

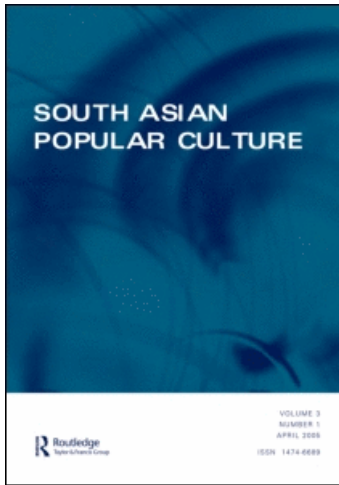
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### Teesri Duniya Theatre: Diversifying diversity with relevant works of theatre

Rahul Varma <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Teesri Duniya Theatre, Montreal, Canada,

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## Teesri Duniya Theatre: Diversifying diversity with relevant works of theatre

Rahul Varma\*

*Teesri Duniya Theatre, Montreal, Canada*

Teesri Duniya Theatre produces politically relevant theatre about a number of uncommon and contentious issues. Its plays rely on everyday cultural experiences acquired within the local cultural milieu. This approach involves a deliberate distancing from the culture of origin and, at the same time, a resistance to cultural homogenization. A dialogic exchange ensues that includes an examination of critical social issues and relationships *with* the dominant culture(s), as well as a questioning of cultural orthodoxy from *within* diverse cultural communities. This paper discusses the material conditions (funding and company structure) that affect Teesri Duniya's work. It also addresses the relationship between art and society through a discussion of selected images and texts from Teesri Duniya productions. Teesri Duniya Theatre has demonstrated that a politically engaged theatre that examines critical and contentious issues, and builds solidarity among cultures, can represent the cultural identities of visible minorities as well as express the relationships between cultures.

### The company

Teesri Duniya Theatre, which means 'Third World' Theatre, was established in 1981 by Rana Bose and myself, Rahul Varma, both immigrants from India residing in Canada. At the time, neither Rana nor I could be called professionals and neither of us had formal training in the theatre. Rana, however, possessed extensive hands-on experience as an actor, writer and director in the street-theatre of India. My experience was restricted to school, college and community performances.

Since co-founding Teesri Duniya Theatre, I have learned the necessary theatre skills through workshops and professional development. When we founded the company, no other South Asian theatre company existed in Montreal that could offer guidance, so I learned to address the unique challenges of artistic directorship and company management on-the-job. At the same time peer guidance from the mainstream was non-existent, as the notion of cultural diversity was also absent from the theatre world. By contrast, there was ample and willing guidance in the field of playwriting from peers such as Sally Han, Paul Lefebvre, Jack Langedijk, and Ted Little, to name but a few.

In 1986, Rana formed a new company called Montreal Serai. Since then he has emerged as an established playwright, director, poet and a novelist with two major novels to his credit – *Recovering Rude* and *The Fourth Canvas*. I have dedicated my energies to playwriting and directing Teesri Duniya as a professional theatre company firmly rooted in the community.

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\*Email: rahul.varma.rahul@gmail.com

In 1981, the company's mandate was more-or-less to address the cultural needs of the South Asian community in Montreal through works of theatre. Today, the company's mandate states:

Teesri Duniya Theatre is dedicated to producing socially and politically relevant theatre, exploring the relationships between cultures, and creating theatrical styles based on the cultural experiences of visible and culturally diverse communities living in Canada. Multicultural diversity and intercultural interaction are defining features of our work. We are committed to multiethnic casting and the telling of meaningful stories. (<http://www.teesriduniyatheatre.com>)

### Historical – from one to many cultural strands

Teesri Duniya Theatre began as a South Asian theatre company. Today it is one of the few culturally inclusive theatre companies in Canada and, along with the Black Theatre Workshop, one of only two companies in the province of Quebec concerned with the theatre of visible minorities. While the Black Theatre Workshop focuses exclusively on the black community, Teesri Duniya Theatre builds on a wider vision of diversity, one which permits it to work with members of all visible minorities comprised in the social fabric of Canada. This includes Canadians of East Asian, South Asian, West Asian, African, Latin American and Arab descent, as well as those of mixed-race. While the focus is on visible minorities, the company aggressively interacts, and shares the stage, with the dominant Anglo-French culture.

The company was launched, in 1981, with Badal Sircar's groundbreaking play *Julus* [Processions] and, until 1985, produced plays in Hindi from India, including: Sharad Joshi's *Ek Tha Gadha urf Aladad Khan* [A Donkey Called Aladad Khan] (1982), Anil Barve's *Thank You Mr. Glad* (1983), Gursharan Singh's *Gaddha* [Pothole] and *Ahsaas* [Realization], and Kishan Chander's *Darwaze Kho Dou* [Open Doors] between 1983–1984. During that period, the company also produced locally created plays in Hindi dealing with issues affecting the lives of South Asian immigrants to Canada. These plays included *Bhanumati ka Pitara* [Pandora's Box], *Ghar Ghar Ki Kahani* [Household Story] written by me, and *Nazme-Faiz* [Faiz's Poetry] by Azra Naqvi.

After this brief period of producing plays in Hindi, which served as a cultural unifier for the South Asian Diaspora, the company began producing plays in English which dealt with local immigrant realities, and interacting with the larger community. These plays included Susan Townsend's *The Great Celestial Cow* (1985), and Rana Bose's *On the Double* (1986). Also included was a series of plays that I wrote in collaboration with fellow artists; I wrote the first drafts and then involved other authors during the workshop process. Among these were: *Job Stealer* (1987), with Ian Lloyd-George and Helen Vlachos, *Isolated Incident* (1988), with Stephen Orlov, and *Equal Wages* (1989), with Helen Vlachos. These locally created plays, marked by loose plots and an absence of serious characterization, broadly fitted the mould of agitprop. Some scholars, such as Uma Parameswaran, have described the plays as 'Protest Theatre' (Parameswaran 8; Nothof 196). While I question such a characterization, these plays, despite their agitprop style, did offer a theatrical response to local issues affecting immigrants' lives. They did so by presenting plays while issues were still hot in the media, thereby capitalizing on their news value.

Aparna Dharwadker notes that 'Indo-Canadian theatre . . . shows two distinct stages of evolution – a period of community-centred consolidation and then a fairly rapid transformation in response to the political, socio-cultural, and material realities of an "officially" multicultural but . . . blatantly racist society' (Dharwadker 309). I would argue

that this society is, in fact, a bicultural society with a multicultural sub-component, and as such has produced two distinct art worlds: a dominant Anglo-French art world and an unequal visible-minority<sup>1</sup> art world, described in such terms as multicultural, culturally diverse, immigrant, ethno-cultural, etc. French theatre is based primarily in the province of Quebec, which has a small pocket of Anglo theatre, confined to the island of Montreal. English theatre is located in the rest of Canada with small pockets of French theatre sprinkled sparsely across the country. In terms of government patronage, the English and French components of the dominant art world enjoy relative equality with each other. This equality reflects the power sharing in their racially problematic history as 'founding nations'.

Since the 1950s, the Government of Canada, through national arts-funding bodies such as the Canada Council for the Arts, has provided sustained financial support to the Anglo-French theatre without interfering in its development and artistic creation. In contrast, arts policy respecting visible minorities was designed and implemented by a Multicultural Directorate in the early 1970s that interfered with artistic creativity. This Directorate channelled resources into community festivals, artefacts, and events that emphasized exoticism rather than a creativity which would enable visible minorities to follow a cultural agenda of their own. Such actions resulted from an ideological and systemic bias aimed at maintaining the social primacy of Occidental arts over visible minority arts, which were viewed as folkloric and/or exotic. Such exoticism seemed to appeal to members of Occidental cultures not only because of the novelty involved, but because this exoticism fitted the stereotype of what minority arts ought to be. Faced with the dominant art world's status and better patronage, visible minorities often practiced their arts in their spare time. They did so in a perfunctory way, displaying 'exotic' artefacts, costumes and customs, while rejecting any serious representation of their heritage and cultural experience. Teesri defied this practice and challenged Occidental hegemony.

Canadian multiculturalism, despite all its pitfalls, offers a way for various cultures to relate to each other and, indeed, a way to alter one's relationship to the concept of culture. At Teesri, we view multiculturalism as a framework that, over time, produces a more congenial and equal society by eliminating the institutional superiority of Anglo-French culture vis-à-vis the cultures of visible minorities, who now account for 16.2% of the country's population. For example, visible minority artists challenged the Canada Council for the Arts in its Eurocentric bias and systemic exclusion of visible minorities' arts and culture. This resulted in the creation of the Equity office and the implementation of a policy of racial equality in the arts, as well as the creation of a separate office for Aboriginal Arts in 1990. Most provincial arts bodies have incorporated the Canada Council's lead to varying degrees, except for those in Quebec, which have exhibited a notable reluctance.

Until the mid-nineties, the only funding that Teesri Duniya Theatre received was from the federal Department of Multiculturalism, which supported its theatre productions in the form of 'community events'. The provincial and municipal governments, for their part, supported Teesri Duniya by allocating free rehearsal space once a week at certain designated colleges – free space on Sundays at different colleges was, apparently, part of the official patronage programme administered by the provincial and municipal departments concerned with ethnic communities. Neither the experience that Rana and I had from India, nor the contributions we made to the local theatre scene through Teesri Duniya, satisfied the eligibility criteria of arts-funding bodies.

This changed after the creation of the Equity Office at the Canada Council for the Arts in 1991, which led to attempts, still ongoing, to remove the Eurocentric bias in defining

aesthetics. With the formation of the Equity Office, Teesri received its first project grant from the Canada Council for the Arts in 1995, and its first project grants from the provincial and municipal arts-funding bodies in 1998. By 1998, the project support from the Canada Council for the Arts had turned into operational support for the company. Although insufficient, the operational support began to cover some of the cost of production, personnel and administration. Unfortunately, the provincial and municipal arts-funding bodies in Quebec, where the discourse on diversity is just beginning, have not yet incorporated the kind of reforms, related to racial equality and cultural inclusiveness in the arts, implemented by the Canada Council for the Arts.

The moment that Teesri began to receive arts funding from the Canada Council of the Arts marks a turning point in the company's history. The result was a string of avant-garde plays which were properly workshopped and featured actors of colour who were paid unionized salaries. These plays were produced at fully equipped venues known by the theatre-going public and, until that time, exclusively used by Anglo-French companies.

The company's avant-garde plays expressed the socio-cultural complexity of immigrant life, and engaged politically with First Nations issues. My play *Land Where the Trees Talk* (1990), directed by Jack Langedijk and produced at Montreal's prestigious Centaur Theatre, was inspired by the Oka crisis, in which Mohawk Indians held out against the Canadian armed forces for weeks, barricading the road to prevent confiscation of their ancestral land for use as a golf course. Drawing upon the judicial quagmire surrounding the James Bay Hydroelectric project, *Land Where the Trees Talk* addresses environmental racism and the denial of social justice for Canada's Native peoples. The play highlights catastrophic government projects that are not only disastrous for the environment but also attempt to dispossess Natives of their land. Issues treated in the play include flooding, mercury poisoning and the deaths (of people and animals) caused by the Quebec government's 'Megawatt' power project. Although the play depicts the plight of Native Indians, it becomes a bridge between Native Indians and new immigrants with the introduction of the character of Dr Karuna Kate, a female Indo-Canadian doctor. The play thereby emphasizes the need for solidarity between new cultural minorities and First Nations people.

*No Man's Land* (1992), by Ken McDonough and me, and *Trading Injuries* (1993) – the subsequent radio version of *No Man's Land* that I wrote alone, and which was directed by Sally Han – are about the exploitation of immigrant labour and the insecurities of Muslim refugees from India living in Quebec, who might be uprooted for a second time if Quebec separates from Canada.

The company also produced cutting edge political plays involving other cultural groups, such as Main Street Collective's *Divided We Stand* (1994), directed by Harry Standjofski; Jason Sherman's *Reading Hebron* (2000), directed by Wajdi Mouawad; Sylvija Jestovic's *Noah's Arc 747* (2002), directed by Paulina Abaraca; Camyar Chai, Marcus Youssef and Guillermo Verdecchia's *Ali & Ali And The Axis of Evil* (2004), directed by Guillermo Verdecchia; Nina Lee-Aquino and Nadine Villasin's *Miss Orient(ed)* (2005), directed by Sarah Stanley; and most recently, Alan Rickman and Katharine Viner's controversial play *My Name Is Rachel Corrie* (2008), directed by Sarah Stanley, to name a few.

*My Name Is Rachel Corrie* was jointly produced in Montreal and Vancouver by Teesri Duniya Theatre and Vancouver's Newworld Theatre. It is noteworthy that a handful of big theatres in the US and Canada that had committed to producing this play backed out under pressure. While we at Teesri consider censorship odious, we consider self-censorship more so. We produced the play, with great success, in both Montreal and Vancouver.

### Company structure and creation process

Teesri Duniya Theatre is affiliated with the Professional Association of Canadian Theatres. It is run by the artistic director, with assistance from a general manager, and is accountable to a board of directors. The company's permanent base is a small office space from where all company business is carried out.

Except for Firehall Theatre, based in Vancouver, there is not a single culturally diverse theatre company that owns a performance venue. Like the rest, Teesri rents available venues for its productions. The most frequently used venues are the Monument-National, owned by the National Theatre School of Canada, and Montreal Arts Interculturels (MAI), owned by the city of Montreal. The MAI is the sole venue dedicated to presenting intercultural work from all artistic disciplines. The Monument National is a fully-equipped, top class auditorium with up to 200 audience capacity, while MAI seats up to 120 people.

The company's in-house production process involves creating original theatre that draws on everyday cultural experiences that are acquired 'here' rather than 'there'. This means: a careful distancing from the country where our ancestors lived; resisting homogenization with the groups that are dominant in the place we now live; and vigorously impeding religious orthodoxy from appropriating culture. In addition, the company aggressively looks for scripts with strong content from playwrights of all cultures.

With the diversification of the community, the company engages in new dramaturgical approaches and training programmes. The company's Fireworks play development program is multi-layered, taking different approaches to develop different types of plays. The company uses its own concept called culturally sensitive dramaturgy to develop original Canadian theatre reflective of the social realities lived by new Canadians. For the original plays that are developed and produced by the company, the creative process involves the playwright writing a full text, followed by one-to-one interaction with a designated dramaturge. Strong emphasis is placed on text, plot and character development based on contemporary and lived cultural experiences 'here' rather than expatriate experiences 'there'. Culturally sensitive dramaturgy is applied in a manner that depends on both the aesthetics and the socio-political context. The play is work shopped with actors only when the text is substantially ready. These workshops are timed carefully to integrate sound and design elements. Works developed in the company are thematically driven in a way that relevance and human dignity foreground the play. Exotic and culturally nostalgic themes that merely display the diversity are avoided altogether. Cultural particularity is preferred and homogenization is resisted. The company tests the play through public reading locally as well as at other play-development programmes across the country. Each production's size, scope and team differs in composition. The company is committed to hiring actors of colour, and certain actors such as Prasun Lala, Shalini Lal, and Raminder Singh have acted in many of the company's productions. The design team differs from play to play.

There are many culturally diverse companies that are actively expressing the human conditions of their communities in their own way. Teesri is among the very few that do so politically – by choosing to express human conditions through issues that, though specific, uncommon and contentious, have outcomes with universal relevance. Our contention is that theatre is a strong manifestation of cultural identity, but it only has a meaningful impact when it is politically engaged and, more importantly, of a professional quality. There is no room for bad quality theatre, particularly if it is political.

The company's open and intercultural approach is exemplified in the cross-section of plays, ranging from older to more recent, briefly described below.

### ***Counter Offence* and its French translation *L’Affaire Farhadi***

*Counter Offence*, written by me and directed by Jack Langedijk, was produced in 1996 and 1997. The play was translated into French by Pierre Legris with a new title, namely *L’Affaire Farhadi*, which was produced in 1999 under Langedijk’s direction in collaboration with Paul Lefebvre. *Counter Offence* is a story of conjugal violence in which the struggle to end violence against women comes into conflict with the struggle to end racism.

With the production of *L’Affaire Farhadi*, Teesri earned the distinction of being the only culturally diverse company producing work in Quebec’s official language given the noticeable opposition to multiculturalism within Quebec’s complex cultural scene. Expanding cultural and linguistic range was enthusiastically received both by the public and the press. Montreal’s English newspaper *The Gazette* declared: ‘*L’Affaire Farhadi* could be the vanguard of the revolution in French-language theatre’ (Donnelly 1).

The central conflict is as follows: Shapoor, an Iranian on a temporary visa who wants to bring his parents from Iran to Canada, is accused of hitting his Indo-Canadian Muslim wife Shazia. When Sgt Galliard, a white police officer, arrests him, a seasoned anti-racist activist named Moolchand Misra launches a ‘counter offensive’ by accusing Galliard of racism. On Shazia’s side is Clarinda Keith, a black woman activist who professes zero tolerance against wife battery. She not only counsels Shazia with respect to seeking retribution and justice, but also defends Galliard, in spite of the indefensible racial profiling and violence inflicted by police officers against black people.

The play opens with a speech by Moolchand Misra praising Canada as a multi-ethnic country in which social justice and equality should be possible, despite its racial history. He declares: ‘I’m not fighting against racism; I am fighting for equality where police identify people by their acts not by the colour of their skin’ (Varma *Counter Offence* 19). The story



Figure 1. *Counter Offence*. Credits: Cas Anvar and Raminder Singh. Photo: Yasmin Ameri.

unfolds as Shapoor's dead body is discovered in a room in the YMCA in Montreal, the city to which he had secretly returned after having been deported to Iran. All those who had contact with him become suspects in his murder. In addition, all had motives, as is revealed in a series of flashbacks and flashbacks-within-flashbacks. The first flashback is of Shazia discovering Sgt Galliard, in Shapoor's YMCA room, standing over his dead body. In another flashback Moolchand contradicts his opening speech – I'm not fighting against racism; I am fighting for equality – by using the 'race card' to remove Galliard from the force. To him Galliard's camel joke against Iranians and his rough handling of Shapoor justify such an accusation. In contrast, Galliard's 'I treat all wife-beaters equally' does not save his job, although he is the best officer in the domestic unit. In yet another flashback, Moolchand tries to persuade Clarinda to join him against the white majority and convince Shazia to drop charges against Shapoor. However, Clarinda refuses because she pursues gender, rather than race politics. In response, Moolchand questions Clarinda's loyalty to communities of colour.

There are no heroes in this play, only compromised characters with competing agendas, who (according to Soraya Peerbaye) 'are either bigoted, gluttons for punishment, opportunistic, stubborn or blind, or any combination of the above. Their conviction, however, is unquestionable, and this makes for hard-hitting dialogue' (Peerbaye 7):

Moolchand: I know how you feel. Please listen – he's a good man with so much potential. I know right now that he can't control his rage, but he needs our help. He can't get help if he is thrown out. What I am saying is – us, the East Indians, the Africans, the Chinese – you know – people like you and me – If we are to survive, we must be united. Help each other.

Clarinda: Because we are coloured? [...]

Moolchand: He's one of us, see?

Clarinda: Isn't *she* also one of us?

Moolchand: That's why she shouldn't deport him.

Clarinda: And give him an opportunity to attack her again? And turn the crime against her into her own fault? No! [...]

Moolchand: Galliard is a racist.

Clarinda: A woman was assaulted here.

Moolchand: He racially assaulted Shapoor.

Clarinda: You can't be serious. That's not the issue here.

Moolchand: Right here in Montreal eight coloured men have been shot dead by the officers and you want to tell me the officers aren't racist?

Clarinda: Galliard isn't one of them.

Moolchand: Just the other day the officers looked very happy, because there was a black taxi-driver in custody. When officers have that smile on their faces and there is a black man in custody, do you know what's coming?

Clarinda: Don't teach me what racism is!

Moolchand: Just because you are a shade darker? (*Varma Counter Offence* 54)

Anne Nothof argues that *Counter Offence* pits one social practice against another and 'raises the question as to whether imported customs that infringe on the rights and freedoms of others should be tolerated' (Nothof 199). According to Nothof, the play examines whether violence against women is the cultural preserve of ethnic minorities,

who ‘imports’ it into Canada, and whether importing this ‘cultural trait’ infringes upon the rights and freedoms of Canadians (Nothof 199). Statistics, however, reveal that violence against women is pervasive across all cultures, social classes, religions and races, and more often than not, a well-kept secret within all those groups. The majority of women murdered by their partners are from the dominant race or culture. Furthermore, all domestic violence occurs within a ‘cultural’ context – that context being the man’s desire to control the woman’s life. Yet only the crimes of visible minorities are viewed as belonging to a cultural phenotype. Contrary to such public perception, *Counter Offence* distinguishes a particular ‘practice’ from the ‘culture as a whole’ – upholding the culture and questioning the offending practices in its name.

Moolchand: Right now he happens to be one of many unfortunate men in this country because he happens to be a man of the wrong colour and culture.

Clarinda: Nobody’s culture equals torture. He hit her because he is a man and she is a woman. It’s nothing to do with culture. (Varma *Counter Offence* 52).

*Counter Offence* premiered in 1996 at the Montreal Arts Intercultural auditorium for a three-week run attracting 75% audiences with three sold-out performances. Using a multi-ethnic cast, Langedijk directed the play in a non-realistic way; the set consisted of a set of doorframes which were effectively configured to represent home, police station, office and other locales. Actors spoke to an unseen judge from various locations of the stage making the entire stage a place of examination. The lighting plan was used in a cinematic fashion to show the present, the flashback and a crucial ‘flashback-within-a-flashback’.

*Counter Offence* raises more difficult questions than it resolves, and highlights tensions within and across cultures. For every social offence there is a counter offence, for every cultural truth there is a competing truth. *Counter Offence* is not a play of ethno-cultural victimization; it is a play in which cultural virtues are shown to collide and compete, within cultures and without. To me, such an understanding is part of the maturing of multicultural diversity.

*Counter Offence/L’Affaire Farhadi* was also translated into Italian as *Il Caso Farhadi* by Gullio Marra and produced in Venice under the directorship of the late Bill Glassco, considered a legend in Canadian theatre.

### ***Bhopal***

In 2001, I wrote *Bhopal*. This play parallels, at least in intent, the company’s 1990 play *Land Where the Trees Talk*, but with a difference: it focuses on global environmental issues and their ramifications for living conditions in the Third World (insofar as these conditions hinge on the relationship between the developed and developing worlds). *Bhopal* is based on the world’s biggest industrial disaster, in 1984, at the Union Carbide pesticide factory in the central Indian city of the same name – a disaster which claimed over 3000 lives overnight, over 20,000 to date and still counting. In dramatizing this disaster, the play examines the recurring yet unstoppable mass murder of the poor – murder which is legitimized in the name of progress, development, and the state.

The play does not represent another factual account of the tragedy but searches for a deeper truth through an imagined plot inhabited by fictional characters: an NRI (non-resident Indian) company manager Devraj, his lover Madiha Akram, the chief minister Jaganlal, the CEO Warren Anderson, the Canadian NGO doctor Sonya Labonte, and the slum resident Izzat who knows how to survive at all costs. The characters manoeuvre their way through fictional situations in which they must negotiate or fight for

what they want. Each time they get what they want, something irreplaceable is lost. According to Paul Lefebvre, associate artistic director of the National Arts Centre, who served as dramaturge of this play, ‘these losses ultimately add up to disaster. This play – a pitiless analysis of the stakes of globalization – explores how this happens’ (Lefebvre).

Devraj, the development-hungry diasporic company manager, returns to India to rebuild his country with western know-how and persuades the chief minister to grant him a license to produce mega-quantities of an agro-chemical known as Karbide Thunder that increases productivity and tips the balance of profit in the country’s favour.

Devraj: Mr Minister, on the way to your office, I passed through the slum. It was filled with open garbage, the heat was suffocating, and the stench of human excrement was unbearable. I stumbled over drunken men, saw babies hanging from their mothers’ breasts, and encountered stubborn seven and eight-year-old boys with faces that said that if I didn’t give them some change, they’d die of hunger. I met a woman, a poor woman, who told me that her first child died of worms that crawled out of its body. Why? How did this happen? There are those who will blame industrial development. Chemicals like our Karbide Thunder. Obviously, that is not the case; we always think of safety first. But environmental safeguards are irrelevant if we don’t attack poverty first, for it is the poverty that is our greatest environmental hazard. Yes, my efforts aren’t reaching the people yet. But with my plan in place, the benefits will trickle all the way down to the poorest of the poor. That’s why we need the People’s Progress Zone. (Varma *Bhopal* 24)

In contrast, the Canadian NGO doctor Sonya Labonte, perceived as a ‘white do-gooder’ by Indian authorities and Devraj, is unimpressed by the benevolent development which, they promise, will pull India out of poverty’s grip. She is concerned about ‘diseases unknown to medical science’ and deformed babies born to the women living next to the factory. Her research prior to the accident will become scientific evidence after the accident that was ‘waiting to happen’ occurs.



Figure 2. *Bhopal*. Credits: French language production 2005 of *Bhopal*. Photo: Idra Labrie.

Sonya: I can show you my research – or I could if I knew where it was – Karbide is draining toxic waste into the lake, the pond. The children play in that water . . . people bathe in it and fall sick of diseases unknown to medical science. (Varma *Bhopal* 15)

Sonya has enlisted the slum-dwelling woman Izzat to recruit female subjects to participate in her research project, and has talked her into ‘exhibiting’ her deformed baby Zarina as an example of corporate inhumanity at an upcoming international conference scheduled to take place in Montreal, but Izzat is cunning and a survivor. She receives money and favours from mutual adversaries: from Sonya for supplying research subjects and from Devraj to hand out compensation to villagers whose babies and animals are dying (compensation which, according to Sonya, is a way to buy villagers’ silence). Devraj’s lover Madiha knows that Izzat cheats both Devraj and Sonya. Upon the revelation that Sonya has collected enough evidence of the link between the factory emissions and child deformity, as well as other illnesses, Madiha, who is pregnant with Devraj’s child, confronts Sonya in a fit of emotion:

Madiha: The evidence? The evidence is right here, right inside me. (To Sonya) I breathe more ‘poison’ than any of those women in the slums. If what you say is true, then my baby must be ten times more deformed.

Sonya: You’re damn right, madam, because the company’s poison does not discriminate.

Madiha: Then I’ll be a good test case for you. [ . . . ]

Madiha: Sign me up for your study. Why not?

Sonya: My study is banned. [ . . . ]

Madiha: To see you posturing (Imitating her) ‘I have this evidence, I have that evidence!’ Well (Pointing at her own stomach) here is my evidence. When my baby is born, you’ll see.

Sonya (To Madiha): I won’t be around. (Turns to Devraj) But how are you going to live with it? (Varma *Bhopal* 38)

The question of claims and counter-claims of poverty’s relationship to development and characters’ competing agendas becomes increasingly complex as the truth behind the ‘truth’ is revealed, following the ‘accident’. Now the development’s promoters’ own baby is threatened with deformity. For his part, the Chief Minister Jaganlal changes his tune multiple times. Prior to the accident, he is a full-fledged corporate globalization supporter, granting Devraj the license to manufacture dangerous chemicals, promoting development through photo-ops with the poor, and expelling Sonya Labonte as an anti-development agent. After the accident, he becomes a voice for the victims by reversing his stance on Sonya Labonte, whose research can be used as evidence to extract larger amounts of compensation from the company.

Jaganlal: Dear Delegates, good people of Canada, and business leaders of the world assembled in Montreal, je veux vous dire, I want to tell you, il n’y a pas d’amour, there is no love left in Bhopal. There are ten thousand sick babies. Dying babies, orphaned at birth. What can I do? Seek to lay blame? Cry for one baby? No. Do I mourn the dead? No. Sad as it may sound, I cannot afford to mourn for the dead. It’s useless. Because we know that for every child that dies, a new baby is born. The time for mourning has past, we must now pave the way to the future. (Varma *Bhopal* 63)

*Bhopal* premiered in September 2001 under Jack Langedijk’s direction at the Montreal Arts Interculturels for a three-week run attracting over 70% audience with four sold-out nights during the last week of the run. Directed in non-realistic form, Langedijk used live music, minimalist set, and a chorus to depict chaos in Bhopal city. The play’s French translation by Paul Lefebvre was produced at the Theatre Periscope in Quebec City and

at the Espace Libre in Montreal during 2005–2006 under Philippe Soldevilla's direction. Soldevilla also used live music and cast eight actors in multiple roles resulting in a bustling reflective of the surroundings of the city of Bhopal. Aparna Sindhoor choreographed movement and dance to add an additional layer to the play. Christian Fontaine's set design consisted of wooden blocks that were moved into different configurations to create different locations in an imagistic rather than realistic fashion.

*Bhopal* is a play against forgetting. Even after 25 years, mothers who inhaled poisonous gas on or after the explosion are giving birth to severely deformed babies. While still in the womb, babies are inheriting unformed limbs, melted skin, and holes in their brain tissue. This is a blatant attack on the inherent right of children to be born healthy and free from bodily harm.

The play was translated into Hindi as *Zahreeli Hawa* by India's legendary artist Habib Tanvir, and produced across India during 2003–2004 under his direction, including at the prestigious Prithvi Theatre Festival (2004) in Mumbai. This was the first Quebec/Canadian play to have been professionally produced in India. Tanvir's translation was trilingual – Hindi, Chattisgarhi and English – which allowed India's linguistically diverse audiences to share the play under one roof. In 2003 *Zahreeli Hawa* opened in the city of Bhopal with memories of 9/11 still fresh in the minds of general public. During a mass rally commemorating the disaster, one of the placards read 'you want Osama, give us Anderson'.

### *Miss Orient(ed)*

Written by Nina Lee-Aquino and Nadine Villasin, this work is a hilarious identity play which serves to explore intergenerational relations and the untold stories of Filipino Canadians. The play was first produced by the Carlos Bulosan Company in Toronto and remounted with a new cast in Montreal, by Teesri Duniya Theatre, to sold-out crowds. In an interview with Ric Knowles, playwright Nina Lee-Aquino said she 'is serving the Filipino Canadian community that is trying to speak up' and 'Nadine is working to develop new voices, new Filipino Canadian Voices, playwrights and actors' (Knowles 77). According to Nina Lee-Aquino, *Miss Orient(ed)* marks a shift that acknowledges two generations of Filipinos – the first generation that immigrated and the new generation that is developing a new identity known as 'Filipino-Canadian' (Knowles 77). Aquino and Villasin's work is less about preserving and more about developing: Aquino calls preserving 'museumization' (Knowles 77).

Set during a beauty pageant in which three contestants vie for the title of Miss Pearl of the Orient, *Miss Orient(ed)* gently satirizes the struggle between conflicting cultural identities and beauty ideals. Do beauty contests ever go beneath the surface to their contestants' hearts and minds? How do questions of ethnicity fit into the mix? Carrie fights to fit in with a box of Clairol #5 blond, Jennifer discovers that she is not white on a road trip to New York with her friends, and Twinkle survives the new immigrant experience by watching *Survivor*. Each girl asserts her right to fill the shoes of the reigning Miss Pearl of the Orient (a.k.a. the 'Beauty Icon') and goes to battle over who is more Filipino-Canadian than the other. The big question is: who wins?

The play highlights three representatives of the Filipina-Canadian community: the Filipina born in Canada, who does not know a lick of the language but looks Filipino; the Filipina who wants to completely erase the past, pretends she does *not* speak the language and dyes her hair blond; and the fresh-off-the-boat, wide-eyed, naïve Filipina. Added to them are the ex-Miss Pearl and a versatile pageant 'mom'. The community-specific beauty



Figure 3. *Miss Orient(ed)*. Credits: Emilee Veluz, Elizabeth Lofranco, and Nadine Vilasin with Cecile Cristobal (background) Photo: Bo Huang.

pageants are one of the most popular events among many ethnic cultures and the beauty contestants are regarded as the community's ambassadors to the outside world; but according to Aquino,

what we noticed, and this is where the politics came in and we know what we wanted to say – is that the winners were usually the ones that looked like westerners. In the search for the ideal, modern Filipina was the search for an 'other.' (Knowles 81–82)

For Aquino and Villasin, *Miss Orient(ed)* – unlike some culturally diverse plays (for example *Rice Boy* by the Canadian Stage Company, a mainstream Toronto company) – is not merely about 'showing the difference'. They ridicule the practice of 'museumization', remarking:

there is a kind of look, exotic little thing on display, come and see it! Especially, knowing that their audiences are mostly white middle-class, there's this china-porcelain-doll syndrome.

Muffy and Buffy are feeling nice and their consciences are clear. They have that China doll on the shelf. (Knowles 80)

Aquino and Villasin's play is set during an ethnic beauty pageant, but it explores serious identity issues faced by the Filipino Diaspora, and critiques the homeland which supplies immigrant labour for the Canadian economy. Through the medium of the beauty pageant, the playwrights examine the hidden truth masked by the exoticism of such pageants, and offer a glimpse into the contestants', and by extension the whole community's, inner lives. Contestant Jennifer, who thought she was completely integrated – who 'played tennis and went skiing instead of hanging out at the mall' [...], 'listened to Pink Floyd instead of Mariah Carey', [...] 'took advertising not nursing' – goes to New York with friends to celebrate her twenty-second birthday and realizes for the first time that she isn't white:

Jennifer: My girlfriends decide it would be really cool to take a road trip to New York to celebrate. We've got it all figured out. Hit the museums, see a couple of plays, go to Central Park – it was going to be a great trip. So we load up the car and head for the border. It's just me and Helena and Amy. The three of us have been best friends since grade school. We're having the best time doing car karaoke, laughing, telling jokes. But as we hit the line to cross the border Helena starts to get a little nervous and tells us to settle down. I ask her what's the matter and she says in her most breezy casual voice 'I just think we should try to be as inconspicuous as possible.' Inconspicuous. 'I don't want immigration to think that we're trying to smuggle in an illegal alien.' And everything stops. [...] And suddenly I realize that in her eyes, we were all the same. [...] Somebody said something about dog-eaters. And Helen said, 'Isn't that what they eat in your part of the world?' and laughed. And I laughed with her. It seemed funny at the time. But now I can't seem to shake this feeling that that's how people see me. That they look at me and think: Dog-Eater. (Aquino and Villasin 88)

Originally premiering in Toronto, Teesri Duniya remounted a new production of *Miss Orient(ed)* in March 2005 for a three-week run at a 110-seat auditorium called the Mainline theatre. *Miss Orient(ed)* marks the first Filipino Canadian production in Montreal that also featured an all-women Filipino cast. Madeline St Jacques's set mimicked a real beauty pageant with audiences sitting around the catwalk. Done in realistic comedy mode, director Sarah Stanley used film and video clippings and frequent use of Tagalog language. The play had many sold-out nights, attracting over 90% attendance.

In a survey by the *Montreal Mirror*, a local alternative weekly, *Miss Orient(ed)* was voted the best play of the year by Montreal audiences.

### *A Leaf in the Whirlwind*

In September 2007, Teesri Duniya launched its season, entitled 'Waging Peace in Times of War', with the production of *A Leaf in the Whirlwind*, a piece of dance-theatre. The text was adapted by Montreal playwright Jodi Essery from a short story by the late Malayalam writer Lalithambika Antherjanam, and was directed and choreographed by Aparna Sindhoor.

Director-choreographer Aparna Sindhoor, who is trained in Bharatnatyam, juxtaposes various dance forms, yoga, martial arts, gymnastics, multilingual songs, and dialogue to create her own unique brand of dance-theatre. Sindhoor's dance-theatre is very different from the conventional dance-drama, which, as an identity symbol, is wildly popular among members of the Indian Diaspora. Unlike traditional Bharatanatyam-based dance-drama, which relates scriptural stories about gods and deities, Sindhoor's dance-theatre fuses classical Indian dance and the structure of theatre, using characters who, through action, dance, words and song, recount meaningful contemporary stories.



Figure 4. *A Leaf in the Whirlwind* Photo 1. Credits: Aparna Sindhoo and Anile Natyeveda. Photo: Amar Khoday.

*A Leaf in the Whirlwind* is the war-rape story of women who were kidnapped by the ‘other’ side and, while detained, were physically, sexually and emotionally abused. This dance-theatre demonstrates the dialectic relationship between the agony of the subject matter (death, rape and trauma) and the form in which it is presented:

the artistic beauty of dance, music and scenic composition to tell the horrific story of a woman refugee, who in an unnamed country during an unnamed war, must come to terms with her own rape and child conceived of that act. (Essery et al. 22)

The child asks: ‘Where do I come from? To whom do I belong?’ Sindhoo’s dance-theatre then asks: ‘What does it mean to be alone? What does it mean to resist? How does the body move on?’ According to Jodi Essery, the answer lies in the play’s music, colours, songs, language and the story itself, which comes alive through movement:

[I]n the work of Aparna Sindhoo, the body resists by moving, and this collaboration continues to be an education in how the body stands up to the world. It would seem that the greatest resistance to the incomprehensible is truth and in *Leaf*, mother begins by telling her child the truth about her beginnings, about her history. In the face of the unspeakable, she speaks. In the face of political rhetoric, the refugees dance. In the face of death, the women live. (Essery et al. 23)

Sindhoo and Essery’s collaboration started with Antherjanam’s story and Sindhoo’s idea of dancing it. Sindhoo also brought with her several first-person testimonials about women’s experiences with war, a poem which responded to 9/11, and newspaper clippings. *Leaf* was performed by an international cast which included Indian performers with expertise in traditional Indian dance and martial arts forms, and Montreal actors and dancers trained in various Indian forms, tango, modern, contemporary, jazz, dance-mediation, and physical theatre. *A Leaf in the Whirlwind* which ran 10–28 October 2007 at the Montreal Arts Intercultural was this play’s world premiere. *A Leaf in the Whirlwind*,



Figure 5. *A Leaf in the Whirlwind* Photo 2. Credits: Ensemble from Canadian premiere of *A Leaf in the Whirlwind*, October 2007. Photo: Amar Khoday.

Aparna Sandhoor, directed an international cast that included two of India's most highly accomplished performers, Anil Natyaveda and Pratheesh Sivanandan, along with local performers Marjolayne Auger, Tomomi Morimoto and Michelle Parent. Designer Anoushka Anand's set consisted of ropes and net as a wall that delineates a border. Using different forms of dance, movement, aerial dancing, storytelling enhanced by a rare mix of world music, *A Leaf in the Whirlwind* set a new standard in dance theatre genre.

### Future activity

We are living in times of war and, by default; all works of art are now being created in a time of war. Accordingly, the overarching theme of Teesri Duniya Theatre is: staging peace in times of war. My upcoming play *Truth and Treason*, due to open September 2009 under the direction of Arianna Bardesono, is the story of a US soldier of conscience and an Iraqi writer alleged to be a terrorist – two men in conflict, whose destinies are intertwined with that of a 10-year-old girl killed by an unknown soldier in occupied Iraq.

### Conclusion

Cultural diversity has reached a new, still-developing stage in the Canadian theatre. At Teesri, the belief is that, in a pluralistic democracy, recognition of specific cultural groups is essential for their advancement. Failure to recognize such groups results in a 'common culture' wherein all cultures blend indiscriminately, though only the dominant one has public expression. Teesri Duniya Theatre, in its entire works, has offered resistance to such cultural homogenization. The company's ultimate goal has been to create a shared social space in which visible minorities are recognized as different but

equal. It has aimed to maintain the cultural specificity of groups, while engaging with all cultures. The company has thereby increased networking, communication and cohesion across social groups. In general, the approach it has taken has allowed Teesri Duniya Theatre to move away from Eurocentrism into an intercultural art practice which allows for multiple memberships across a spectrum of cultures. Teesri has effectively demonstrated that this can be achieved through politically engaged, high-quality art that examines relevant issues, challenges audiences and supports the cause of social justice.

### Note

1. Visible minorities, as defined by the *Employment Equity Act*, are members of ethnic minority groups that are 'persons, other than Aboriginal peoples, who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour' (Statistics Canada).

### Notes on contributor

Rahul Varma is a playwright and artistic director of the Teesri Duniya Theatre which he co-founded in 1981. His works have been translated and produced in French, Hindi and other languages. His recent works include *Counter Offence* and *Bhopal*, which was translated in Hindi as *Zahreeli Hawa* by India's preeminent director Habib Tanvir. More information on Rahul Varma can be found at the Literary Encyclopedia at <<http://www.litencyc.com/php/speople.php?rec=true&UID=5399>>.

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