

UNITING EAST, WEST AND ALL THE REST

by **Brit
Bachmann**

“What I like about Diwali as a concept from my culture is the underlying theme of unity,” says Rohit Chokhani, Jessie award-winning curator and artistic director of Diwali in B.C. “I think we need to appreciate where all of us are the same—at the human core, soul level.”

Diwali is the Hindu festival of lights, which symbolizes the spiritual victory of light over darkness. During the celebration, bright lights are illuminated in homes, businesses and places of worship.

Diwali in B.C., not to be mistaken with other celebrations of Diwali, runs from Oct. 3 to Nov. 17 in Vancouver, Coquitlam, Maple Ridge, Vernon and Nanaimo. It is a multicultural, multidisciplinary performance festival in its second year.

This year’s theme is “New Horizons,” represented in part through the expansion into communities outside of the Lower Mainland. Diwali in B.C.’s five-year plan is to extend celebrations across British Columbia to develop an audience for traditional Indian dance and storytelling, and in the process, build a circuit for performers.

In 2017, Chokhani launched Project SAT (South Asian Theatre), an initiative to support and showcase South Asian theatre across Canada. Chokhani describes SAT as “an entry point” for new artists to be trained in their culture, as opposed to more Eurocentric, institutionalized training. This project folds into Diwali in B.C., both nurturing a cultural landscape that is equally sustainable, inclusive and entertaining.



Diwali in B.C. brings traditional Indian artistry to Canada, celebrates the victory of light over darkness, and showcases South Asian theatre and dance with a rich and thought-provoking offering of performances



📍 A Vancouver Guldasta depicts a Punjabi family living in South Vancouver in the 1980s, during the tumultuous times of the Indian military invasion of the Golden Temple in Amritsar, Punjab.

“Most of our programming is affirmative action for people who are under-represented,” says Chokhani, speaking of the diversity of performances and those taking the stage. “It’s not that we want our own space. We need spaces where dominant culture and under-represented groups can still come together and create beautiful things.”

“New Horizons” is also a response to the cultural moment. As Chokhani points out, “there is a lot happening in the world right now politically, but also in terms of gender clashes or racial tensions or cultural divides.”

The festival’s theme is not just about bringing the values of Diwali to new audiences, but the sharing of new perspectives.

A highly anticipated performance is *The Believers Are But Brothers*, written and performed by Javaad Alipoor and co-presented with The Cultch.

“It takes a way deeper look at the toxic masculinity that exists, but also makes a point around why certain generations of young men are finding themselves burning with these kinds of resentments and why they do these destructive things to get power,” explains Chokhani.

The Believers Are But Brothers is in direct dialogue with major news headlines, but other Diwali in B.C. shows

📍 Dancer Arno Kamolika performs in *Shyama*, a contemporary interpretation of a classic romantic tragedy with an all-female cast of B.C.-based Bharatanatyam dancers. Diwali in B.C. photos.

are more subtly thought-provoking.

Shyama at the York Theatre on Oct. 27 promises to be an unforgettably poetic performance, co-presented with Vancouver Tagore Society in community partnership with Mandala Arts & Culture. Directed by Chokhani himself, the production has been three years in the making. It is a contemporary interpretation of a classic romantic tragedy with an all-female cast of B.C.-based Bharatanatyam dancers.

Chokhani describes it as “taking [Bharatanatyam] dance and creating it into a theatre to tell a language with a body that not many Westerners understand, but is unique to a script that was written by the first non-European Nobel-laureate poet, Rabindranath Tagore.”

In these performances, and throughout the festival, the spiritual pulse of Diwali is strong but not overbearing. Traditionally, Diwali coincides with the Hindu New Year, a time associated with reflection and new beginnings.

“I wanted to not be dogmatic about its religious roots, but actually take the spirituality and celebratory component [for Diwali in B.C.],” says Chokhani.

“Diwali is not just about getting up and dancing and celebrating, which is what we do at the festival, but also about good over



evil, light over darkness. Those themes of Diwali are reflected in the shows that we do.”

Another show is *A Vancouver Guldasta*, which depicts a Punjabi family living in South Vancouver in the 1980s. Taking place during the Indian military invasion of the Golden Temple in Amritsar, Punjab, *A Vancouver Guldasta* explores the processing of trauma. It is a production by the South Asian Canadian Histories Association and runs Oct. 2-21 at the Vancity Culture Lab.

Diwali in B.C. is a relatively new festival with limitless possibilities. In many ways, it has been a long time coming.

In a society where popular culture is stimulated by division and duality, one overarching theme of Diwali in B.C. endures, Chokani says.

“We need to be able to see each other for our differences and still appreciate them.”

Diwali in B.C. runs from Oct. 3 to Nov. 17 in different communities and venues across British Columbia. For more information, visit DiwaliBC.ca

Dipti Mehta honours women as part of Diwali in B.C. celebrations

Dipti Mehta's one-woman play Honour: Confessions of a Mumbai Courtesan shines a light on the rights of women as part of Diwali, Hindu festival of lights



SHAWN CONNER

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Dipti Mehta brings her one-woman play, *Honour: Confessions of a Mumbai Courtesan*, to Vancouver Oct. 20-Nov. 4 at Vancity Culture Lab. *JESSICA MENTIS / PNG*

Honour: Confessions of a Mumbai Courtesan

Oct. 20-Nov. 4 | *Vancity Culture Lab*

Tickets and info: from \$35, thecultch.com (<http://thecultch.com>)

One might not think there's not a lot of overlap between acting and medical research, but to theatre artist and cancer researcher Dipti Mehta, the two professions are more similar than they might appear.

Both require persistence and patience. And perfection is elusive.

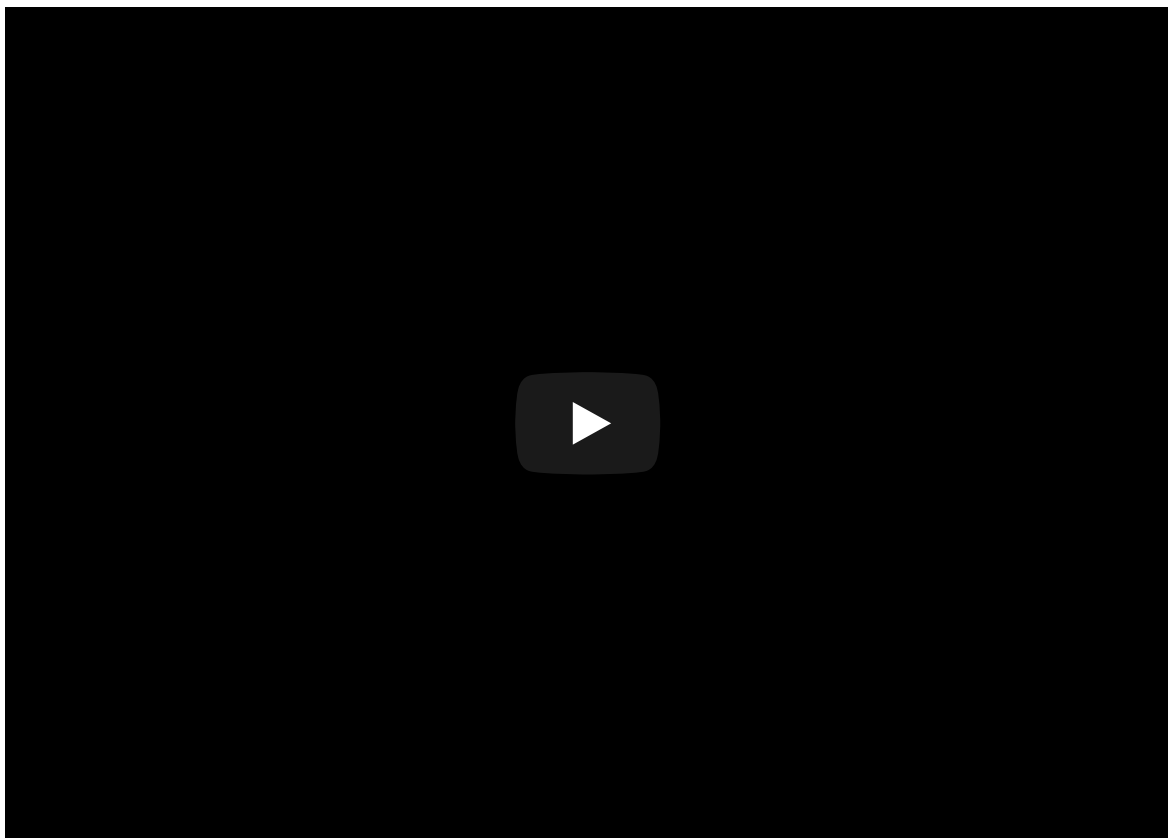
“As a scientist, you can never say ‘Okay, I’m done studying, and now I’m just going to work,’” said Mehta.

“You have to study and look at what’s new in the world. It’s the same thing as an artist. You have to keep training yourself.”

Honour: Confessions of a Mumbai Courtesan, the one-woman play she is bringing to Vancouver, is a case in point. The production has gone through a number of alterations since its 2009 premiere.

The latest is a change to the choreography. “We added an element in our set, and changed some of choreography to go with it,” she said.

“We have tied in a mythical Indian story with the show. The presence of that world has elevated the play to the next level.”



In 2018, Mehta will be adding projections, but has probably stopped making radical changes, she says. The most recent major shift occurred in 2015, when she dropped one character and added three.

“I used to tell the story via the lens of an American journalist,” she said. “We took her out, and I added the queen from the myths of the (ancient Sanskrit epic poem) Mahabharata. I also added an old priest, and the character of a eunuch.”

Mehta is bringing the production back to Vancouver as part of Diwali in B.C. (<https://rchokhani1981.wixsite.com/diwalibc>), a project by director and writer Rohit Chokhani (<http://rchokhani1981.wixsite.com/career/videos>) to make the Hindu festival of lights celebrations provincewide over the next five years. The new run follows two performances here with the 2016 Monsoon Arts Festival.



Dipti Mehta. *KYLE ROSENBERG / PNG*

Along with tweaking and touring Honour, Mehta's acting work includes TV series and films. In the former, she's often cast as a doctor.

"When I was in India I would get cast as a reporter," she said. "Indians are stereotyped. I think I look like I could be a doctor. And I have a certain ease with the medical jargon."

Mehta was born and raised in Mumbai. When she was 12, a radio programming director saw her read at an elocution contest.

"She loved how I delivered my little speech," Mehta said. "She asked me to write something that was about 10 minutes long, and I wrote a piece about how women are ill-treated. They loved it, and it went on air. And that was the beginning of my creative journey."

Mehta was ambitious from an early age.

"I come from a community that's still pretty backwards," she said. "Very patriarchal, very orthodox. A woman's role was very defined as to be at home and have children and to take care of her husband and her in-laws and her children. The fact that I wanted an education was a huge problem. The fact that I wanted to be an actor was a disaster."

After seeing the suppression of her mother and the other women around her, Mehta knew she would have to fight for her rights.

With Honour, she's giving back. A portion of her proceeds will go to Apne Aap Women Worldwide, (<http://apneaap.org/>) an organization dedicated to the rescue and rehabilitation of sex trafficked victims and children in the brothels.

The piece didn't start out as activist theatre, Mehta says. "But it was always giving voice to people living in unfortunate circumstances. Over time it has become more than just a theatre show. It's become almost a calling for me, and a movement to make a difference."

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Rohit Chokhani and Diwali in B.C. amplify South Asian voices

Partnering locally with the Cultch, the festival reaches out to wider audiences

by Janet Smith on October 3rd, 2018 at 12:32 PM

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Diwali in B.C. artistic director Rohit Chokhani has had a direct role in bringing several recent South Asian works to the stage.

One way to describe Rohit Chokhani’s approach to curation at Diwali in B.C. is, as he calls it, “finding the diversity within the diversity”.

While putting together this year’s festival, the artistic director has found performances that cover vastly different South Asian experiences. There’s a U.K. play about online extremism, an intimate play about a Vancouver Punjabi family dealing with tragedy in their homeland, and a classical-Indian-dance rendition of a Bengali myth.

But Chokhani’s work is also about a kind of cultural diplomacy—a honed mix of collaboration, networking, and communication. And that’s no big surprise, considering this is the producer and theatre artist who won the Vancouver NOW Representation and Inclusion Award at July’s Jessie Richardson Theatre Awards.

Not only is this fast-emerging local arts leader working with such groups as SACHA (the South Asian Canadian Histories Association) and the Vancouver Tagore Society on this year’s Diwali shows, his provincewide fest is copresenting the Vancouver productions with the Cultch. All will be staged at its Vancity Culture Lab and York Theatre, and he’s worked closely with executive director Heather Redfern on programming.

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“I always believed that although Diwali has roots in India, we’re doing it in B.C.,” Chokhani tells the *Straight* over the phone. “How do we take that concept and make it welcoming to other cultures?”

For Chokhani, that’s meant not only reaching out to marginalized artists and arts groups within the South Asian community, but also teaming up with a more mainstream theatre to reach a wider audience.

Together, Chokhani and Redfern attended the 2017 debut of local writer-director Paneet Singh’s *A Vancouver Guldasta*, set in an actual Vancouver Special. In it, a Punjabi family struggle with the trauma of the 1984 armed invasion of the Sikh Golden Temple in India, while their daughter forms a growing relationship with their young Vietnamese tenant.

“Heather and I went into this small house and we said, ‘We have to do something with this,’ ” relates Chokhani. “It was actually very powerful—we felt like part of the family, and we felt the story was very Vancouver.” (Diwali in B.C. and the Cultch are now copresenting it with SACHA.)

Similarly, Chokhani and his mentor headed to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival last year and found *The Believers Are But Brothers*—a one-man play that encourages audience members to wire into WhatsApp as it draws parallels between the online actions of two ISIS recruits in Britain and a white alt-right

extremist in the U.S.

“It was taking me into a world I didn’t understand at all,” Chokhani says. “Why do certain young men feel powerless around money and power and sex, and what lengths will they go to get it?”

The U.K.’s *The Believers Are But Brothers*.

The U.K.’s *The Believers Are But Brothers*.

Chokhani looked closer to home to help develop *Shyama*, working as director for Bengali-Canadian artist Arno Kamolika, who’s interpreting fellow Bengali Rabindranath Tagore’s epic tale through the ancient Indian dance form of bharata natyam, working with the Vancouver Tagore Society and Mandala Arts & Culture.

Beyond that, Chokhani has spread Diwali in B.C. events as far as Vernon, Maple Ridge, and Nanaimo. He says that’s one reason he’s named this year’s fest New Horizons; the other is to position the programming as a way to look beyond our divisive world. As he puts it, “How do we look at things in a different way?”

Looking at things in a different way has been a part of the Mumbai-born Chokhani’s success in getting diverse voices heard on local stages.

He spent his early adulthood in computer programming, first earning his master’s in the field, then leaving it to delve into the arts after he arrived here in 2010, by way of the U.S. If you feel like you’re seeing more and more compelling South Asian stories on Vancouver stages, chances are the artist-producer has had his hands on the project.

In 2016, he worked, as part of Diwali Fest, with Touchstone Theatre to present *Brothel #9*, a searing account of sex slavery in Calcutta that won him a special Jessie award for “outstanding work in expanding the diversification of Vancouver theatre through excellence in festival programming”. Last year, his reimagined version of Anosh Irani’s



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Bombay Black, about a blind man’s love for a courtesan, blew away Vancouver Fringe Festival audiences and was reprised at the Firehall Arts Centre. In the summer, he cohelmed the Monsoon Festival of Performing Arts, programming strong work like Anita Majumdar’s *The Fish Eyes Trilogy*. And he’s also created Project SAT, an ongoing initiative to help South Asian artists develop, tour, present, and produce new theatre work across the country, through workshops, mentorship, and other programs. (Redfern has been a key mentor on the project.) And news recently emerged that Chokhani will codirect a 2019 production of Shakespeare’s *All’s Well That Ends Well* at Bard on the Beach—one set in India and spiced with South Asian music and dance.

It’s a lot to have achieved in a short time here, where a culturally diverse theatre production was once a rarity on the calendar. But Chokhani knows how to build bridges—an art he chalks up not only to his technology background but to living and learning.

“Sometimes my friends will ask me, ‘That master’s program for three years—do you feel all that work went to waste?’ But I think that’s where I get the strategic brain and communication skills: how to communicate with different communities, how to manage high emotional settings,” he says, and then offers: “But also, when I was younger, I made some mistakes. A lot of these conversations about culture and ethnicity would become more paralyzing. I’m older now, and I see we need to be more collaborative to understand what these systemic barriers are.” And then, strategically dismantle them, one by one.

Diwali in B.C. copresents *A Vancouver Guldasta* until October 21 at the Cultch’s Vancity Culture Lab; *Shyama* on October 27 at the York Theatre; and *The Believers Are But Brothers* from October 30 to November 10 at the Cultch’s Vancity Culture Lab.

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Posted in *The Arts Scene*

OCTOBER 2, 2018

Diwali In B.C. Expands To Three New Cities In 2018!

As a South Asian woman and a writer, I'm always interested in learning about initiatives that combine both of those identities. While I favour writing creative nonfiction and opinion pieces, I am pulled to poetry and theatre for my entertainment, and to stretch me out of my own mind, into the stories of others. When I identify with the stories acted out on stage or film, or spoken from a poet's mouth, it's an even deeper experience for me. Learning about the expansion of Diwali in B.C. makes me so happy, knowing that more people have access to such stories that they can either identify with or learn from.

Nobody understands this better than the creative behind such initiatives, Rohit Chokhani, who is an award-winning producer and director. The recipient of the Vancouver NOW Representation and Inclusion award at the 2018 Jessie Richardson Awards, Chokhani is recognized for encouraging the diverse voices in theatre and dance, and for creating a platform for South Asian artists. In particular, his endeavours Project SAT and Diwali in B.C. appeal to artists and art-lovers who appreciate such a platform.

What is Project SAT?

Project SAT, which doubles as an acronym for South Asian Theatre and the Sanskrit word meaning 'pure and true essence', has a mission to "build a platform for the next generation of South Asian artists and the next wave of South Asian stories being told," says Chokhani. "There are a lot of Western organizations where South Asian artists can go and learn but they're going to teach them how to create and tell their stories based on the Western approaches." Workshops that further this mission are offered throughout the fall with a focus on dramaturgy, Natyashastra, producing and playwriting. These workshops are specifically tailored to members of the South Asian community who experience marginalization, and translators are available in Hindi, Punjabi and ASL.

What is the difference between Western and Eastern philosophies of training in drama?

I was curious about this because it seems to be the crux of Project SAT. Without knowing the difference between the two philosophies, I felt like I couldn't quite grasp the importance of the work that happens in this space. Chokhani explains, "Basically, the key element is 'text or non-text'. In most Western work, more often not, the work starts with 'what is the script, where is the script, get the script made, THEN we will work from the script. In a lot of Eastern traditions, whether it's theatre or dance...the source is emotion-driven...what is the emotion you want to tell? In the Western world, they also focus a lot more on character and what the text needs to tell. In the Eastern world, you could be emoting a lot of things...like the weather."



Interesting!

The Natyashastra workshop this fall takes place over 4 days and dives deeper into this distinction between the two philosophies, comparing the dramaturgy of Bharata's Natyashastra text and the Western dramaturgy of Aristotelian poetics.

In another workshop, Introduction to Producing, Chokhani will focus on the fundamentals of theatre production.

Do you have any ideas about what is lacking in the South Asian arts scene? Questions about his workshops? Chokhani welcomes your comments and questions, and loves chatting about cultural arts.

Diwali in B.C. October 3 – November 17, 2018...YES! 6 Whole Weeks!

Last year I had the privilege to speak with Chokhani about his new province-wide Diwali celebration, celebrating the Festival of Lights as well as South Asian culture in an inclusive way. With programming that centred around sex trafficking, abuse and healing, last year's festival was a hit – and this year, it's back and BIGGER.

Expanded to include 3 new cities, you can find programming for 2018's theme New Horizons, in Vancouver, Coquitlam, Vernon, Maple Ridge and Nanaimo. When asked about this expansion, Chokhani explains, "What was lacking was to go beyond Metro Vancouver. So last year I created a new brand, a new organizational structure and launched Diwali B.C. specifically with that intention, that the programming in Metro Vancouver should continue...but I did want to step outside of that and cater to the needs for such programming as well as the need to connect with community beyond the major urban centres. So, this year we are starting with Vernon, Maple Ridge and Nanaimo."

A really amazing accomplishment is the launch of this festival in Vernon. Diwali in B.C. is taking over this Okanagan town with events throughout the whole week that cater to individuals as well as families. Bollywood fitness classes, yoga classes, Rangoli making, and a special number performed by the Shiamak Vancouver dance team (I highly recommend experiencing a Shiamak performance!) fill the calendar among other fun and tasty events, as noted below. Visit their website for more details about the festival and each of the events.

2018 Diwali in B.C. Programming:

A Vancouver Guldasta October 2-21 at Vancity Culture Lab | Presented with The Cultch

A Vancouver Guldasta focuses on a Punjabi family in Vancouver in the early 1980s as they navigate through the experience of trauma and violence occurring in Punjab, and their daughter's complicated friendship with a Vietnamese refugee teen who lives in their basement. The story takes place during the Indian government's armed invasion of the 'Golden Temple' — the holiest shrine of the Sikhs — in the epicentre of the Sikh diaspora, South Vancouver, B.C. A Vancouver Guldasta is an examination of common experience, identifying home, and processing trauma.



Diwali in B.C., Vernon October 9-13 at various locations in Vernon, including the Vernon & District Performing Arts Centre

This inaugural event is presented with the Vernon & District Performing Arts Centre and will culminate in a multicultural showcase of diverse artists from different backgrounds. Activities throughout the week will include workshops, discussions, dance performances, musical

performances, cultural activities, and crafts. The festival's final performance, featuring headliner Shiamak Vancouver, takes place at the Vernon & District Performing Arts Centre on Saturday, October 13 at 7:00pm.



Shyama October 27 at the York Theatre Co-presented with Vancouver Tagore Society and in community partnership with Mandala Arts & Culture Society, with support from BC Arts Council

A Bharatanatyam interpretation of Tagore's epic Bengali dance drama Shyama with original choreography by Jai Govinda. This dance theatre piece is a tribute to the first non-European Nobel-laureate poet Rabindranath Tagore and his magically visual poetry and music of love. Dance artist Arno Kamolika has been collaborating with musician Shankhanaad Mallick and with director Rohit Chokhani for over two years on this production, and Diwali in B.C. will debut their most current version of this poetic, deep philosophical story that will be performed on stage with other Bharatanatyam dancers in B.C.: Grihalakshmi Soundarapandian, Jaylakshmi Ravindra , Malavika Santhosh, and Vidya Kotamraju.

The Believers Are But Brothers October 30-November 10 at Vancity Culture Lab | Presented with The Cultch Written and performed by Javaad Alipoor, and co-directed by Javaad Alipoor and Kirsty Housley

The Believers Are But Brothers is an electronic maze of fantasists, meme culture, 4chan, the alt-right, and ISIS. Old orders are collapsing, from the postcolonial nation states of the Middle East to the European Union and to the American election. Through it all, tech-savvy and extremist groups rip up political certainties. Amidst this, a generation of young men find themselves burning with resentment and without the money, power, and sex they think they deserve. This bold one-man show explores the smoke and mirrors world of online extremism, anonymity, and hate speech.



Diwali in B.C., Maple Ridge November 10 at The ACT Arts Centre This inaugural event is presented with The ACT Arts Centre

The evening celebrates South Asian culture with classical and contemporary dance as well as live music performances, and a special performance by Shiamak Vancouver.

Diwali in B.C., Coquitlam November 11 at Evergreen Cultural Centre

Diwali at Evergreen is in its second year and is presented by the Evergreen Cultural Centre. The South Asian themed evening features live music as well as classical and contemporary dance performances, including a special performance by Arno Kamolika.

I hope you are able to participate in one of these events and, if you do, I'd love to hear about your experience!



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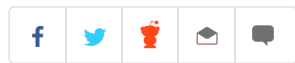
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Fall arts preview 2018: Arno Kamolika's bharata natyam journey takes her from Bangladesh to B.C.

by Janet Smith on September 12th, 2018 at 1:31 PM



Bharata natyam virtuoso Arno Kamolika (left, with contemporary dancer Stéphanie Cyr) is finally melding her Bangladesh roots and Indian classical dance, with a few Canadian touches as well.

EMILY COOPER

From afar, Indian classical dance is easily perceived as a homogeneous art form marked by dramatic facial expressions, articulated hand gestures, and sparkling costumes. In this context, it might not be at all surprising to hear a story about a Bengali girl who fell in love with bharata natyam.

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But in Bangladesh, a largely Muslim country, that dance was a rare pursuit when Arno Kamolika was young. After all, the storytelling form has its roots in totally different cultures—Buddhist and Hindu ritual and mythology. Other classical styles like odissi and manipuri were much more popular in Bangladesh, and Kamolika studied those in a fine-arts school as a girl. However, when she was about 16, a bharata natyam guru came to lead a two-month workshop, and Kamolika says she was hooked for life.

“It was the storytelling of it,” she says with passion over the phone to the *Straight* from her home here. “And that was when I decided I won’t do any other dance. What triggered me about bharata natyam was I could see the artists who were getting so emotionally involved with their character—and I always have been a great fan of movies and theatre. I thought, ‘This dance lets me become a dancer and at the same time a character as well.’”

Flash forward to Vancouver, the last place Kamolika expected to pursue her art form when she arrived here from Bangladesh in 2010 to continue her architecture studies. But soon she found Mandala Arts’ bharata natyam master Jai Govinda here, and delved even further into the classical dance, touring to festivals everywhere from India to Germany and the U.S.

This fall, watch for her to take her specialty to wider audiences, pushing bharata natyam into new territory with her most ambitious project to date—one that ties her beloved Indian dance to the heritage of her homeland.

Shyama—which debuts at Diwali in Vancouver on October 27 at the York Theatre, in a copresentation with the Vancouver Tagore Society and the Mandala Arts & Culture Society—tells Bengali writer Rabindranath Tagore’s epic dance drama through bharata natyam dance. The Nobel laureate’s 1939 work follows a courtesan who saves the hero from the scaffold and runs away with him. *Shyama* is the fruition of almost three years of work, featuring direction by Rohit Chokhani, original choreography by Jai Govinda, a score by Bengali-Canadian composer Shankhanaad Mallick, and four other bharata natyam dancers.


“I feel so close to both these things,” she says of the dance and Tagore’s poetry, which her parents often read while she was growing up. “I was a bit nervous when I started. But bharata natyam is not an ancient form; it has its roots in ancient text and temples, but it is as contemporary as any other dance,” she adds, likening the style to ballet.

Kamolika hopes to expose new audiences to the dance’s beauty and technique, as well as to Bengali literature and music. “It’s been such a journey to make this production. It’s so Canadian,” she says, referring to the mix of cultures the show brings together, including its French-Canadian choreographer, dancers from diverse parts of India, and a director from Mumbai. “So bharata natyam is connecting all of us. It makes me very happy.”

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DIWALI IN BC: BRINGING EVERYONE TOGETHER

Sarah Amormino



ARNO KAMOLIKA IN SHYAMA. PHOTO VIA DIWALI IN BC.

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Every year in India, people celebrate Diwali, a multi-day celebration with festivities celebrating religion, spirituality, and art. It's a time of gift-giving, sharing meals, spending time with family and friends, and fireworks – lots of fireworks. For non-South Asians, Diwali is like Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's squished into one.

Award-winning Artistic Director Rohit Chokhani is bringing Diwali cheer to British Columbia this year from October 3 to November 17 for the second annual *Diwali in BC*. Born in Mumbai, Chokhani moved to North America after a vibrant childhood of dancing, performance, and being immersed in India's artistic culture. Diwali in India, he recollected over a cup of chai, is a time that brings everyone together.

Chokhani founded *Diwali in BC* in 2017, an inclusive and diverse organization for South Asians in Metro Vancouver who needed a platform in the performing arts. After the success of last year's *Diwali in BC*, which had the theme of Shatki – feminine power – Chokhani recognized the need to expand outside of Vancouver's borders and into more BC communities. This year's *Diwali in BC* will feature programming not only in Vancouver, but in Coquitlam, Vernon, Maple Ridge, and Nanaimo. Drawn to global issues, Chokhani says that this year's *Diwali in BC* theme is a response to this expansion, and to where we are as a society within the international political landscape. The festival will explore and celebrate Multiculturalism,



including South Asian culture, through the theme of ‘New Horizons’ in theatre, dance and culturally-specific workshops for underrepresented artists in Vancouver.



A VANCOUVER GULDASTA. PHOTO VIA DIWALI IN BC

Programming for this year’s *Diwali in BC* festival includes topics of identity, trauma, poetry, love, money, power, sex, and classical and contemporary dance and music.

Presentations such as *A Vancouver Guldasta*, *Shyama*, and *The Believers Are But Brothers* are some of the works that will represent ‘New Horizons’.

Chokhani believes that Diwali in Canada doesn’t need to replicate Diwali in India, as the artistic and cultural roots of the festival will be the same regardless of where it’s celebrated. “*Diwali in BC* is not a partisan or denominational festival. We honour the tradition of where Diwali comes from, but the way we share and celebrate

needs to be localized for people who live in Canada.”

Diwali in BC takes the artistic concepts prevalent in India’s traditional way of celebrating Diwali, and presents them in an accessible way that showcases Canada’s multiculturalism.



DIWALI IN VERNON FESTIVAL POSTER, FEATURING THE SHIAMAK DANCE TEAM. VIA DIWALI IN BC.

Diwali in BC is a platform that exists for underrepresented groups and artists that are excluded from mainstream performing arts. However, what was once a platform specifically for South Asian artists is now slowly changing, as Chokhani and his team are hoping to bring in more cultures and different artists into future iterations of the festival. For people who have never attended *Diwali in BC* before, expect to experience a different culture, and be prepared to have conversations about it. Chokhani believes that art is meant to disturb, engage, push boundaries beyond our comfort, and create a conversation – a unique experience for people who have never participated in a South Asian event before.

“As a kid, Diwali for me was visiting family and friends, giving gifts and eating together and sharing a cup of chai. My goal with Diwali BC is to take that experience beyond families and into communities. If two different communities come together over a cup of chai and have a good conversation, that is Diwali.”

Visit www.diwalibc.ca to view this year’s *Diwali in BC* program.

Project SAT (South Asian Theatre) is a new initiative founded by Rohit Chokhani that is aimed at creating a network for South Asian projects in Canada. Offering support to younger, marginalized South Asian artists within the Metro Vancouver area, Project SAT hosts free workshops on producing, playwriting, dramaturgy and Natyashastra. To learn more about Project SAT and to view the 2018 programming, visit www.projectsat.ca.

October 05, 2018 /

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A Vancouver Guldasta: welcome nuance

October 4, 2018 by [Colin Thomas](#) [Leave a Comment](#)



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Rani (Arshdeep Purba) hugs her mom Niranjana (Gunjan Kundhal) in *A Vancouver Guldasta*. (Photo by Paneet Singh)

It was like meeting real people. And they took me places I'd never been.

In *A Vancouver Guldasta*, playwright Paneet Singh introduces us to the Dhaliwals, a Sikh Punjabi family living in South Vancouver in 1984. It's June. Sikh militants who want to create a new nation called Khalistan have occupied the Golden Temple in Amritsar, the holiest site of Sikhism. Then, on the orders of Prime

Minister Indira Gandhi, the Indian army invades the temple with the stated purpose of removing the militants.

According to Wikipedia, the army's invasion resulted in the deaths of over a thousand activists, soldiers, and civilians.

In *A Vancouver Guldasta*, Chatter, the dad in the Dhaliwal family, is desperately trying to make phone contact with his brother, who lives near the Golden Temple, but telephone communication with the Punjab has been cut off and, like many families in Vancouver, the Dhaliwals twist in uncertainty.

It was a polarizing time and one of the strengths of Singh's script is that it refuses to take sides. Instead, it offers a compassionate meditation on politics, identity, and practicality.

Struggling to form a coherent sense of herself, Chatter and Niranjana's teenage daughter Rani is desperate to attend the enraged protests in downtown Vancouver. But Chatter isn't having it. He's worked hard to establish his restaurant business and he doesn't want it to suffer. He's also afraid of government reprisals, including the potential refusal to grant travel visas.

But, for me, the most sympathetic character is Rani's friend Andy, who lives downstairs in the Dhaliwals' house with his parents. Andy fled Vietnam with his family and his recollections of the concrete horrors of violence are among the most affecting passages in the script.

Singh's characters don't just assume positions and holler at one another; they genuinely—and actively—listen.

The production and performances are also nuanced. Last year, SACHA (the South Asian Canadian Histories Association) produced *A Vancouver Guldasta* as a site-specific work in a Vancouver special on the south side. I didn't see that version but, snuggled into Skye Dyken and Lauren Jamie Homeniuk's period-perfect set, this mounting in The Cultch's Vancity

Culture Lab achieves a palpable sense of intimacy.

To a significant degree, that's because of the tone that Singh establishes as a director. He and some of his actors work in both theatre and film and, in their hands, a series of often short scenes play out—mostly—with filmic naturalism. There are silences. There's space.

The quiet ferocity that Lou Ticzon brings to the role of Andy broke my heart. Gunjan Kundhal (Niranjan, the mom) is every bit as thorough. Arshdeep Purba and Parm Soor are also impressively strong as Rani and Chattar.

A Vancouver Guldasta isn't perfect. Off the top, Singh's direction of the teenage characters veers towards cliché, which contributes to the sense that the performance styles haven't found a common groove yet. Some of the exits feel arbitrary: "Let's go play basketball again." On opening night, some of the transitions felt a bit glitchy. And, for folks who don't clearly remember the events at the Golden Temple, more focused contextualization earlier would help.

But I'm grateful for *A Vancouver Guldasta*. It seems that, as theatre has lagged behind in terms of diversity, film and television may have been acting as incubators of significant talent. That we're seeing this show is yet more evidence of the programming vision of Heather Redfern at The Cultch and Rohit Chokhani of Diwali in BC.

There were times in *A Vancouver Guldasta*, when I knew that I wasn't fully understanding the characters' motivations. And I'm certain that I missed scores of details in the script and production that will resonate strongly with Sikh Vancouverites. But that's great. It's all part of the adventure.

A VANCOUVER GULDASTA Written and directed by Paneet Singh. A SACHA production presented by The Cultch and Diwali in BC. In the Vancity Culture Lab on Wednesday, October 3. Continues until October 13.

Tickets.

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A Vancouver Guldasta's exploration of home is intimate, generous, and affecting

by Kathleen Oliver on October 4th, 2018 at 6:07 PM

0



A Vancouver Guldasta
 PARDEEP SINGH

Written and directed by Paneet Singh. A Cultch and Diwali in B.C. presentation of a SACHA production. At the VanCity Culture Lab on Thursday, October 3. Continues until October 21

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Rohit Chokhani and Diwali in B.C. amplify South Asian voices

The personal is political, but the politics gets very personal in *A Vancouver Guldasta*.

The play is set in June of 1984 in a South Vancouver home, where a family watches the news of the Indian government's attack on the Golden Temple, the Sikh community's holiest shrine.

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Spiralix Men's Collaborative, *Wai' Ku'itama (Two Men Story)*, 2003. Synthetic polymer paint on canvas. 82 11/16 x 74 13/16 in. Promised gift of Margaret Levi and Robert Kaplan. In honor of the 75th anniversary of the Seattle Art Museum. © Spiralix Men's Collaborative. Photo by Susan Cole. Courtesy American Federation of Arts

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Guldasta means “bouquet” in Punjabi, and it reflects the diversity of the family’s reactions to the crisis. Teenage daughter Rani wants to join in the protests that have been erupting locally, but her father, Chattar, is terrified that there may be consequences for his home, his business, or his family, including a brother in Amritsar, whom he hasn’t been able to contact since the temple was invaded. His wife Niranjana is loyal but conflicted. Rani’s friend, Andy, a Vietnamese refugee who lives in the family’s basement suite with his parents, wants to protect her from the horrors of war.

Writer-director **Paneet Singh** first staged this play as a site-specific piece two years ago in an actual Vancouver living room. For this production, Skye Dyken and Lauren Jamie Homeniuk have recreated that sense of intimacy with a loving attention to period details, from the floral upholstery right down to the giant antenna on the family’s cordless phone.

The idea of home in a larger sense is at the heart of this play. Rani has lived in Canada all her life and only visited the Punjab once, as a small child, but she recalls having felt a sense of being at home when she went to the Golden Temple. Andy describes watching the land of his childhood disappear behind him from the boat on which his family flees Vietnam: “Choosing between home and freedom was the hardest choice we ever had to make.” Each character’s experience of displacement and sacrifice informs their reactions to the crisis.

Singh directs a strong cast, all of whom find a convincing naturalism. Parm Soor is a charismatic Chattar, whether he’s geeking out about Indian classical music or hamming it up in a cheesy TV ad for his restaurant, but there’s also fear and anger

beneath his cheerful veneer. As Rani’s mother, Niranjana, Gunjan Kundhal is as contained as her daughter is flippant: just watch Arshdeep Purba’s Rani race through her ritual prayers. And Lou Ticzon’s quiet concern makes Andy credible and sympathetic. The live action is interspersed with video projections of archival news footage, a constant reminder that something very real is at stake for all these characters.

The play’s motivating spirit is one of generosity: every performance is followed by a talkback. I’m grateful for this uniquely intimate glimpse of Vancouver history.

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Diane Brown, Nicola Cavendish, Sereana Malani, Adele Noronha, Lara Sadiq, Colleen Wheeler and Donna Yamamoto are featured performers in *Happy Place*. PHOTO SUPPLIED RIUN GARNER

Pamela Mala Sinha's Happy Place is full of silver linings

Creative healing

Happy Place runs Oct. 20-29 at the Firehall Arts Centre, 280 E. Cordova St., Vancouver. Tickets: \$20-\$33 at tickets.firehallartscentre.ca or 604-689-0926.

CHRISTINE LYON
clyon@nsnews.com

It's a story about depression, but that doesn't mean it's depressing.

That's a message Toronto-based actress and writer Pamela Mala Sinha wants to relay about her play, *Happy Place*, which follows a group of women staying at an in-patient care facility who have all attempted suicide.

"Depression is the organizing principle of the piece, but it's not the point of the

piece," Sinha says. "The piece is about these seven women in this particular given circumstance and their impact on each other."

Presented by Touchstone Theatre in association with Ruby Slippers Theatre and Diwali in B.C., *Happy Place* makes its Vancouver debut Oct. 20-29 at the Firehall Arts Centre. Roy Surette directs the all-female cast, which includes North Shore talents Nicola Cavendish, Colleen Wheeler and Donna Yamamoto.

Despite the dark premise, the story is full of silver linings.

"I can say without hesitation that it's about love. It has compassion, it has humour. It has difficult

SHAKTI DIVINE FEMININE POWER

Diwali in B.C. is a new provincial initiative launched by artistic director and cultural leader Rohit Chokhani. During its first year, the event will explore the artistic theme of Shakti – feminine power – through theatre, dance, film and culturally specific workshops. In addition to *Happy Place*, the inaugural Diwali in B.C. celebration will feature the following programming:

Encounter

Oct. 17-22 at the York Theatre | Presented with The Cultch
Navarasa Dance Theatre's *Encounter* blends daring physical theatre with bold storytelling. Inspired by award-winning writer Mahasweta Devi's short story, and using acrobatics and original music, *Encounter* is the story of an Indigenous

See Honour page 32

subject matter, but not handled in a heavy handed way," Sinha says, explaining

the laughs come from the frankness of the whole situation.

"I believe the best kind of humour comes from truth, and this is a very truthful place. There is no bullshit in this place. People say what they think and what they feel, and sometimes to the great detriment of others," she notes. "They are saying – not only to each other but to themselves – what is unsayable outside those walls."

The idea for *Happy Place* came to Sinha while she was writing her debut play *Crash*, a one-woman show, in which she performs, based on her personal experiences with post-traumatic stress disorder, sexual assault, and the death of her father. *Crash* received widespread critical acclaim (it won four Dora Mavor Moore Awards,

including Outstanding New Play and Outstanding Performance) and finished up an off-Broadway run in New York this past summer. But the work focuses on Sinha's own experiences and she longed to share the stories of the many other women she met, and who impacted her profoundly, during that difficult time in her life. She's also all too familiar with the dearth of good roles for actresses over 40 and wanted to create parts for women at the peak of their game. Five of the seven characters are 45 and older, she notes with pride.

In her writing of *Happy Place*, Sinha says she used

See Sinha page 32

The Believers Are But Brothers: See it, believe it, and think really hard

November 1, 2018 by Colin Thomas [Leave a Comment](#)



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For the (very) full experience, leave your phone on during The Believers Are But Brothers. (Photo by The Other Ri

The Believers Are But Brothers is about the internet and it's like the internet: it's bursting with information and I'm not sure how to make sense of it, but I find it really fucking stimulating.

In *The Believers Are But Brothers*—the title comes from the Quran—writer and performer Javaad Alipoor is particularly interested in those areas of the internet where young men, politics, and violence overlap.

One of his stated aims is to complicate the narrative of the dangerous young Muslim who gets radicalized online and, to a significant degree, he succeeds in that complication. Alipoor uses statistics: he informs us that, of the three million Muslims living in the UK, fewer than 300—a minute percentage—have joined Isis. (The figures in this *Guardian* article are somewhat different.)

But the more resonant complication comes in the stories that Alipoor chooses to tell. For the record, Alipoor is British and comes from a Shia Muslim background.

Two of his main characters, Atif and Marwan, are based on real young men whom Alipoor met online. Both are Muslim Brits and both travel to Syria, but neither fits the jihadist stereotype. Like a lot of foreign recruits apparently, Atif fails basic training—which is kind of hilarious—and ends up working in the Isis equivalent of tech support. Marwan, who joins a non-Isis militant group, is haunted by the image of a suffering Syrian girl.

And things get good and complicated with the introduction of Ethan, a 22-year-old white guy who's hanging out in his bedroom in his parents' house in Orange County. Alipoor based Ethan on Elliot Rodger, the young man who went on a killing spree in California in 2014, murdering six people and wounding 13—largely, it seems because he thought it was so unfair that he was still a virgin at 22.

Through Ethan, Alipoor accesses the darkly misogynistic world of the alt. right, where Trump may be seen, Alipoor speculates, as the “Social Failure in Chief.” Here, we learn about GamerGate, the enraged reaction to feminist criticism of the gaming industry, which resulted in a flood of rape and murder threats against feminist commentators.

Unsurprisingly, members of the alt. right have objected to Alipoor associating them with Muslim militants, but the playwright makes a compelling case. Both alt. right and radical Islamist online communities are largely made up of resentful young men who find entertainment in violent imagery on the internet. And, in their online communities, members of both groups seem to find a longed-for sense of identity and belonging.

For me, the most chilling observation in *The Believers Are But Brothers* is that, not only is the medium the message, our technology significantly inflects our modes of thinking: our brains are our cellphones. In the show, Alipoor notes that, for him, significant conceptual shifts take place gradually over time but, for some of the guys he talked to online, huge changes in perception were virtually instantaneous. And perhaps that’s possible because our realities are becoming increasingly virtual, untethered from our bodies and physical communities. As Alipoor says, “On the screen, no one chews anything.”

Alipoor doesn’t really get into the systemic reasons that cultures seem to be crumbling so significantly these days—what’s happening at the intersection of economics and gender, for instance—or why some young men who are raised in comfortably middle-class homes are so deeply bitter. This refusal makes watching *The Believers Are But Brothers* frustrating but productively provocative: I spent ages afterwards trying to talk these ideas through with friends. And I’d much rather see a provocative show than a polemical one.

Theatrically, the textures of *The Believers Are But Brothers* are seductive—and perhaps just a bit too much of a good thing.

On that front, Alipoor’s most audacious move is to make WhatsApp part of the show: before the performance, audience members are invited to join a WhatsApp group. Doing so allows you to receive messages during the event—and to sass Alipoor back if you feel like it. But the storytelling is already dense and, theatrically, there’s a lot going on: Alipoor addresses us directly, with or without a mic, depending whose story he’s telling; sitting at a desk, he speaks into his laptop with his back to us and the image of his face is projected onto a screen; a guy named Luke Emery, who is visible behind that screen, is busily running the show; and the screen is sometimes filled with the kind of imagery that feeds the likes of Atif, Marwan, and Ethan—although, thankfully, Alipoor never exposes us to the full violence of that kind of pornography. Then there’s the presence of Alipoor himself: charming, loquacious, playful, unapologetically bright, and associative.

On top of all this coolness, I sometimes found the WhatsApp element annoying. When messages and core narrative information were coming at the same time, I lost chunks of one if I paid attention to the other. But maybe overload is part of the point. And, at the end, there’s an effective series of WhatsApp messages that doesn’t have to compete with anything else.

That series includes the sentence, “The tools we use have always shaped us.”

Yikes. *The Believers Are But Brothers* is explicitly not an indictment of social media, but it still scares me.

I highly recommend *The Believers Are But Brothers*. It will give you an essential workout.

THE BELIEVERS ARE BUT BROTHERS By Javaad Alipoor. Co-directed by Javaad Alipoor and Kirsty Housley. Produced by Luke Emery. Presented by The Cultch and Diwali in BC. In the Vancity Culture Lab on Wednesday, October 31. Continues until November 10. **Tickets.**

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Honour opens at The Cultch

From page 13

woman, her defiance against injustice, and her communities' struggle to uphold their Indigenous way of life.

Honour: Confessions of a Mumbai Courtesan
Oct. 20-Nov. 4 at Vancity Culture Lab at The Cultch | Presented with The Cultch

In this one-woman play, award-winning actress Dipti Mehta transports us to Mumbai's red-light district to spotlight the plight of those trapped in the world of sex trafficking.

Anatomy of Violence

Nov. 4 at Cineplex Odeon International Village | Co-presented with Vancouver Asian Film Festival

Deepa Mehta's film examines one of the country's most internationally notorious crimes: the 2012 gang rape and murder of a 23-year-old woman on a Delhi bus. Film screening followed by panel discussion comprised of local filmmakers, artists and social justice workers.

Shyama
Nov. 16 at the York Theatre | Co-presented with Vancouver Tagore Society

A Bharata-Natyam interpretation of Rabindranath Tagore's epic dance drama *Shyama*. Choreographed by Jai Govinda, artistic director at Mandala Arts & Culture Society, and performed by his disciple Arno Kamolika, this dance theatre piece is a tribute to India's acclaimed playwright Rabindranath Tagore.

Project SAT Workshop Series
Various dates at various venues | In collaboration with New(to)Town Collective

Workshops with Anosh Irani, Dipti Mehta, Rohit

Chokhani, and New(to)Town Collective. Schedule details at projectsat.ca.

Diwali at Evergreen
Nov. 5 at Evergreen Cultural Centre | In collaboration with the TriCity India Heritage Network

As part of the Variety Series at the Evergreen Cultural Centre, Diwali in B.C. brings the Diwali celebrations to Coquitlam. This South Asian, cabaret-style evening features classical, Bollywood and contemporary dance as well as classical live music performances.

For more information, visit diwalilbc.ca.



Dipti Mehta brings her one-woman play, *Honour: Confessions of a Mumbai Courtesan* to The Cultch. PHOTO SUPPLIED

Dining Guide

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The Cheshire Cheese Restaurant & Bar \$\$
www.cheshirecheeserestaurant.ca
 2nd Floor Lonsdale Quay Market, N. Van. | 604-987-3322
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- 📘 Facebook
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- 📶 Wifi
- ♿ Wheelchair Accessible

Sinha uses the hospital as a microcosm of world outside

From page 13

the hospital setting as a "microcosm of the world outside." There are many faces of depression and many people struggle in silence. She particularly hopes to draw attention to the unfortunate "hierarchy of suffering" that validates one person's grief over another's.

Sinha has been acting for the stage and screen for nearly three decades and performed in the 2015 Toronto premiere of *Happy Place*. She will be watching the Vancouver production from the audience, though – her first time not acting in a staging of her work.

While she can't know how the audience will react to her play, Sinha hopes presenting her characters might cause viewers to recognize themselves or a loved one and leave the theatre with a better understanding of the cross-section of depression.

"I'm just an artist who's offering up the human experience and hoping it will be recognized as truthful and resonant to the people who are witnessing it."

Sinha is currently at work on a movie adaptation of *Happy Place* with Toronto-based Sienna Films. Directed by Helen Shaver, the production is slated to start filming in early 2018.

Performers help Demers as committed collaborators

From page 14

honour life," she says. For Demers, dance can be a transformative, instructive experience, a way to connect with what we might not understand – as opposed to speaking a universally understandable language.

"What is really interesting is to actually confront what you're doing in your little corner. Confronting different art, different cultures, different ways of understanding the world and different ways of navigating the world. I guess for me the privilege of going elsewhere to present my work is to actually make my work better."

She stresses that the strength of her performers has also helped improve her work.

The production, which stars Marc Boivin, James Gnam, Brianna Lombardo and Riley Sims, gives the characters flexibility to create something wild, spontaneous and new every show.

"They're so committed," she says. "A lot of my thinking these days is to make a difference between choreography and dance. In a way, set choreography can be very boring and it can be very safe. ... I think with this production you really have to come and see the performers because they have so much responsibility in making this work."

Bro'hood: believe it or else...

Medium is the message in Javaad Alipoor's immersive solo farrago



Lincoln Kaye | Oct 31st, 2018

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Me and my shadow, all alone an' feelin' blue. Image: Diwali in B.C.

In a startling twist on theatre-going norms, not only are we *not* ordered to shut off our cellphones as we settle into the

airless black box of the Cultch's Culture Lab; we're in fact enjoined to keep them live and loud and tuned into the encrypted messaging screens of WhatsApp.

That – along with Yorkshire accented soliloquys, on-screen projections, fluid pantomimes and GameBoy shoot-em-ups – is how artist/activist/analyst Javaad Alipoor means to buttonhole us tonight.

It's a compound medium all his own, to convey an urgent message, to wit: **the medium is the message...is the medium...is the message...***ad McLuhanesque delirium.*

But this infinite regress echo chamber has taken on terrifying new resonance in our own age of social media. It hands geeky sociopaths globe-spanning power to incite **stochastic terror** from their laptops or cellphones.

Whether the content of the messaging is Sunni fundamentalism or Aryan pride, Christian or Muslim end times apocalypse, there's an uncanny kinship among the target audiences: young, disenfranchised, aimless, solitary, resentful males avid for some – any – purpose in life. Or death.

So they're ripe to become the most ardent believers in whatever creed comes knocking. In that sense, they're brothers – or cognates – of each other, even if they subscribe to diametrically opposed ideologies. The more opposed, the tighter the kinship, in a way; bitterest enemies provide each other a dialectical *raison d'être*.

But there's a more enticing fraternity on offer in one's own ideological camp. A newfound fanaticism can supply even the loneliest loser with an instant worldwide brotherhood – and, crucially, sisterhood – of fellow-believers. Except there's the nagging need to always re-earn your co-religionists' trust with fresh acts of fealty.

That path all too often ends with a "bang" of martyrdom that leaves us non-believers agape in horrified bewilderment. But, to begin to fathom the phenomenon, Alipoor guides us to trace the trajectory back to where it begins: in a whimper of self-pity.

He introduces us to three true-believing "brothers" – a plashy, overlooked tech-nerd who winds up as cannon-fodder in Syria; an underemployed English midlands law grad who serves jail time as a low-grade ISIS courier and then returns to the killing fields for a promotion to the exalted status of suicide bomber; and a pimply geek who spews misogynistic neo-Nazi vitriol from the privacy and comfort of his Southern California bedroom to sway French and American elections.

All three, Alipoor admits, are composite characters. But they're compiled, he insists, from thousands of real-time safari hours among a wide spectrum of cyber-jungle fauna. All logged in without even camouflage or hunting blinds; he never disguised his identity as a Yorkshire-born non-observant Shiite Muslim of mixed parentage.

Gotta be grateful for his fortitude on our behalf. In the process he must have exposed himself to potential attack by notoriously violent actors, not to mention the suspicious notice of serried governmental cyber-policing agencies. But, even more daunting, he's had to imbibe unremitting geysers of bile from all quarters.

We get just the merest taste – a homeopathic microdose – of what he's faced through the venomous WhatsApp outpourings in the course of the hour-long performance: rape threats, racial slurs, unimaginative profanity laid on with a thick trowel. And, amidst it all, Alipoor polls us online about our estimates of the U.K. Muslim population or the most stomach-turning thing we've seen on the Net.

Our answers scroll up impartially on the message board, the earnest and rational ones right alongside the facetiously off-the-wall. "See?" Alipoor smiles, "the internet is the most truly democratic space in the world."

Whereupon our screen starts blazing anew with more hate speech. The contrast is unnerving between the wasp nest buzz of the phone's vibration and the gentle "ping" of incoming messages all over the room.

For a one-man show, the stage is wildly populous with Alipoor avatars. Now he's paddling back and forth in his swivel chair, then he's striding straight into the front row, next he's pontificating like Great Oz from a giant greenish projection of his face on a translucent screen.

Just behind this scrim, unperturbed, a bearded figure silently taps away at a laptop, gently nodding to something in his earphones and occasionally pausing to twiddle his cellphone. He looks calm – almost studious – like someone you might see at a public terminal in any VPL branch. No telling which – if any – of the believing brothers he might be.


Alipoor finishes his peroration and turns away from us, picking up his "joystick" to resume his interrupted video game. On the screen we see a hellscape of recognizable landmarks: an Eiffel Tower just barely discernable amidst the smoking ruins of the Champs de Mars, the steps of the New York Stock Exchange as viewed through gunsights. From the speakers, a rhythmic spatter of muffled explosions.

It's an impressive and important show ("Best of Fringe" in Edinburgh last year) that runs here through November 10 under the aegis of the 2018 Diwali in B.C.

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From live group chats to video projections, The Believers Are But Brothers clicks all the links

by Kathleen Oliver on November 2nd, 2018 at 5:18 PM



The Believers Are But Brothers

By Javaad Alipoor. Directed by Javaad Alipoor and Kirsty Housley. A Javaad Alipoor production presented by The Cultch and Diwali in BC at the VanCity Culture Lab on November 1. Continues until November 10






Wow, you can pack a *lot* into an hour of theatre.

In *The Believers Are But Brothers* British writer-performer Javaad Alipoor uses multiple interfaces, including direct address to the audience, video projection, and a live group chat on WhatsApp to explore, in his words, “men, politics and the Internet”. The play’s form mirrors its subject matter, clicking link after associative link.

But *The Believers Are But Brothers* is not an attack on social media; Alipoor tells us that he appreciates the community he finds there and values the opportunity it affords to “blur



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the edges of [him]self.” The play raises thought-provoking questions about just how blurry those edges can get. Alipoor draws on his own experience, alongside the imagined stories of Atif and Mirwan, two radicalized British Muslims based on young men with whom he had brief real-life interactions online, and Ethan, aka Father Lulz, a California white boy whose lack of success in dating metastasizes into chatroom-fuelled misogyny.

To understand the worlds of these characters, it helps to know words like jihadism, 4chan, Gamergate, doxing, libtards, lulz, memes—but for the uninitiated, Alipoor does an excellent job of explaining. He demonstrates first-hand by having audience members guess—on WhatsApp—how many Muslims there are in the U.K., and how many of them have joined ISIS. Lit-up cellphones dot the audience; the guesses vary wildly. “It doesn’t matter if you know what you’re talking about, you just get your voice out there,” Alipoor observes.

“On-screen there’s always already a war being fought,” Alipoor’s narrator tells us of Ethan, the American. “He may look alone, but he is invisibly surrounded.” This idea is present in Ben Pacey’s stage design: Alipoor occasionally turns his back to us to attend to one of the screens (one of them shows a first-person shooter game) on a desk facing the audience; another desk faces his, where another man (producer Luke Emery) sits in shadow at

another computer screen.

The textural variety of the show is rich: one moment you’re reading texts in your lap or taking part in what feels like an informal conversation; the next you’re watching a face on a screen describe a milestone in the history of ISIS in language that is both poetic and disturbing. The imprisonment and torture of Sayyid Qutb, an early advocate of violent jihad in 1950s Egypt, is described as leading to “a vision of redemption that you can only reach by climbing a mountain of corpses”.

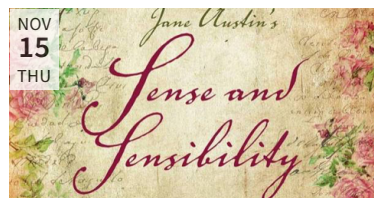
Believers doesn’t offer easy answers to any of the difficult questions it asks. There’s more to take in than a single viewing affords; that’s an enormous achievement.

[JOIN THE DISCUSSION](#)

HIGHLIGHTED THINGS TO DO



When There Is Peace



Sense and Sensibility



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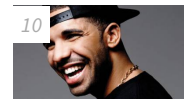
Long lineup forms outside Vancouver liquor store for premium spirits, including \$30,500 bottle of whiskey



Elections B.C. clears former New Westminster council candidate Daniel Fontaine—and says "no rules were broken"



Avril Lavigne is dead and has been replaced by a look-alike, according to some weirdo in Brazil



All You Need to Know About: Drake in Vancouver

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Agam Darshi plays the exotic dancer Apsara and Munish Sharma is her blind patron Kamal in the 2017 Vancouver Fringe Festival production of *Bombay Black*. (Photo courtesy Zahida Rahemtulla)Na

Nanaimo's TheatreOne opens season with Vancouver Fringe hit 'Bombay Black'

Vancouver playwright Anosh Irani's play told
from perspective of blind character

[JOSEF JACOBSON](#) / Nov. 8, 2018 9:00

a.m. / [ENTERTAINMENT](#) / [LOCAL ENTERTAINMENT](#)

Last year Vancouver playwright Anosh Irani and theatre director and producer Rohit Chokhani were walking through the streets of Mumbai, with Irani pointing out the sites that inspired and are depicted in his 2006 Governor General's Literary Award-nominated play *Bombay Black*.

Then he asked Chokhani to close his eyes.

Bombay Black tells the story of a blind man who visits an exotic dancer who is managed by her mother.

Chokhani describes it as both a romantic love story and a mysterious thriller.

“For me, what’s interesting about the show is, first of all, why does a blind man want to go and see an exotic dancer?” he said, later adding, “That’s interesting that a playwright who wants to take on, in a way, the topic of male gazing, but then not let the guy who is male in the play gaze because he’s blind.”

When the two met in Mumbai, their shared hometown, Chokhani said to Irani, “So you took that eyesight away from the lead guy, but why did you not take that eyesight away from the audience members?” Irani was intrigued and from there Chokhani began working on an interpretation of *Bombay Black* told from the blind man’s perspective.

Last year that production debuted at the Vancouver Fringe Festival and went on to earn the Pick of the Fringe Award. From Nov. 15 to 17 the play makes its Vancouver Island debut at Malaspina Theatre as it opens TheatreOne's 2018-19 mainstage season. The play is also part of Diwali in B.C. celebrations in Nanaimo.

Chokhani attributes the production's success to its approach to illustrating how the world can be perceived without sight. He said audience members have the option of wearing blindfolds, some scenes are performed in the dark and others make use of exaggerated lighting and sound effects.

"We want to say, like, the blind are not really blind. They have a very different ability of seeing the world through their other parts of their senses and we explore that quite a bit," Chokhani said.

He said Irani has been supportive of his take on the play.

"He's the kind of playwright who comes in whenever we need him..." Chokhani said. "He's very much on board with the idea and he loves where we're taking it."

WHAT'S ON ... TheatreOne presents *Bombay Black* at Malaspina Theatre from Nov. 15 to 17 at 7:30 p.m. and Nov. 17 at 2 p.m. Tickets are \$30 for adults, \$15 for students. Available [online](#) or at 250-754-7587.

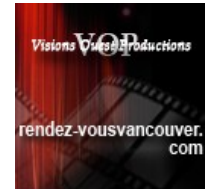
Festival of lights and culture

Brittany Thomson // Culture, Festivals // Volume 19, Issue 08 - October 23–November 6, 2018

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Dancer Arno Kamolika. | Photo courtesy Diwali in B.C

This year's Diwali Festival in B.C. promises to both entertain and educate. Founded by Rohit Chokhani, Diwali in B.C. is an artistic platform and a celebration of the festival of lights during the Indian New Year. A multi-cultural festival, Diwali promises to engage artists and

people from different backgrounds and specialties.

Raised in Mumbai, Chokhani grew up with the mindset that he would become a doctor or a lawyer. While pursuing a career in computer science, he managed only to participate in the arts as a side project.

Fast forward to 2018 and Chokhani is now an award-winning artistic director of Diwali in B.C. Having only founded Diwali B.C. in 2017, Chokhani has made a great deal of progress in making Diwali B.C. a B.C.-wide celebration. Chokhani's day-to-day is filled with content curation, collaboration, partnerships and a lot of chai. Though making space for different perspectives can be difficult, he credits his passion for providing a platform for artists that are not often represented as his driving force.

This year's celebrations are themed New Horizons.

"[The theme is]an artistic response to racial tensions and gender abuse that continues to threaten the safety of the world in which we live," says Chokhani.

Many of the performances this year reflect this choice of theme. In the production A Vancouver Guldasta, there are fresh conversations around trauma and healing through the lens of a Punjabi-Sikh family living with a Vietnamese refugee in Vancouver. In The Believers Are But Brothers, through the world or technology it takes a deeper look at toxic masculinity, and Shyama explores different colours of love, the price of desire, forgiveness, and morality through one of India's most celebrated playwrights – Rabindranath Tagore. The theme also refers to Diwali B.C.'s geographical expansions. This year Diwali is expanding to three new cities, including Vernon, Nanaimo and Maple Ridge.

Chokhani hopes that this year's celebration encourages more local productions. He also hopes Diwali B.C. will experience growth both organizationally and financially, allowing the organization to undertake projects that have a more culturally specific process for creation.

"We want to develop and produce more theatre shows locally. We want to represent more underrepresented groups from different backgrounds and abilities, provide more free accessible residencies, mentorship opportunities and internships," explains Chokhani.

Universal artistry

Another project Chokhani has been working on is Project SAT (South Asian Theatre). Described as an initiative aimed at creating a network for developing, touring, producing, and presenting national and international South Asian theatre projects in Canada, Project SAT serves to inspire the next generation of South Asian artists. Through a series of workshops, artists can learn producing, playwriting, dramaturgy and Natyashastra (a text on the performing arts). As the program enters its third year, Chokhani says he has received an overwhelmingly positive response. Many workshops are fully booked, but there are still opportunities for those eager to learn. With hopes of developing more workshops and opening their doors to different underrepresented communities, Chokhani has high hopes for expanding the project.



R. Chokhani, founder of Diwali in B.C. |
Photo courtesy Diwali in B.C

"Speaking out and representing underrepresented voices is part of living my truth. I know what it is like to be ignored, to be on the outskirts or feel unheard. It has happened to me and it made me stronger and hungrier to not let it affect me and so I want that platform to exist that can offer space for folks who need it the most," says Chokhani.

Diwali in B.C. takes place between Oct. 3 and Nov. 17. Through theatre, dance, and culturally specific workshops, Chokhani promises a rewarding experience for all who attend. For more information, please visit www.diwaliinbc.ca and www.projectsat.ca.

[vancouverpresents.com](https://www.vancouverpresents.com)

Diwali in B.C. to expand its offerings as part of Rohit Chokhani's five-year plan

6-8 minutes



Diwali in B.C. artistic director Rohit Chokhani.

Having produced and curated numerous Diwali celebrations throughout Metro Vancouver over the years through his Raghupriya Arts and Culture Society, artistic director [Rohit Chokhani](#) has now set his sights on taking his Diwali in B.C. celebrations province-wide in the next five. 2018 will mark the second year of his ambitious plan.

For Chokhani, the expansion has come about for a couple of reasons. The first is in helping to give an extended life to some of the programming.

“As a curator and a producer I was feeling like sometimes we put in a lot of effort into shows, and the idea was how can we make these artists who come together have a life beyond just the one time,” says Chokhani.

The second reason comes from audience members who expressed interest in seeing the shows in their own communities.

“I was getting a lot of messages either on Facebook or at events where we might be doing something in Coquitlam and somebody would come from Abbotsford or Richmond and they would didn’t want to have to commute to access the programming,” says Chokhani. “But if there’s a way to make it accessible to bring it to other localities, then we can make it happen.”

And while Chokhani says there are still many communities across the province he is looking to target, this year’s expansion will feature programming in Vancouver, Coquitlam, Vernon, Maple Ridge, and Nanaimo.





Shiamak Vancouver will headline shows in Vernon this year as Diwali in B.C. continues its expansion.

Given the growth of Diwali in B.C. it is perhaps not surprising Chokani has chosen “New Horizons” as this year’s theme. Again, there are two rationales behind the choice.

“Not only is the new horizons for us as an organization and as an initiative and a platform for marginalized, underrepresented artists, but also in the sense we are entering new territories geographically this year,” he explains.

The second speaks to specifically to this year’s programming.

“The other aspect to the theme is around new perspectives and new ways of looking at things,” he says. “Specifically, we’re seeing a lot of gender abuse and cultural clashes in society right now, and the shows that we are programming look at those issues at a much more deeper level.”

Chokhani points to the remount of [A Vancouver Guldasta](#), which opens Diwali in B.C. this week at The Cultch as one example.

“We are having fresh conversations around trauma and healing through the lens of a Punjabi Sikh family, living with a Vietnamese refugee in Vancouver,” he says. “The story is set in 1984, responding to an event that happened in Punjab, but how did that affect the people who were here?”



Members of the cast of *A Vancouver Guldasta* which opens this year's Diwali in B.C.

And while *A Vancouver Guldasta* may be set over 30 years ago, Chokhani sees parallels today, something he also sees in *The Believers Are But Brothers*, another of this year's offerings.

"It takes a much deeper look at the toxic masculinity, and this underground world that exists in the worldwide web and all the things that go on there," he says.

While the shows presented as part of Diwali in B.C. will resonate with Southeast Asian communities, Chokhani insists there is something in it for a more diverse audience, going beyond the spiritual nature of what is India's biggest and arguably most important holiday of the year.

"It's an artistic platform and a multicultural artistic platform to bring together diverse cultures and different communities together, to have a celebration," he says.

That sense of community arises from the reason why Chokhani first came to Vancouver. Having lived and studied in Boston for his master's degree in computer science after leaving India at the age of 22, Chokhani found himself missing the connection to his South Asian community.

"I mean, there are South Asians in Boston, but it's not like Toronto or Surrey, and so my uncle who lives in Langley said if I decide not to go back to India it might be worth looking into Canada," he explains.

After a two-year journey through Canada immigration, he eventually landed in Vancouver just two days before the city began playing host to the Winter Olympics. "I remember thinking, wow, this city is quite happening."

But while Chokhani found himself on the West Coast to be closer to his cultural community, it was also a bigger transition from a being a techie who does arts, into completely immersing himself in the arts.

"I always had the passion for the arts, but as a teenager, like many cultures, there were warnings about how the arts were not super sustainable financially when compared to becoming an engineer, doctor, or a lawyer," he says. "We are a very status-conscious community and making money and getting married early is something that I was raised on."

Fortunately for Chokhani, while still faced with cultural pressures, his family remained largely supportive.

“They were always supportive, but cautious,” he says. “The advice I got was to think about the long-term and be realistic as to what it takes.”

Chokhani says he was grateful for the advice, and it pushed him even harder to make a career in the arts sustainable.

“In a way, computer science was a blessing because when I graduated with my masters, even right out of school, you get pretty decent paying jobs. So what I could do was actually hold a daytime good paying job, and then save money to do the arts,” he explains “And when I’d saved enough, I came to Canada.”

Initially relying on his savings Chokhani launched himself headfirst into the arts community.

“I’m super privileged and honored now that I survived, and it’s not like it’s a lot of money, but I have a career in the arts and I don’t have to do other jobs to make money, but it did take eight, nine years to get there,” he says.

It is obvious Chokhani isn’t one for looking back for too long though. No doubt buoyed by winning the Vancouver NOW Representation and Inclusion Award at this year’s Jessie Awards, he has his sights clearly focused on the next five years.

Diwali in B.C. takes place in various cities from October 3 through November 17. Visit diwalibc.ca for the complete line-up.

The Vancouver Arts Review

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“Vancouver Guldasta” is a Refresh



When I walked into the Culture Lab, I was welcomed into a home. It felt familiar, with floral couches and pictures of the Golden Temple, which I am accustomed to seeing in many Punjabi Sikh homes. “A Vancouver Guldasta”, thus, opened its arms and doors to welcome the audience into a riveting performance! The theme of a “Guldasta”, which means “bouquet” in Punjabi, seeps throughout the play to show the

various themes of diversity and how they all come together beautifully.

“A Vancouver Guldasta” takes place in a Punjabi Sikh home in Vancouver during the 1984 civil unrest and military attacks on Sikhs at the Golden Temple in India. Paneet Singh, the writer and director, allows the audience to step inside the living spaces of those who were affected by the tragedy, and how they felt it across the seven seas in Vancouver, where a large South Asian diaspora resides. Through an interesting use of media clips, news from the time of the conflict, the show unveils how it shook and continues to touch families and their relationship with one another- their identity as immigrants while they struggle to find home and belonging.



The cast is outrageously talented. There was not a moment of disbelief as they wrapped us in a spellbound journey to another time and into the hearts and minds of complex characters. I became attached to each character as they dived

into emotions we can all relate to – the fear of loss, negotiating identity, and the love for family.

Get your tickets here!

– Maira Hassan

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Sadness, laughter, hope in Happy Place

JO LEDINGHAM @joleedingham

It's hard to imagine a more dynamic group of actors – all women – sometimes all on the Firehall stage at one time: Diane Brown, Nicola Cavendish, Sereana Malani, Adele Noronha, Laara Sadiq, Colleen Wheeler and Donna Yamamoto.

Under the direction of Roy Surette, recently returned to Vancouver after 10 years at The Belfry followed by 10 years at Montreal's Centaur Theatre, each actor creates a unique, well defined individual. Yet despite the characters' different histories they have one thing in common: attempted suicide.

The setting is a thousand-dollar-a-day in-patient rehab facility. Set designer Pam Johnson hints at fairly luxurious accommodations with the bedroom into which Samira, "the new girl," is assigned: an upstage bed with a comfy

duvet and behind which, on the wall, is a large, multi-petalled wall hanging. The bedroom eventually serves as the bedroom; the rest of the set, including a couch and TV, looks less homey, more institutional.

Portraying foul-mouthed, bullying Mildred, who was sexually abused in childhood, is Nicola Cavendish and it's a joy to see her onstage after a hiatus. However, her meltdown – a dramatic highlight of the play – and the subsequent checking herself out of the facility remain a mystery.

Sereana Malani's Celine, raped twice as a young woman and whose son has been sexually abused, is intelligent and thoughtful but why she reached her tipping point is also unclear. Why would she leave her child motherless? Samira (Adele Noronha), raped five years ago, has no memory of her assailant. Colleen Wheeler's Rosemary suffers unbearable grief with

the breakdown of her marriage and lost custody of her stepson while Laara Sadiq's character Nina suffers from false pregnancy.

Diane Brown is gossipy, fragile Joyce who admits very late in Act 2 that she is not sad because her marriage failed; her marriage failed because she is sad. By weighting the play the way she has, Sinha implies that sexual abuse and marriage breakdown are the most common reasons women find life no longer worth living. I don't know if that's statistically true but the lack of balance weakens the play. Death of a child? Paralyzing injury?

Playwright Sinha builds *Happy Place* with short, choppy scenes in which frustratingly small pieces of information are offered. In the end, we don't know as much as we'd like to about these troubled women. What Sinha clearly points out is that techniques for dealing with suicides have a long way to go.

The strongest elements in *Happy Place* are two sides of the same coin: the support these seven actors give each other to get them through this tough material; and the support the patients offer each other. Even tough, raunchy Mildred offers hope and love to Samira in one of the most touching scenes in the play.

Produced by Touchstone Theatre in association with Ruby Slippers Theatre and Diwali in B.C., *Happy Place* is not a bleak play. While we may not understand these characters' motivations, we're rooting for them. It leaves us with some fears – there's no guarantee Mildred won't be back or that Celine will make it – but also glimmers of hope. **W**

HAPPY PLACE

At the Firehall Arts Centre until Oct. 29. Tickets from \$20 at tickets.firehallartscentre.ca or 604-689-0926

Thanks to Kane, the calm in the storm

JO LEDINGHAM @joleedingham

The first scene in Kevin Loring's play begins with Clifford (Tom McBeath) shooting a female grizzly and her two cubs. Loring is not celebrating the killing of bears; far from it. The huge fake bear is strung up – in an image of Christ on the cross – and remains there for most of the play.

The central character is Nan, portrayed by the virtuosic, Order of Canada appointee, Cree-Saulteaux actress Margo Kane, for whom Loring wrote the part. If anyone can alleviate the harrowing image of a dead bear it's Kane, with her dust-dry sense of humour, straight-up delivery and understated but steely passion.

In the summer, while picking berries, Nan had met that same mother bear and her cubs and had "sung" the

grizzly into a dignified retreat. Bears are sacred to Nan, so non-Native husband Clifford's senseless slaughter throws Nan and her extended family into disarray.

It's Thanksgiving and they're assembled: Nan's daughter Sue (Andrea Menard), an alcoholic whose twins John (Caa'cumhi – Aaron M. Wells) and Marie (Tai Amy Grauman) have largely been raised by Nan. Also at the table is Marie's lesbian partner Sam (Leslie Dos Remedios) and Nan's redneck grandson Clayton (Denesh'Cho Thompson).

While *Thanks for Giving* is generally realistic, there are symbolic scenes that take the play to another level. A bear dancer, shrouded in fur and wearing a bear mask, opens the play, alerting us to the special place grizzlies have in the Lytton First Nation where playwright/director Loring

sets the story. The dancer (Shyama-Priya) appears again in a nightmarish scene with Menard and once more at the end of the play when she performs a breathtaking pow-wow style dance.

"It's kind of like a turkey dinner," says Loring, N'lakap'amux from the Lytton First Nation, laughingly describing his play. "There's a lot on the table." There is: colonialism, mistreatment of First Nations people, residential schools, vegetarianism, alcoholism, environmentalism, mythology and more.

It's hard to determine what, exactly, is at stake. Nan and Clifford's marriage? Sue's reconciliation with her children? Marie and Sam's relationship? The sacred bond between First Nations people and animal spirits?

Central to it all, however, is Margo Kane. Small and solid, she is the calm, quiet centre

of the play. If the grizzly sow is the Mother, Kane is the Mother of this production: a wise, no-nonsense actor who channels Nan's values.

Polar opposite to Nan is Clifford. McBeath is the villain in the piece, although Loring is careful to give Clifford enough backstory to explain why he is the way he is.

In its premiere run, *Thanks for Giving* will probably go through more drafts and develop a stronger through-line. It's also possible – and worth considering – that this is First Nations storytelling style and we need to accept it on its own terms. **W**

THANKS FOR GIVING

At the Arts Club Granville Island Stage until Nov. 4. Tickets from \$29 at artsclub.com or 604-687-1644

Adopteez pet of the week: Rocky

NOA NICHOL @adopteezpleez

So far, life for Rocky hasn't been too smooth, but this purebred beagle puppy is hopeful for better days ahead.

Born last March, Rocky suffered a spinal injury at about four weeks old, which left him slightly incontinent and having to "bunny hop" with his hind legs. His tail was broken, leaving it lifeless. A neurologist diagnosed him with scoliosis due to trauma – but the good news is the condition will not worsen.

"In fact, Rocky is able to walk, run, jump and play without any issues," says



Rocky. Contributed photo

Yuana, founder and director of Surrey-based Dhana Metta Rescue Society, where Rocky is currently residing. "Although he does leak urine if his bladder is not expressed regularly, he has been fairly easy to manage. He usually does his business outside, if

he is taken out every three to four hours."

Rocky wears diapers indoors, which could also be used at bedtime. "He needs an adopter who is home a lot, not leaving him for more than three hours at a time," she explains. "He also requires some basic puppy training."

Despite it all, Rocky "is ridiculously friendly and, for a beagle, he never strays far from his people."

Rocky is looking for an understanding, experienced home. If you are interested in adopting or fostering him while he waits for his forever home, visit dhanamettrarescuesociety.org. **W**

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BEST BUY - CORRECTION NOTICE

NEWSPAPER RETRACTION FOR THE BEST BUY OCTOBER 20 CORPORATE FLYER

In the October 20th flyer, page 6, the HP All-In-One Wireless Monochrome Laser Printer – Fax (Web Code: 10405028) was incorrectly advertised with a free \$20 gift card included. Please be aware that this promotion does not include a \$20 gift card.

We sincerely apologize for any inconvenience this may have caused our valued customers.

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Vancouver Welsh Men's Choir and the Band of the 15th Field Regiment RCA

SUNDAY, November 5th, 2:30pm, BETH ISRAEL SYNAGOGUE
Oak Street & West 28th Avenue, Vancouver

TICKETS: Adult \$29, Seniors \$27, Students \$12
www.vwmc.ca or 604 878 1190 or at the door

Director asks audience to put on blindfolds

For *Bombay Black* — an award-winning play that'll be mounted in Coquitlam this week as part of the South Asian Diwali celebrations — director Rohit Chokhani wants viewers to “see” life the same way as his blind protagonist.

[Janis Cleugh](#) / Tri-City News

NOVEMBER 6, 2018 09:51 AM



Bombay Black runs at the Evergreen Cultural Centre in Coquitlam Thursday to Saturday during the Diwali celebrations.
Photograph By PHOTO SUBMITTED

For *Bombay Black* — an award-winning play that'll be mounted in Coquitlam this week as part of the South Asian Diwali celebrations — director Rohit Chokhani wants viewers to “see” life the same way as his blind protagonist.

Or, at least, for part of it.

Chokhani is asking guests to put on blindfolds for certain parts of the show “to understand what it’s like to be blind in Mumbai,” he said. “There are scenes in the play where we are depicting dark outs so the audience can imagine things in our mind, much as he does.”

The 2006 story by Anosh Irani, who moved from Mumbai (formerly known as Bombay) to Vancouver in 1998 to pursue his writing career, is set in present-day India.

It follows Apsara, who works as an erotic dancer; her manager mother, Padma, with whom she lives; and Apsara’s blind client Kamal.

Kamal, as it turns out, was married to Apsara when he was 10 and she was three. He discloses news about her father, from whom she and her mother have been hiding, and opens new wounds of child abuse.

“It’s a really hard-hitting play,” Chokhani said. “You don’t know what’s going to come next. I think we have put a really unique interpretation on it.”

He added, “The whole story is based on a blind man who is with an exotic dancer. I found it was a very interesting premise, especially about the act of male gazing. I was born and raised in India and, when I met Anosh Irani in Bombay years ago, we spoke about that concept. What if, during certain sections of the script, we don’t let the audience gaze? We are now showing it from his perspective.”

Named the Pick of the Fringe at last year's Vancouver Fringe Festival, Bombay Black's four-date run at the Evergreen Cultural Centre concludes with a South Asian event on Sunday night featuring dancers and musicians — including Bharatanatyam dance artist Arno Kamolika.

The show is programmed by Chokhani, who is the also the artistic director of Diwali in B.C.

Meanwhile, next year, Chokhani will co-director the Bard on the Beach production of Shakespeare's All's Well That Ends Well, set in India during the waning days of British occupation.

• For tickets to *Bombay Black* and the *Diwali* celebrations, call the Evergreen Cultural Centre (1205 Pinetree Way, Coquitlam) at 604-927-6555 or visit evergreenculturalcentre.ca.

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