

Inadvertent pioneers and new frontiers

On 14th December my sister, Suman, phoned me to say that BKS Iyengar, the late, great yoga guru, had been awarded the honour of being the 'Google doodle' on what would have been his 97th Birthday. I switched on my computer hugely excited to see this celebration of the brand of yoga that Suman and I had followed for the last 35 years. This global posthumous recognition confirmed what we already knew; Mr Iyengar had 'arrived'. We had witnessed with some pride the rise and rise of Iyengar Yoga over our adult life. It is now practiced all over the world; endorsed by celebrities like Madonna.

Around the same time that we started Iyengar Yoga, Suman and I joined [Tara Arts](#), the first British Asian theatre company that was founded by four friends (current artistic director Jatinder Verma among them) in response to the racist murder of Gurdip Singh Chaggar at Southall in 1976. At the time both the theatre we were making with other young, second generation, British Asians, and Iyengar Yoga were seen as 'fringe' activities. Our parents made no secret of the fact that they would have preferred us to concentrate on studying what my kids now call 'the Asian four'- Biology, Chemistry, Physics and Maths! Somehow instinctively I knew then that both theatre and yoga were going to be of huge significance in my life. Indeed they have shaped me into the 50-something year old I am now.

I am the unlikeliest theatre maker you could meet. I was a chronically shy teenager who studied three out of the 'Asian four' and went on to do a degree in Maths and Sociology. It was a chance encounter with Jatinder and Tara that set me on an extraordinary journey into theatre. From the beginning 'who I am' was significant. Meeting other Asians who share a common purpose of navigating our 'difference', while seeing ourselves as resolutely British, has been the reason we make theatre. Theatre gave us a sense of belonging and saved us all from existential identity crises. We learnt about our history and how we found ourselves here as a direct result of colonialism; we devoured South Asian literature, and combatted racism by seeing our multifarious identities as a huge resource to draw on and a positive prism through which to view the world.

It was at Tara that I met Kristine Landon-Smith. We were both acting in a play called *The Broken Thigh*, an episode from the Indian epic, the Mahabharata - a great reason to read that part of my Indian heritage! Kristine and I went on to found [Tamasha](#) in 1989, and for 26 years it was the place where the two of us collaborated on and commissioned significant, groundbreaking work. Tamasha provided an artistic space for us and at the same time provided opportunities for a huge cohort of artists that see Tamasha not only as a pipeline into the mainstream, but a home where they make their best work and find their uniquely subjective voices. Writers like Ayub Khan-Din, Emteaz Hussein, Satinder Chohan, Avaes Mohammed, and taxi driver turned playwright, Ishy Din are part of Tamasha's significant alumni, as are actors such as Jimi Mistry, Sunetra Sarker, Archie Panjabi and Parminder Nagra.

I recently stepped down as artistic co-director and Tamasha's next chapter has begun with Fin Kennedy, a playwright who has a significant body of 'premiere' plays that he has written through a unique collaboration with the largely Muslim girls of Mulberry School in East London. Navigating 'difference' and 'making a difference' for him has been a journey where the significance of 'who he is' is in his artistic curiosity and not his cultural identity. By immersing himself in the world of the Mulberry students he was writing for, he has earned trust and a 'legitimacy' to write authentically about experiences very different to his own. By making work about today's 'cultural fault lines', Tamasha continues to be committed to the diverse voices of diverse theatre makers.

Tamasha recently marked its 25th year with a party and retrospective of scenes from the back catalogue; shows like *Strictly Dandia* about the inter-caste rivalries within the Gujarati community, *Child of the Divide* about the experiences of children during Partition and *A Fine Balance*, Rohinton Mistry's landmark novel set during the Emergency in India. Wanting to put a mirror up to our communities in order to reflect the complexity of our lived experiences with challenging, entertaining and innovative work has been what has fuelled my journey as an artist and theatre maker. It is this energy that continues to drive me, even when navigating the complex terrain that is our theatrical landscape.

I am often in conversation with artists of colour of my generation about whether the difference our collective creative endeavours have made will endure. We have been inadvertent pioneers, audience developers, cultural entrepreneurs, and role models for the next generation of artists. We have, sometimes reluctantly, carried a sense of responsibility for the nuanced depiction of our communities, warts and all. We have knocked down doors and barriers. We have built allegiances and long term partnerships that have led to residencies and loyal audiences for work on the small, medium and large scale. We have also seen these evaporate like footsteps in the sand, and have had to shift and adapt to continue to create the conditions in which to make our work. It seems as though the structures are still not in place for work to go from the 'margins' to the 'mainstream'. We continue to witness the reinvention of the wheel. Conversations about 'inequality of access and opportunity' remain the same. I recently heard the wonderful Gaylene Gould talk about a collective experience of 'cultural neglect'. It was a relief to hear it being defined so succinctly. As individual artists of colour, the experience of leading 'parallel lives' and having to prove yourself again and again can be hugely eroding.

Real conversations are being held behind closed doors as actors and writers vent their ire about the personal experience of having to explain their 'difference' and sell their 'cultural credentials' when trying to get their work from idea to stage or screen. Stories abound that mirror my own experience of trying to pitch work to senior executives in the business, who are loathe to commission more than one work from minority ethnic artists at the same time. It seems being an 'artist of colour' is now a genre, and once that box is ticked, we have to wait for the next opening. A friend recently remarked how his phone only rings furiously during Black History month. Our career trajectories are not 'incremental' in the way that we have witnessed with our white peers with similar credentials. Each credit in our biographies does not make the next opportunity any easier to forge. We find ourselves too often on the back foot. We urgently need to find a vehicle to air these difficult conversations without artists feeling nervous that by speaking out, they will not get their work 'green lit'.

Despite the barriers that still exist we can celebrate the huge expansion in work and in the number of artists over the 40 years since Naseem Khan wrote her report. When I was growing up in the 70s and 80s, there was so little diverse work in our theatres or on screen that we would all congregate to the one event that might be on; whether a season of Satyajit Ray's films at the Electric Cinema, or a Hanif Kureishi play at the Royal Court. You had to be there to bear witness and we all felt a palpable sense of the huge importance of each 'happening'. That feeling still lingers for me today and was very present during the tour of my recent play that was six years in the making. [My Name is...](#) is the true story of Molly Campbell, the half Pakistani/half Scottish teenager who made headlines in 2006 when she ran away from her home in Stornoway. It is about how Molly's parents met and fell in love in 80s Glasgow and tried to forge a family while navigating race, religion and love. This deeply personal story reflects a global conversation. I was privileged to see the effects of that on diverse audiences in England, Scotland and on Radio 4. At the same time, Ayub Khan Din's *East is East* was enjoying yet another revival and still feels very resonant with audiences nearly 20 years after we first commissioned it. These are palpable reminders of the urgency of exploring 'difference' through art to investigate our common humanity.

As I am now well into what Voltaire called 'the old age of youth and the youth of old age', yoga is now an ever more important lifeline to me. It reminds me that bring present in the moment is the key to acceptance and renewal. The moment that I am in is a place of endings and new beginnings. I do wonder sometimes if I should have stuck to the 'Asian four' and more fiscal certainty. I would possibly have had a nice pension to look forward to but would certainly have missed out on the scenic route. I will be forging the future and occupying a space that is not defined by 'closed doors' and 'seeking permission' but rather by new collaborations and partnerships where 'who I am' is yet again at the forefront of new frontiers. Talking of 'difference' and 'making a difference', in 2016 I will be working on 'Golden Hearts', a piece about the inheritance of loss that myself and many in Asian communities feel as family members are lost prematurely through heart disease (South Asian men are 50% more likely to have coronary heart disease than men in the general

population). I am thrilled to be artist-in-residence at [East London Genes and Health](#), one of the world's largest community-based genetic studies of people of Pakistani and Bangladeshi heritage. I will also be reviving [Child of the divide](#) in 2017 to mark the 70th anniversary of the Partition of India - again I hope with exciting partnerships. It will be tough I know. As a senior executive at the Arts Council remarked to me recently, 'You're starting again, but with a reputation!'

As yoga has grown and permeated the mainstream there are so many ways to practice, from Iyengar to Hatha, Ashthanga to Bikram, and the latest brand Fierce Grace. I wonder what Mr Iyengar would make of all these diverse offerings? I confess that I do sample other forms, not least to enjoy the 'heat' of the room in mid winter, but find myself drawn to the anchor of the honed practice of Iyengar. Like yoga, I hope that theatre that doesn't shy away from difference; theatre that gives voice to the complexity of 21st-century lived multiculturalism, will have a similar growth. With international strife, new patterns of migration, and millions seeking sanctuary on the scale that we are witnessing, it is both timely and necessary for us to embrace and celebrate difference through art that reflects who we are today. As I have witnessed with the rise of yoga, it is only when the collective benefit of practice is felt that barriers are broken and growth ensues. As Mark Tully quoted from BKS Iyengar's philosophy, 'a casual attempt only gains casual results'. I am ever hopeful that this vital conversation about the arts and difference will be far from casual, and instead a concerted, collective call to action.