Aesthetics, and History in the Making: A Report on
*Desi Drama: the First National South Asian American Theatre Conference***

By: Uzma Z. Rizvi

Desi Drama: The First National South Asian American Theatre Conference, was held at the Silk Road Theatre Project (SRTP; www.srtp.org) in the Historic Chicago Temple Building. This conference brought thirty theatre professionals (writers, directors, choreographers, actors, and management) from around the country for an intensive four-day conference from July 19-22nd, 2007. The history of South Asian American and Diaspora theatre in the United States has been largely undocumented thus far, in spite of the growing scholarship on the South Asian Diaspora and various performative aspects (for example, Maira 1999, 2002; Joseph 1999; Gopinath 2005; Chatterjee 2006). One of the key aims of this conference was to begin to document the existence of a theater movement within the South Asian Diaspora, as well as begin the discussion and debates about how these hybrid forms of theater give rise to a new aesthetic within American theater.

This conference emerged from discussions during the *Next Big Bang: The First National Asian American Theatre Conference* (www.nextbigbang.org), held in the summer of 2006, hosted in Los Angeles by East West Players. During that conference, a

South Asian Caucus was created in which the unique problems faced by South Asian American professionals were addressed, as well as the need for a network, and national community. A national planning committee took into account previous discussions and concerns to curate the agenda for *Desi Drama* and provided eight sessions that covered topics from Donor Cultivation to Activism in theater (for a complete list of sessions and abstracts see “notes”).

South Asian American theater practitioners have, after decades of scattered reports of individuals around the nation, reached a critical mass allowing for the establishment of a movement, a community, and a network. Within this group, there are some key defining issues that become a continuing subtext. Perhaps the most obvious point of contention identified is the tension between theater, *drama*, *natak*, classical dance, etc from the Subcontinent and what continues to emerge within the US as new forms of artistic interventions. This is not an unfamiliar anxiety as the existence of a Diaspora ultimately necessitates a rupture allowing for new works that index a homeland, but do not represent a nation. This shift is a significant departure in the imaginations of South Asians in the United States, and unlike in other fields, it is a recent one documented in the theater world. In perhaps one of the few key articles on South Asian diaspora theater “Diaspora and the Theatre of the Nation,” Aparna Dharwadker presents only two diaspora locations as offering examples of sustained original work in theater by immigrant Indians – one in England, and the other in Canada (2003: 304).

Original theater develops in the diaspora only when it distances itself from the culture of origin and embraces the experience of residence in the host culture, with all its attendant problems of acculturation and identity. Without this detachment from origins, diaspora theater can only re-present the culture of the nation, in expatriate plays about home, local productions

of plays from home, and full scale imports. (Dharwadker 2003: 305 – italics in original document)

It is impossible to discuss theater in North America without mentioning Rahul Varma. Varma established one of the first documented South Asian theatre companies, Teesri Duniya Theatre in 1981 (www.teesriduniyatheater.com). This company has since shifted into a multi-ethnic, multi-racial theatre company that prides itself on bringing communities together in Quebec, Canada, and arguably, around the world. With early productions solely in Hindi dealing with issues affecting the lives of South Asian immigrants in Quebec, Teesri Duniya was ground breaking in its community service, and providing a new voice in a new language to the Quebec theater scene. It was only in 1985 that Teesri Dunya began producing English language plays, marking, what the artistic director considers a radical new approach to engaging with present realities, which analyzed social conditions in which immigrant communities live. This shift was soon followed by a realization that inclusion of multiple backgrounds, ethnicities, etc allowed them to also create new avant-garde plays. The ability to produce in multiple languages (Hindi, English, French, and Tamil) provides the stimulus for a new aesthetic (*La Formation Interculturelle Au Quebec* [1986-1996]. pp. 294-306; for additional history on the South Asian Diaspora theatre movement in Canada see Dharwadker 2003).

Dharwadker argues for three main forms of Indian theater denoting three distinct ‘modes of presentation’ in the United States: the first at the local level, that include colleges and community based organizations that draw upon “modern and contemporary Indian drama to mount two or three community centered productions every year”; the second a more complex level of organization, consortiums of businessmen (she particularly draws our attention to the Gujarati community) and cultural entrepreneurs

that arrange North American tours of popular plays from India; and finally, non profit organizations such as the Indo-American Arts Council in NYC (2003: 317).

Dharwadker's article focused primarily on the affect of the latter two sectors, which, in all fairness, most likely pull in more audience members, and money. I would argue, however, that collapsed in the first 'mode of presentation' were the beginnings of a larger theater movement within the diaspora, which at first may have seemed more community theater based, but in fact, was more reflective of the emergence of "original" theater. Moreover, in keeping with Dharwadker's definition of "original" theater as emerging only when the distance between the culture of origin and new experiences of residence intersect, I would argue that the last decade has experienced original theater written, produced, and performed by diaspora artists within the U.S. who should be recognized, and institutionalized through the publication of the works of the playwrights. In addition to strictly Subcontinental-US Diaspora Theater, there are also a growing number of global artists, and companies bringing a transnational facet to the concept of a diasporic performance community by linking the Subcontinent to multiple other centers around the world, for example the Post Natayam Collective.

Illustrating an earlier version of the tension of old home/new home on stage, individual artists of South Asian heritage such as Shishir Kurup were already active in theater by 1980 and in a key solo performance in 1991 called *Assimilation*, Kurup made the rounds on college campuses inspiring a generation of actors and performance artists. It was the mid 1990's that these movements found homes on college campus's, such as NAATAK founded in 1995 by students from University of California, Berkeley and Stanford University (<http://www.naatak.com>), PenNaatak founded in 1999 by Hareesh

Chander and Anita Sreedhar at the University of Pennsylvania (<http://dolphin.upenn.edu/~naatak/>), and SAATh (South Asian American Theater) started in 2001 at Tufts University founded by Sudipto Chatterjee, Tara Deshpande, and John Mathew (Mathew and Bose 2003: 99).

Around the same time as the early college groups were presenting new visions South Asia to the stage, theater companies and collectives emerged across the nation. Pangea World Theater, founded by Dipankar Mukherjee and Meena Natarajan, opened its doors in Minneapolis, MN in 1995 (www.pangeaworldtheater.org). In addition to world theaters, non-profit organizations supporting South Asian art and culture such as ArtWallah, founded in 1997 in Los Angeles, and SALAAM Theatre in New York City in 2000, emerged as significant points of entry for many artists on both coasts (www.artwallah.org; www.salaamtheatre.org). New York City was also home to the Indo-American Arts Council (IAAC) established in 1998 (www.iaac.us); the IAAC becoming a significant player in creating bridges between emerging playwrights and development theater companies, most significantly the post 9-11 partnership with the Lark Play Development Center, producing readings since 2001 for the South Asian Diaspora Theatre Festival, now folded into the Lark's Playwrights' Week (www.larktheatre.org). Since then, theater companies focusing on or directly dealing with the South Asian American experience have dotted the American theater skyline across the nation, including companies such as Rising Circle Theater Collective (www.risingcircle.org), Disha Theatre (www.dishatheatre.org), Desipina Theater (www.desipina.org), Silk Road Theater Project (www.srtp.org), Alter Ego Productions (www.alteregoproductions.org), and Rasaka Theater (www.rasakatheatre.org) to name a

few. In addition to these specific examples, it should be noted that in the past decade, 'mainstream' theater companies and Asian American theater companies have been producing South Asian diaspora plays as a part of their seasons, for example, Sujata Bhatt's *Queen of the Remote Control*, produced during the 2002-2003 season at East West Players in LA (www.eastwestplayers.org).

Within the first generation immigrant theater professionals to the United States, one can point to Pakistan-born Bina Sharif's prolific career as a playwright, actor, and director. Most recently her piece *A Month in the Café*, was produced for the Theater for the New City (NYC) – a company that has been producing Sharif's plays for nearly twenty years. Sharif is one of the few playwrights of South Asian descent whose work is included in an anthology of contemporary American plays – *My Ancestor's House*, was published in *Contemporary Plays by Women of Color*, edited by Roberta Uno and Kathy Perkins (1996), and has a biography published in *Asian American Playwrights: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook* (2002). Other first generation theater professionals who have based their lives in the US, but are actively part of a diaspora, may include well known names such as Madhur Jaffery, Bapsi Sidhwa, and academics/artists such as Fawzia Afal-Khan and May Joseph, to name a few.

The one-point-five and second generation South Asian Americans emerge with a different expression of belonging. For example, Sujata Bhatt's *Queen of Remote Control*, which was mentioned above, had its first New York City reading in 2001, and focuses on children “attempting to wrest their own lives from parents who are reluctant to cede control, but even more so it's a play about how Indians live in the US: to what extent do they remember their history/homeland, to what extent do they forget it and jump right

into the capitalistic waters of the American dream.” (Bhatt, personal communication) A similar troupe investigating human relationships in new contexts, is a recent production of Nandita Shenoy’s, *Marrying Nandini* (2007), a one act, in which Konkani parents write up a profile on Match.com for their daughter. Investigating the relationship between the parents, this piece demonstrates a slight shift in the immigrant narrative, where it no longer illustrates the tension between the parents and child, but rather there’s a focus on relationships within the new landscape of urban America and how that shifts their understanding of previous notions of love that they (the parents) brought with them.

Adaptations of known Western and Eastern classics provide significant fodder for the diaspora playwrights. Perhaps one of the best iterations of this genre within the South Asian diaspora is Shishir Kurup’s, *Merchant on Venice* (2007), in which “Italy intersects with L.A.’s Venice Boulevard in a wickedly funny, wildly inventive and politically provocative re-imagining of Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice*. Written in iambic pentameter and vividly colored by Indian, American and Latino pop references, playwright Kurup transforms Shakespeare’s original by injecting the story with Bollywood musical numbers, L.A. Punk, Hindu-Muslim tensions, and a distinctly American landscape.” (www.srtp.org) Lina Patel’s new work (a semi-finalist for Sundance this year), *Sankalpan (Desire)* (2007), draws from both Chekhov’s *Three Sisters* and Tagore’s *The Home and the World*. Through this play, Patel evokes a time of revolution (1907 Bengal) and transcends time by drawing sharp parallels to contemporary geopolitics. Direct adaptations from American classics, include Anita Chandwaney’s South-Asian American adaptation of *A Streetcar Named Desire* into *Gandhi Marg* (2004), set in a South Asian immigrant neighborhood in Chicago.

Other genre's explored by the new crop of South Asian Diaspora playwrights include plays about various urban ménages including Sonya Pabley's *Sex in Other People's Houses* (2003), and critical pieces as political interventions such as the production of *Pulling the Lever* (2004) written by the Rising Circle Theatre Collective. Expanding the types of plays written by South Asian Diaspora writers are the significant contributions of humorous plays, including works like *Fatwa* (2004), by Anuvab Pal which was premiered as a part of the NYC Fringe Festival, and *The End of the Apurna's* (2004) an original black comedy written by Sarovar Banka. Pushing the boundaries of art, politics, and aesthetics, artists such as D'Lo incorporate their passion for music (hip hop), performance, politics, and identity as a Tamil, Sri Lankan, gay solo performer (<http://www.myspace.com/dlocokid>; Chatterjee 2006). Within this realm of creating new artistic landscapes are also dance collectives, for example, the Post Natyam Collective, which is a multinational network of choreographers, who collaborate to create innovative performances, workshops, film, and scholarly works that push aesthetic boundaries across continents (www.postnatyam.net).

These new *original* diaspora works explore Americana and urban contexts that are global in perspective and have less to do with any nostalgia or imaginations of a previous nation, rather index a vibrant new genre of American performance arts.

One of the significant outcomes of *Desi Drama* included awareness that this movement within the diaspora community had inclusive references, with a focus on not only the singular, South Asia-US concept of a diaspora rather, to a more global experience of South Asian-ness in the US and the world. This is something to look out

for in the emergent South Asian American Theater movement, one that may either unite the various artists in their approach, or signify two simultaneous locations of activity.

This conference documents a significant attempt to define a movement, to create a network of professionals, and to support continued work in the performing arts for the US based South Asian diaspora. In that spirit, various national committees (steering committee, artistic development, arts administration, publications, and online community building) have been formed that are currently organizing, developing, and planning a future for South Asian American and Diaspora theater in the United States.

This aim of this report is to document the conference, and provide some data for future historians of American theater, specifically those focusing on Diaspora works. It is important to note that DESI DRAMA would not be happening without the vision and encouragement of Roberta Uno and the generous support of The Ford Foundation, with additional financial support provided by the American Institute of Pakistan Studies (AIPS).

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NOTES:

Agenda for *Desi Drama: the First National South Asian American Theatre Conference*

1. Oxymoron or the Perfect Match: Trailing a Path from Social Stigma to Super Stardom

Moderator: Shaheen Vaaz and Shishir Kurup

In this session we will discuss the intra-communal challenges of being a South Asian American theatre artist and explore strategies for confronting the expectations of our families, our communities, and ourselves. The particular challenges faced by South Asian American women in theatre will also be addressed.

2. Between "Here" and "There": the Geography of South Asian American Theatre

Moderator: Susan Kanga

In this session we will discuss the importance of creating an authentic canon of South Asian American plays. Should such a canon celebrate the cultures and stories of “back home” or reflect the realities of Diaspora? What makes for an authentically South Asian voice? Roles written by South Asians vs. roles written for South Asians. How do we integrate hybrid and mixed blood experiences, along with the phenomena of a rapidly globalizing world, into our collective voices?

3. Finding our Audience

Moderator: Reena Dutt

In this session we will discuss the unique challenges of creating audiences for South Asian American art within (a) our South Asian communities and (b) non-South Asian communities. How do we move beyond Bollywood or traditional folklore and still attract a loyal audience?

4. Funding & Donor Cultivation

Co-Moderators: Malik Gillani & Sharmila Rao Thakkar

In this session we will discuss how to make the case for funding South Asian American theatre. Topics will include: navigating the differences between foundation giving, corporate giving, state/federal giving, and individual giving; the difficulties of fundraising for theatre within our South Asian communities; linking South Asian art to product marketing; aligning our agendas with the agendas of potential funders; and the unique challenges of raising funds for solo work.

5. Getting Professional

Moderator: Nandita Shenoy

In this session we will examine the challenges and rewards of professionalizing our companies and organizations. What are the pros and cons of going Equity? Non Profit vs. For Profit? Can emerging companies pay artists a decent wage? How do we entice higher profile playwrights and directors to work with us? How do we pursue partnerships with larger organizations without being made the “junior partner”? What does it mean to run a “tight ship”? Weighing the realities and pros and cons of self-producing.

6. Art & Activism: the Social and Political Responsibilities of Being a South Asian American Artist

Co-Moderators: Geeta Citygirl & Uzma Rizvi

In this session, we will explore our roles as both artists and activists. Does such a duality exist? Do we as artists have a responsibility to advocate for social change within our often resistant communities? How do questions of war and peace, civil liberties, race, class, gender, and sexuality impact our art? How do we support feminist and queer artists in a socially conservative context? What types of alliances should South Asian American artists be building with other minority communities?

7. Nurturing a Nascent Movement

Co-Moderators: Purva Bedi & Sharmila Devar

In this session we will explore strategies for building and sustaining a South Asian American theatre movement. Topics will include: developing and nurturing actors, playwrights, directors, producers, designers, and dramaturges of South Asian backgrounds; establishing our own theatre companies vs. integrating into existing theatre companies; the debate over non-traditional casting; and breaking into the mainstream.

8. Next Steps: Building a National Network

Co-Moderators: Jamil Khoury & Dipti Patel

In this session we will brainstorm ideas and identify necessary steps for building a national network of South Asian American theatre artists. Should we create a common web site for South Asian American theatre nationally? How do we define “support”? How can we promote each other’s projects and shows? How can we collaborate on projects in different cities? What are the advantages and risks of co-producing?



Desi Drama: The First National South Asian American Theatre Conference

Silk Road Theatre Project, Chicago. July 19th – 22nd, 2007 Conference Participants:

(Left to Right)

Top Row: Susan Kanga, Gita Reddy, Sandra Chatterjee, Geeta Citygirl, Obaid Kadwani, Anish Jethmalani, Alka Nayyar, Jamil Khoury, Shaheen Vaaz, Shishir Kurup, Kant Desai, Kareem Bandelay, Uzma Z. Rizvi, and Sujata Bhatt.

Middle Row: Sharmila Devar, Lina Patel, Naveen Choudhury, Dipti Patel, Purva Bedi, D’Lo, Anita Chandwaney, Lavina Jadhvani, Meena Natarajan, and Nandita Shenoy.

Bottom Row: Malik Gillani, Tariq Vasuveda, Reena Dutt, Urmika Chatterjee, Shyamala Moorthy, and Dipankar Mukherjee.