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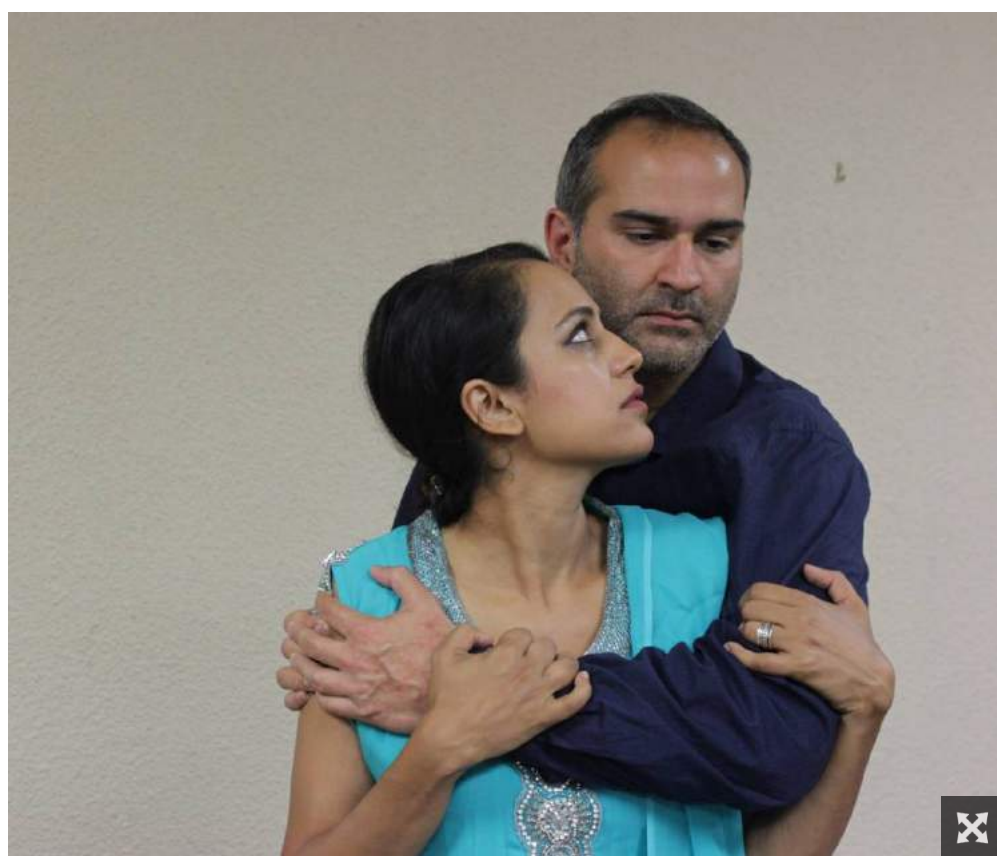
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Vancouver Fringe Festival review: Bombay Black

by Andrea Warner on September 11th, 2017 at 11:59 AM




 0



Bombay Black's Agam Darshi and Munish Sharma
 by ZAHIDA RAHEMTULLA


This is one of the most harrowing, unsettling, and mesmerizing plays I've ever seen.

Ten hours after leaving the theatre, I'm still shaken by its uniquely poetic horror, and marvelling at the complexity of what acclaimed playwright Anosh Irani weaves in *Bombay Black's* dense 75 minutes.


Padma (Nimet Kanji) and her daughter, Apsara (Agam Darshi) live in an apartment by



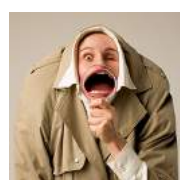
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- 

Advance Theatre New Works by Women: Jumping Ship
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- 

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 Sep 11, 4:30pm

- 

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the sea where Apsara dances for men and Padma is, essentially, her madam. When the blind Kamal (Munish Sharma) arrives for his appointment, he upends their lives in unimaginable ways. The performances are all stellar, but Kanji is unforgettable as the diabolical Padma, who belongs in the hall of fame of horrifying fictional mothers.

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Claiming space

Rohit Chokhani is blazing trails for South Asian artists

SABRINA FURMINGER @sabinarnmf

How do you claim space in a sector that has been dominated and defined by white European settler culture for decades?

It's a pressing question when you're an artist of colour, determined to break through into a mainstream theatre world that doesn't seem to have space for you, and it's a question that has risen in volume and frequency in the Vancouver theatre scene over the last several years.

We've heard it when companies cast white actors to play characters of colour, or when they try their hand at non-traditional (sometimes called colour-blind) casting. For a question this pressing, no easy answers have emerged.

A tipping point of sorts did come in 2015, when more than 150 members of the Vancouver theatre community issued an open letter to the board of directors of the Jessie Richardson Theatre Awards, taking them to task for an apparent lack of diversity among Jessie nominees and recipients. The Jessies responded by inviting community consultation, subsequently instituting a diversity mandate and introducing the Vancouver Now Representation and Inclusion Award.

Rohit Chokhani was a signatory on that 2015 open letter. By that point, the dynamic cultural leader had been in Canada for five years, producing work for a long list of theatre companies, but not yet directing – and not because he lacked the skill.

"When I came [to Canada], I was as confident as I am right now as a director, but there was no space," says Chokhani in a recent interview in a West End coffee shop. "There was no space for people to give me the kind of opportunity that I wanted, and I don't like to wait around for things."

Chokhani says his work has always been about more than himself; it's about claiming space for his community. In this way, he considers himself a second-generation theatre artist, building on the work of trailblazing theatre artists such as Margo Kane from the Talking Stick Festival and Gateway Theatre's Jovanni Sy. "Their work allowed a little bit of space for folk like me to enter, and now we are claiming more and more

because of the work their generation did," he says.

Since arriving from India (by way of the USA) in 2010, Chokhani has been an artistic producer for the not-for-profit South Asian Arts organization and growing Diwali festival, an artistic associate at the Bard on the Beach Shakespeare festival, and producer-in-residence at the National Arts Centre in Ottawa, leveraging his positions to claim more and more space for South Asian theatre artists in and beyond Vancouver.

"This doesn't mean seeing more South Asian stories done in a Eurocentric way."

—Rohit Chokhani

This year, Chokhani kicked that effort up a couple of notches by launching Project SAT, an initiative aimed at creating a network for developing, touring, producing and presenting national and international South Asian theatre projects in Canada. Meanwhile, he'll make his long-awaited directorial debut next week at the helm of *Bombay Black*, as part of the 2017 Vancouver Fringe Festival's Dramatic Works series.

All of this comes on the heels of his Jessie Award win in June for Significant Artistic Achievement (Large Theatre) for presenting Touchstone Theatre's hard-hitting sex slavery study *Brothel #9* (all while curating The Cultch's upcoming Diwali programming, too).

With Project SAT – SAT being both an acronym for South Asian Theatre and the Hindi word for truth and the inner essence – the primary goal is elevating South Asian artists. "There's only so much we can do as independent producers, because there are only a few of us who have actually claimed that space, so the quality is there but the quantity isn't," Chokhani says. His goals include aiding in the development of new work and building a globe-spanning touring network. "In order for the quality to happen, we need to create more things – and of course, we can produce things here, but they need to go elsewhere in Canada. They need to go globally."



Top: Project SAT founder and pioneering South Asian theatre artist Rohit Chokhani, pictured at his Hare Krishna temple in Burnaby. Dan Toulou photo Bottom: *Bombay Black* playwright Anosh Irani. Nirmal Shah photo

Project SAT launched in July with a series of culturally specific workshops focused on grant writing and pitching project ideas to presenters and producers, like Chokhani. Translators for Punjabi, Hindi and ASL participants are available upon request. Upcoming workshops will focus on producing, playwrighting, dramaturgy and Natya Shastra, an ancient South Asian text on the performing arts.

The aim of Project SAT isn't to teach people of colour how to adapt their voices to the mainstream, says Chokhani, nor is it to give them tools to contort their stories so that they're palatable according to European standards.

"This is continuing to

claim the space for South Asian artists, but this does not mean just seeing more South Asians on Eurocentric stages," he explains. "This doesn't mean seeing more South Asian stories done in a Eurocentric way. This actually means claiming a space to train individuals in their own ancestral way of doing things, and there are many different ancestral traditions in South Asia."

Meanwhile, buzz has been building for his debut. Chokhani is a Fringe veteran – he produced *Siddhartha: A Journey Home* and 2015's *Pick of the Fringe* two-hander *Mrs. Singh and Me* – and for his first go in the director's chair, he chose playwright Anosh Irani's searingly complex, award-winning

drama *Bombay Black* – which is set in present-day India and follows Padma, an iron-willed mother; her daughter Apsara, who performs erotic dances for men; and Kamal, a blind stranger with a shattering secret – because of how well it captures the searing complexities of Mumbai, the city of his birth.

"When you go to India, child marriage, classicism, casteism, uneducated mentality versus educated mentality, urbanism versus ruralism, all of that is thrown in your face, whether you're going for the first time or whether you're going every year like me, you're going to have to face that, and that's what *Bombay Black* does."

Irani is an Indo-Canadian playwright and novelist, and *Bombay Black* has been performed numerous times throughout Canada and India; Chokhani notes that this upcoming Fringe run will be the first time in Canada that the play will be directed by a Mumbai-born director of Indian descent.

Bombay Black's cast is comprised of established stand-out actors: Jessie Award nominee Nimet Kanji and Munish Sharma, who previously shared the stage in *Mrs. Singh and Me*, and Leo Award-winner Agam Darshi (*Sanctuary, Played*), who premiered her one-woman show, *Burning Point*, at the Rialto Town Actors Studio earlier this year.

At the time of our interview, Chokhani and his collaborators were still considering the techniques they could employ to thrust audiences into the whirlwind that is modern-day Mumbai, and also compel them to consider what it's like to maneuver through the world as a blind person. (He intends to remount the play in a few years, when time and budget permits him to conduct a global search and cast a blind South Asian actor in the role of Kamal).

Chokhani has respect for Irani because "he's written a play about male gazing, but then he's taken the eyes away of the person who is potentially male gazing. He's also given the audience an ability to male gaze; but I am taking it further and not letting the audience experience the male gaze all the time, so that itself is pretty loaded." **W**

Information about Project SAT's upcoming workshops can be found at projectsat.ca. *Bombay Black* runs Sept. 7-16 at the Vancity Culture Lab. Tickets at tickets.vancouverfringe.ca.

The East Van band



Amy Logan
Hidden City
@AmySnowLogan

On a recent sunny Thursday morning, the sound of trumpet notes climbing against a tuba backbeat filters out across Woodland Park in East Van. A disparate clutch of musicians, ranging from children to teens, under the direction of band leader Tim Sars, are warming up for an open-air concert under a tree. An audience begins to gather on the grass, drawn in by the rhythmic melodies.

The musicians are a part of the Greenhorn Project's Open Air Orchestra, a free, after-school program at the nearby Britannia Secondary School. Every Monday afternoon from 3:30-5 p.m., musicians of all ages meet up and play music games, New Orleans jazz and original music under Sars' direction. "It's a super fun bunch of folks, often inter-generational. We always play a game of tag halfway through the workshop," he says.

This is music at its most relaxed and loose, a place for young performers to develop confidence and spread their wings alongside more experienced elders. The Greenhorn Project is the brainchild of the Carnival Band, which Sars has been directing for over 10 years. And it runs in the family: along with his father, Ross Barrett, Sars has been closely involved with the grassroots band community scene on Commercial Drive for years.

At a time when many schools are cutting music programs, the Greenhorn Project aims to remove barriers for young or amateur musicians. For Sars, the most rewarding part of his involvement is "hanging out with these amazing youth and hearing them develop."

Greenhorn will be starting up again this September and following the school-year calendar (check Britannia Community Centre for dates). Donations in the form of instruments or money are always gratefully accepted.

Back at the park, a young man leaps up from the audience, trumpet in hand, and proceeds to captivate the audience with a New Orleans-inflected melody. By the time he starts singing, the savvy crew of teens has joined in through voice and instrument and the park fills with music.

These bands are "a huge part of our community, bringing people of so many different ages backgrounds and income levels together," Sars says. "With so many people with kids trying to make ends meet, it's so wonderful to offer a free space to bring people together and play music." **W**

thevancouverartsreview.com

Anosh Irani's Masterfully Suspenseful "Bombay Black" Shows You Colours You've Never Seen Before

2-3 minutes





On a cold Thursday Vancouver night, “Bombay Black” gripped every audience member in the Firehall Arts Centre. It had been a while since I’d held my breath watching a truly riveting drama and feeling unpredictability linger in my chest.

One minute the story was blanketed in the mystery of who these characters are, why they do what they do, and what they will reveal about their relation to each other. The next minute the audience was submerged in poetic ecstasy, mythical creatures, and eclectic music.

The intermission had everyone jittery with excitement. We returned quickly to our seats and hung on to see what happens next to Apsara, Padma and Kamal, the three leads of Anosh Irani’s award-winning play!





“Bombay Black” paints a picture of the busy, crowded, and at times, reckless city of Bombay. Apsara dances for clients in a sea-facing apartment owned by her business-minded mother, Padma. The visually impaired Kamal enters this small, strange world and unleashes a series of revelations for both Apsara and Padma.

An underlying theme of *seeing* without one's eyes runs beautifully like a metaphor throughout the play. The dialogue is unmatched, revealing Irani's capabilities as a playwright. Rohit Chokhani's

directorship stays true to cultural theatrical art forms familiar in Indian storytelling. He ingeniously translates this Indian storytelling format for a Western audience without losing a grain of its wit. The acting is superb, with a star-lit cast led by Nimet Kanji, Arshdeep Purba, and Munish Sharma.



The play deals with sensitive and often triggering issues, all the

while approaching them both with a Shakespearean air. The talk of murder reminds me of "Macbeth", while the parts contemplating love ring close to lessons from "Hamlet". Yet the play still feels fresh and extremely original, leaving me to think that legendary playwriting is alive once again.

Get your tickets [here](#)!

– Maira Hassan

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THEATRE REVIEWS »

Bombay Black rides an ambitious mix of metaphor, magic, and deeply disturbing reality

by Janet Smith on December 8th, 2018 at 11:44 AM



Arshdeep Purba and Nimet Kanji in Bombay Black

RAYMOND KAM

By Anosh Irani. Directed and produced by Rohit Chokhani. At the Firehall Arts Centre on Thursday, December 6. Continues to December 15

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Vancouver Fringe Festival review: Bombay Black

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

As the audience sits in darkness just before *Bombay Black* begins, bells jingle down the aisle. It's the first of many moments that throw us into the black and open us up to sounds, words, and our imaginations. When the lights come up, we see the sound is coming from *ghungroos*, the musical anklets of a young female dancer who is now twirling on the stage.

Director Rohit Chokhani is playing with one of the central themes

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of Anosh Irani's bleak and violent but magic- and myth-fuelled script. The story (by the playwright and author of books like *The Cripple and His Talismans* and *The Song of Kahunsha*) is about a Bombay mother who makes a living out of her seaside apartment, by selling men private dances with her daughter. The one rule: look but don't touch. When a mysterious blind man arrives to buy a session, secrets start to unfold, and their lives change forever.

Chokhani puts us, again and again, in the dark—a state of “blindness” that reflects the male character. The blackouts are especially effective when the blind man, Kamal (Munish Sharma), tells the dancer stories that transport both of them out of their depressing realities.

The stripped-down staging highlights the actors' abilities in three complex roles. Irani's script rides between the poetic and the crude. It's also full of metaphors, with the myth of the celestial nymph Apsara (the dancer's namesake) woven through it. But the cast manages to make it all flow naturally.

The most memorable is Nimet Kanji's Padma, a money-hungry, embittered woman who essentially pimps her own daughter. Reprising the role from Chokhani's hit Vancouver Fringe Festival production of the same script last year, Kanji nails her character's acid-strength sarcasm—“Scratch my back and... I'll scratch your eyes out!” This is a woman who wields an iron bar to smash the fingers of anyone who might touch her breadwinner, and whose favourite pastime is the highly metaphorical act of feeding raw meat out the window to hungry seagulls.

Munish Sharma finds a gentle strength in Kamal, and Arshdeep Purba, the only newcomer to the three-person play, manages Apsara's tricky transformation, giving her more depth as the story goes along. Purba also dances mesmerizingly.



Munish Sharma and Arshdeep Purba in *Bombay Black*

RAYMOND KAM

The way the second act handles revelations of her past trauma, and her mother's



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resentment around it, are a bit problematic. And more could be done, on the sparse set of bench, bureau, and screens, to evoke the essential location of Bombay—the chaotic city filled with former villagers who have fled here to escape secrets, poverty, and public shaming.

In this unusual and complex script, Irani manages to work in myriad ideas: the horrifying treatment of women in India and elsewhere in the world, metaphors about seeing and blindness, and rich mythology. The biggest surprise may be that, amid all this, we also get a relatable and often funny story about a damaged mother and daughter's relationship. Like everything else in this production, it's a complicated and unsettling mix of the dark and light.

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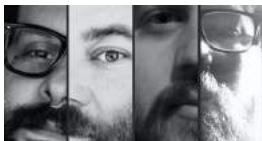
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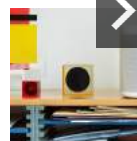
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Agam Darshi plays the exotic dancer Apsara and Munish Sharma is her blind patron Kamal in the 2017 Vancouver Fringe Festival production of *Bombay Black*. (Photo courtesy Zahida Rahemtulla)Na

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

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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.

SAD

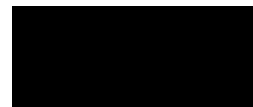
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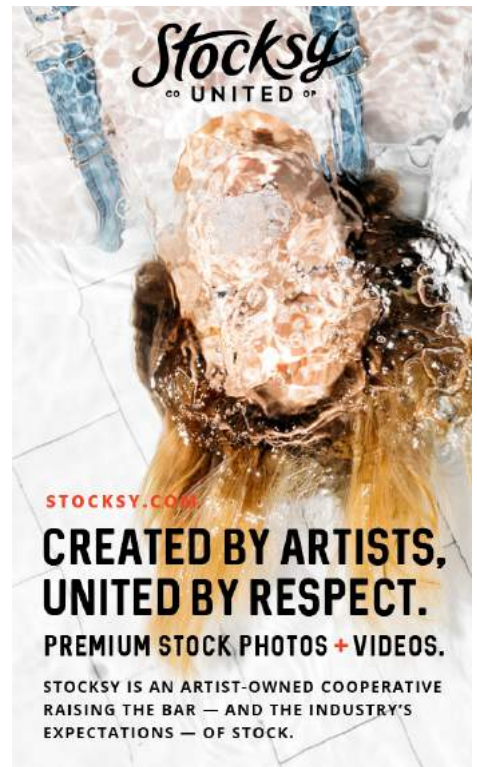
REVIEW: BOMBAY BLACK

Jorin McSween

Although the ivory tower story—a young maiden locked away from the world—is a classic tale, Anosh Irani’s compelling *Bombay Black* (directed for Vancouver's Fringe Festival by Rohit Chokhani offers the concept through new light. The damsel in distress is a dancer, the captor her mother, and the prince a mysterious man. Irani’s plot is not so much a linear tale as it is an unfolding of the intersecting life paths of these three characters.



PHOTO BY ZAHIDA RAHEMTULLA



Set in modern-day India, the minimalist stage invites the audience into the home of Padma and her daughter, Aspara. From this setting, we watch the lives and secrets of their family unravel. Padma holds an entrepreneurial approach as a mother by having her daughter give private dances for men. Aspara endures her mother's dealings

with resigned willingness, deprived of enthusiasm. From the very start, the tensions between the two is palpable and foreshadows what we soon learn to be a volatile relationship.

When a blind customer, Kamal, arrives for his private session with Aspara, Padma assures him that this is not a brothel and that while the dances are erotic, there is no touching permitted. To the confusion of both mother and daughter, Kamal wants only to be in the girl's presence. As the story progresses, the mystery of Kamal expands to change the lives of the mother and daughter.

Nimet Kanji (*Jessie Award nominee*) delivers an authentically raw Padma, a woman for whom life has not met her expectations. She is scorned and bitter, hungry for a revenge which veils her deeper hunger for validation. Kanji brings the play from a theatrical level to a visceral experience. Her humour shines through in Padma's mischievousness and she brings tangibility to the tormented soul that is revealed to us. There are tender moments in which you yearn to embrace the Padma, in no small part due to the believability of the portrayal.

Agam Darshi (*Leo Award winner*) draws us closer to Aspara throughout the play. Just as Padma's taught her to do when dancing, Aspara reveals herself to us slowly, piece by piece. At the beginning, the character could be seen as two-dimensional, but with each progression of the story, the intricacy of her personhood is made evident. By the end of the play, Darshi's portrayal of

Aspara is fleshed out with vulnerability, jadedness, and desire.



PHOTO BY ZAHIDA RAHEMTULLA

Munish Sharma (*Jessie Award nominee*) brings a dichotomy of strength and weakness to the blind Kamal. Kamal is propelled by a hopefulness that borders on foolishness. He has sought after Aspara to balm his pained past and fulfilling his dreams for his future. He chooses to live suspended in a certain level of fantasy: *“Mythology is a poor man’s diet; only rich men can afford reality.”*

Resonating throughout each character is the connecting theme that they are all victims of circumstance. Each character is driven by incidents which both haunt and inspire them. The complexity of their dynamics and dark intentions leave you conflicted about what you hope

happens for the story's resolution.

Director Rohit Chokhani has brought this vibrant feature to life for the 2017 Vancouver Fringe Festival's Dramatic Works Series. His cast and crew have done a great service to playwright Anosh Irani's lyrical, humorous, and somber work; fuelled with cultural depth and theatrical talent.

Bombay Black runs from September 7 to 16 at the Vancity Culture Lab and is exemplary of Fringe's reputation for enriching the city with captivating performance arts.

Visit the Fringe Festival website, and grab tickets to the show! *Bombay Black* will be at the Vancity Culture Club from September 9 to 13, with a final show on September 16.

September 09, 2017 /

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All the basic condition theatre requires is that fire last night & those costumes & the human voice & people gathered together.
Sir Trevor Nunn, Director (*Cats*, 1981 \ *Les Miserables*, 1985)

No question the movie *Slumdog Millionaire* was many people's introduction to contemporary India as viewed through a Bollywood lens. Not so Anosh Irani's 12-year-old script *Bombay Black*. The story is a tale of flawed, disfigured victims of cultural compulsions and energies that populate the sub-continent. It is a metaphor wrapt in a myth, a fable, a legend, a Freudian fairy story, a concise epic of life as it may once have been, perhaps still is, on the sub-continent.

Start with an exploitive, vengeful money-mad mom who forces her teen daughter to dance privately for men. For 3,000 rupees (Cdn\$60 today) on the condition the men do not touch her. Now enter a blind man. His tale from an Indian village from 15 years past unearths secrets that not only scare the women but cause their lives to trip, punishingly, into and over one another. It is as if Shiva's wrath has been unsheathed.

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About Me

 **Baird Blackstone**

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Munish Sharma as the mysterious blind villager Kamal breaks all the rules with dancer Apsara (Arshdeep Purba) when she allows him to touch her, contrary to her controlling, rapacious mother's rules of engagement.

Photo credit : Raymond Kam

There are fundamentally three aspects of Iranian-Canadian Anosh Irani's play that magnetize the viewer in Diwali Artistic Director Rohit Chokhani's clever re-imagining of the script. Light/dark and chiaroscuro visuals. Terrific soundscape. And the acting. Oh the acting.

Rarely on a regional stage like Vancouver's Firehall is one treated to such commanding and captivating performances by each of the three principals. Of Nimet Kanji's mother, Padma, an acquaintance put her forceful nuanced expressionism succinctly : "She could be brushing her teeth on stage and I would be mesmerized." Her facial contortions match Padma's loving, treacherous soul with this daughter she loves and despises both.



Nimet Kanji as her daughter's "promoter" and jailer tries to tell Aspara (Arshdeep Purba) the "truth" about why her daughter must dance enticingly for men to appease the gods as well as earn rupees so she can buy meet to feed the Bombay eagles out of her hand off the studio balcony.

Photo credit : Raymond Kam

Perhaps not enough can be stated without abject hyperbole about Munish Sharma's turn as a blind man on a mission, Kamal. For 90 minutes he captured stunningly both the inward and outward essence of being blind, or "always in black" as he put it. Eyes half shut the entire time, his gentle persistent phantasy-weave in efforts to find and win back his child bride was hypnotic. He spins an dizzying tale again and again about warring gods, a dancer and a lotus flower -- a story he wants to make real.

Daughter Apsara -- named for a Hindu goddess / temptress / assassin -- was given a bold and embracing turn by Arshdeep Purba. Her Bhangra/Bollywood-inspired dance techniques that she started learning as a grammar school kid were spellbinding : not just charming but bewitching. The story of how and why she was afraid even as a late-term teen to venture out into the local neighbourhood market without clutching mom's sari makes for a breath-taking bio-sketch involving her never-seen priest of a father who banished her and her mother from their village of Badu for being demons.

Sound Designer Rup Sidhu faces the prospect of Jessie Award inevitability for his *tour de force* production. He starts with 120 decibel soundscape of Bombay street scenes with their

incessant horn toots, scooter exhausts, random voices and bells and dogs and general din. The audience is invited to wear a scarf over their eyes to imagine Kamal's world prior to the show starting. And start it does -- with a percussive bang! of light and sound : absolutely astonishing music to open the show, a trad seductive wedding dance serenade called "In Aankhon Ki Masti" by Asha Bhosle. [See goo.gl/zMzTXL].

Similarly, Chengyan Boon's lighting composition was a lyrical mix of starburst explosions mixed with oblique half-lights and purposeful all-dark moments to reflect freshman Director Chokhani's totality of vision.

Irani's script reflects Canada's intercultural, raw-cut sights and sounds and flavours that are thrown together *mulligatawny*-style across the land. Almost impossible to imagine this piece attracting much notice in USA, by contrast, except among the most earthy Greenwich Village or Berkeley bunch. The story told is lyrical and horrifying and uplifting, literally, at the end. For its composite strengths in acting, sound, light, dance, & *mythos* it surely is a not-to-be-missed event of stage imagination cut loose and set free that utterly and wholly engages both brain and heart.

Particulars : *Script* by Anosh Irani (that won a Dora Moore Award in Toronto for Outstanding New Play, 2008). *Produced by* Firehall Arts Centre, Donna Spencer, Artistic Producer. *At the* Firehall Arts Centre, Gore at Pender. *On until* December 15, 2018. *Run-time* 120 minutes, one intermission. *Tickets & schedule* information @ [Firehall](#)

Production team : *Director and Producer* Rohit Chokhani. *Set and Costume Designers* Tanya Schwaerzle & Rohit Chokhani. *Sound Designer* Rup Sidhu. *Lighting Designer* Chengyan Boon. *Dance Coach* Gunjan Kundhal. *Voice Coach* Alana Hawley. *Stage Managers* Tanya Schwaerzle & Emma Hammond. *Publicist* Teresa Trovato. *Associate Producer* Shanae Sodhi. *Production Associates* Ayush Kathuria & Ashley Rose.

Performers : Nimet Kanji (*Padma*). Arshdeep Purba (*Apsara*). Munish Sharma (*Kamal*).

-30-

Posted by [Baird Blackstone](#) at 10:03

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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.

jcleugh@tricitynews.com

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Capsule Review: Bombay Black

By Marlene Dong in partnership with [District Local](https://districtlocal.com/) (<https://districtlocal.com/>)



Anosh Irani's award-winning play is a sensory experience. There's the light sandalwood aroma that envelopes you when you enter the theatre. The din of Indian street life assails your ears, punctuated occasionally by a voice that invites you to imagine yourself as a blind person in Bombay. There are black blindfolds draped over each seat to help you journey into the world of *Bombay Black*.

Set in present-day Bombay, the play is the story of Apsara (Arshdeep Purba) who lives with her mother Padma (Nimet Kanji). They eke out a living through Apsara's erotic dances for wealthy men. One day, a mysterious blind man named Kamal (Munish Sharma) comes calling, raising the spectre of a past that has great repercussions in the present.

On the surface, Apsara and Kamal seem to be the main focus of the play, but really, it's the relationship between Apsara and Padma that make up the heart of *Bombay Black*. Their power dynamics are riveting and horrifying, and as performed with ferocity and cutting humour by Kanji, Padma is a force to be reckoned with.

If the play is unflinching in its portrayal of vengeance and betrayal, the language is by contrast lush and beautiful. Kamal doesn't have sight, but he woos Apsara with words that sing and dance in their imagery. During the play's magical realism scenes, the lighting and sound designs add the perfect elements of poetry and mystery.

In this time of #metoo, the trauma that the two women are revealed to have suffered doesn't come as a surprise. As sad as that reality is, you'll emerge from this play reminded of the strength and resilience of women.

Bombay Black

Written by Anosh Irani

Directed by Rohit Chokhani

Featuring Nimet Kanji, Arshdeep Purba and Munish Sharma

Bombay Black

Mariam Baldeh // Culture, Theatre // Volume 18, Issue 04 - August 29–September 12, 2017

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Anosh Irani, author of Bombay Black. | Photo by Nirmal Shah.


In a Bombay apartment by the sea, a young woman dances seductively. In a dark corner of the room a blind man sits, watching her. This image, accompanied by the question Why would a blind man pay to watch someone dance? intrigued Indian-Canadian playwright Anosh Irani into writing Bombay Black.

The play, which runs Sept. 7–16 at the Vancity Culture Lab, is centered around three main characters: the blind man, Kamal; the sensual dancer, Apsara; and Apsara's strong-willed mother, Padma, who collects the money paid by the male clientele who watch Apsara dance. Apsara is the play's catalyst. She triggers the events of the past and she's the reason the blind man has come back to everyone's life in the present day.

On the creative process

"I normally don't have a plan, I start with an image or a character and I just follow that image and see where it leads me," says Irani. "I don't really know what the story is until I've followed it for a while."

For about a year, he let the idea simmer because "thinking and daydreaming is also writing," he says. When he finally sat down to write the play, the first draft was finished in a couple of weeks. Coming up with a title for the play was another story.

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"Normally, I get the title very quickly, [but this time] I struggled for a long time," says Irani. "I'd already written a couple of drafts for the play and I still didn't have a title that I was happy with."

A friend suggested the name *Bombay Black*, which is a variety of the hashish drug made in Bombay, because of the mythological and surreal aspects of the play.

In seeking to explore the balance between reality and fantasy, Irani says he aims for a kind of "emotional or spiritual truth" in the play. He also draws on a culture of bar dancing in Bombay that takes on a different form than the one in North America, he says. "In North America you have strippers, so they're topless, they strip. In Bombay they are bar dancers: they dance to Bollywood songs and it's a combination between what they call item songs and this dance called Mujra, which is a sensual dance form. Some of the girls are incredibly talented but the idea is that some of them work part-time as sex workers [and] some don't, some just dance. So there's a difference in the sense that they're clothed in India. They are never nude, but they still have hundreds and hundreds of men coming literally every night and throwing money at them in the hopes that they will spend more time with them," Irani says.

Looking beyond the surface

Nimet Kanji, who plays the iron-willed mother, Padma, says that there are a lot of layers to explore in the play and all isn't as it seems on the surface.

"When first reading the play, [Padma] is a complex character and Anosh's language is really quite poetic so it's really about digging deep into the text to find this woman," says Kanji, who was born and raised in Nairobi, Kenya. "Slowly but surely, I have been digging and finding her."

Since its premiere in 2006, the play has been reproduced several times in Canada and India. It was translated into Hindi for the Bombay and Delhi audiences.

"What was interesting there was that [when it was] translated into Hindi, it somehow made the play more rooted in reality, which was exactly what I wanted," says Irani.

This is, however, the first time that *Bombay Black* will be directed in Canada by a director of Indian descent: Mumbai-born Rohit Chokhani.

Kanji hopes the play will leave viewers shocked and with plenty of food for thought.

"I think there's lots of conversations that one can have after the show. Like was it destiny, was it environmental, was it tradition, was it culture? It brings all of that into question," she says.

In his work, Irani says he always aims to create a shift in consciousness.

"Literary work or theatre is not meant to be complacent, it's meant to create some sort of disturbance. It makes [viewers] go on a search, and that's what I'm hoping the play does."

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Vancouver Fringe Festival hit Multiple Organism wins big at awards night

by Janet Smith on September 18th, 2017 at 2:08 PM

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Multiple Organisms won several nods at the Fringe awards on the weekend.

Befitting its name, the Vancouver Fringe Festival sex-charged shadow-puppet show [Multiple Organism](#) won multiple awards at the event's annual awards night September 17.

The Mind of a Snail production not only took home the Georgia Straight Critics' Pick against strong runners up *Ain't True* and *Uncle False*, *Bombay Black*, *Hyena Subpoena*, and *Six Fine Lines*. It also nabbed an artistic risk award (against runners up *Slumber Here* and *Katharine Ferns Is In Stitches*) and a coveted Cultchivating the Fringe Award-- a prize from the Cultch that recognizes a performance that demonstrates a strong potential for further development.

If you missed it, you can still catch it along with some of the fest's other offerings: it's won

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a spot in the Public Market Pick of the Fringe holdover series at Performance Works. Multiple Organism happens September 24 at 6 p.m. In our review, critic Kathleen Oliver wrote of the play, "Even diehard fans of *Mind of a Snail* ... are in for a surprise—and a treat."

Other Picks are *Swordplay* (September 20 at 8:45 p.m.); *An Arrangement of Shoes* (September 21 at 8:45 p.m.); *Cry-Baby: The Musical* (September 23 at 6:45 p.m.); *Bombay Black by Anosh Irani* (September 23 at 9 p.m.); and *Chris & Travis* (September 24 at 7:45 p.m.)

Meanwhile, Isabelle Kirouac and Nayana Fielkov for *Habitats* won the Joanna Maratta prize for best demonstrating the founding spirit of the Fringe; Sex-T-Rex's *Swordplay: A Play of Swords* took home a B.C. Touring Council award; and Cat Kidd for *Hyena Subpoena* and Paul Strickland for *Ain't True and Uncle False* won as volunteer picks.

And the Fringe dedicated its annual Spirit of the Fringe award to [outgoing director David Jordan](#), "awarded to the artist, company, or show that best exhibits David's spirit of tenacity, leadership, and calm under pressure". *Slumber Here* took the honour. Jordan is headed to the City of Burnaby as arts services manager, which includes overseeing the Shadbolt Centre for the Arts.

In all, the Fringe reported a successful year, with several shows, including *Draining the Swamp*, *An Arrangement of Shoes*, and *Almost a Stepmom*. *Bombay Black by Anosh Irani* selling out their performances by the first Sunday of the festival!

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Your horoscope for September 14 to 20, 2017

HOLD THE MOMENT



Arshdeep Purba and Nimet Kanji in Bombay Black
Photo: Raymond Kam

review
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Arshdeep Purba in Bombay Black
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The Firehall Arts Centre

Bombay Black by Anosh Irani

Dates and Venue December 5 - 15, 2018, Tues @ 7pm, Wed-Fri @ 8pm, Sat @ 3pm & 8pm, Sun # 3pm, Wed @ 1pm Pay-what-U-can (Dec. 5 & 12) | Firehall Arts Centre, 280 E. Cordova St.

Director Rohit Chokhani **Lighting Design** Chengyan Boon
Sound Design Rup Sidhu **Set and Costume Design** Tanya Schwaerzie and Rohit Chokhani

Reviewer Nancie Ottem

Bombay Black written by Anosh Irani exposes the underside of life for women in India. Set in Bombay the story unfolds through the interaction of three characters, Padma, the mother, played by Nimet Kanji, Apsara, the daughter, played by Arshdeep Purba and Kamal, a blind man, played by Munish Sharma. Irani uses these three characters to tell a story that began ten years ago and in doing so unveils centuries of cultural bondage for Indian women.

Playing to a full house at the Firehall Arts Centre, the play unfolds in two acts. Apsara and her mother, Padma, live together and support themselves with the dances that Apsara performs for wealthy men in their apartment. There is an undercurrent of distrust for men that is evident in the dialogue between the two women. Distrust acts as a foundational element of the play on which to explore the injustices women injure in Indian society.

The scenes are clothed in darkness for portions of the play and at other times the lighting is dim. Chengyan Boon, the lighting designer, has used this technique as an analogy for the shadows that women in Indian society live in. Cloaking scenes in semi-darkness adds to the undercurrent of distrust that is woven throughout the play and alludes to the secrets that the mother and daughter have kept from each other.

Munish Sharma plays Kamal, a blind man who has come to the apartment of Padma and Apsara ostensibly for a dance but it becomes apparent that his connection to the family is deeply significant to the ten year story and explains why Padma and Apsara left their village. Kamal's blindness is symbolic. It could allude to the blindness that Indian society has toward the plight of Indian women of a certain class. It could allude to the ignorance of cultural superstitions that permeate Indian life.

Bombay Black is a play that pulls at the emotions. It deals in betrayal and unmasking the ugly side of love lost. In the end it also unveils hope.

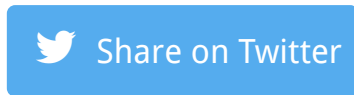
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Blackest RomCom for deepest Kalyug

CultchLab lights up with Magic Realist vision of a City of Dreadful Night



Lincoln Kaye | Sep 13th, 2017





Mother/daughter bonding: My way or the highway. Photo: Zaheda Rahemtulla

If you come early to see *Bombay Black* at the Vancity Culture Lab, you'll be blindfolded and ushered to your bleacher seat amidst a cacophony of urban Indian street sounds. (You're allowed to remove the blinders once seated).

If you arrive too late for the blindfold, you're likely to wind up in the front row of the tiny theatre – the last remaining seats in the packed mini-house – with nothing between you and the narrow performance space.

Either way, prepare for extreme claustrophobia. Blindfolded, the sheer density of the Bombay soundscape presses in on you like nothing you'd ever experience in even the most raucous warrens of Vancouver. But, seated front-and-centre (as we were), the sense of in-your-face crowding is even starker.

The houselights fade, plunging the whole black box theatre into pitch darkness. And then, in the abrupt blaze of the downstage spot, you find yourself eye-to-eye with the gauzily veiled, tauntingly erotic figure of a latter-day *nautch* dancer (Agam Darshi), as the offstage voice of her mother/impresario (Nimet Kanji) barks commands to “tart up” her gyrations even more.

The breathless crush of the staging mirrors the deadly, stifling co-dependency of this mother/daughter pair. Like millions of other internal migrants in India, they’re fleeing the gothic horrors of their home village for the grim, hardscrabble anonymity of city life.

With her childhood scarred by incestuous rape, the daughter is too traumatized to even leave their fourth floor walk-up apartment. So the mother has turned their seaside aerie into a discretely downmarket pleasure dome where she hosts private phone-in clients for titillating *nautch* shows with an optional side order of cocaine or Bombay Black (a compound of hashish and shoe polish).

Meanwhile, both women plot grisly vengeance – on one another and on the child-fucker father who so traumatized each of them. Rape, pedophilia, murder, dismemberment and karmic retribution: quite the lightsome background for a comedy.

Yet that’s what this is, according to classical drama theory, whether by the criteria of Aristotle (it culminates in a marriage) or the *prakarana* of the ancient *Natyasastra* (“happy ending” plays about made-up characters who are neither royal nor divine).

Not just a comedy, but a RomCom, thanks to the interpolation of a third character into this grim ménage – a mysterious blind man (Munish Sharma).

This interloper’s gradually revealed back-story brings matters to a head between the two women. But, even more crucially, he brings to the action a startlingly generous “blind” sensibility that changes the tenor of the play, unleashing the “magic realism” of author Anosh Irani’s poetic imagination.

From the blind man, the dancer learns to “see” with her hands, matching the lines of a face with those of her palms. He teaches her the expansive vistas of a soundscape, where there’s no horizon and nothing casts a shadow and stone monuments can float out to sea as escape rafts. Together they parse the etymological enigmas of their Sanskrit names, the quandaries of ancient myths and the riddle of their shared fates.

Against this current of romance, Irani sets a strong undertow of bitter passion from the two women. To accent the ebb and flow, he dices the dialogue into very short – but intense – mini-scenes, punctuated by slivers of bat-blind blackout. Director Rohit Chokhani moves the action along briskly, with heroic back-up by lighting designer/stage manager Chengyan Boon.

But the real magic of all this magic realism rests solidly upon the tripod of the three perfectly matched co-stars.

Darshi veers effortlessly between the sultry allure of a professional temptress, the crushed innocence of a battered child, the edgy cynicism of a hard-bitten sex worker and the hope-against-hope of a born-again dreamer.

Kanji starts from a baseline of tartly comedic mother-in-law tropes (*à l'indienne*, to be sure, although the stock-character type is universal). But she quickly morphs into a wide-eyed harridan of fearsomely murderous intensity.

And Sharma, with unremittingly downcast eyes, somehow manages to fix his – and our – gaze on far-flung poetic horizons.

So suspend your disbelief for 90 minutes and plunge into the dark of *Bombay Black*; there's light at the end of this tunnel.

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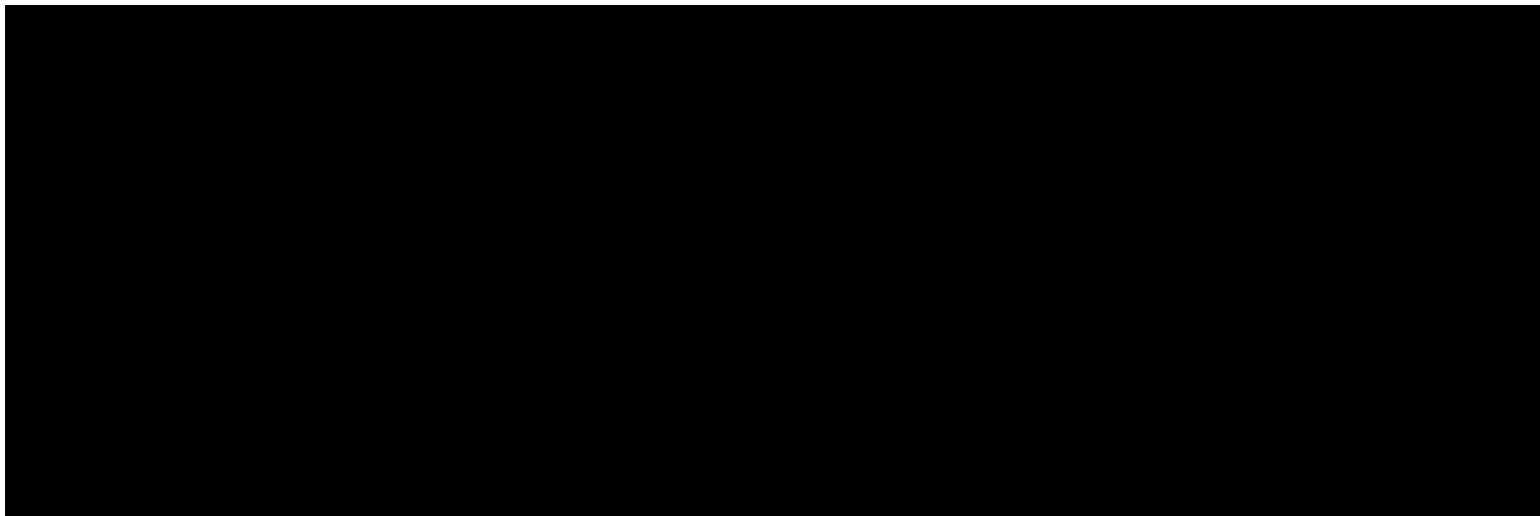


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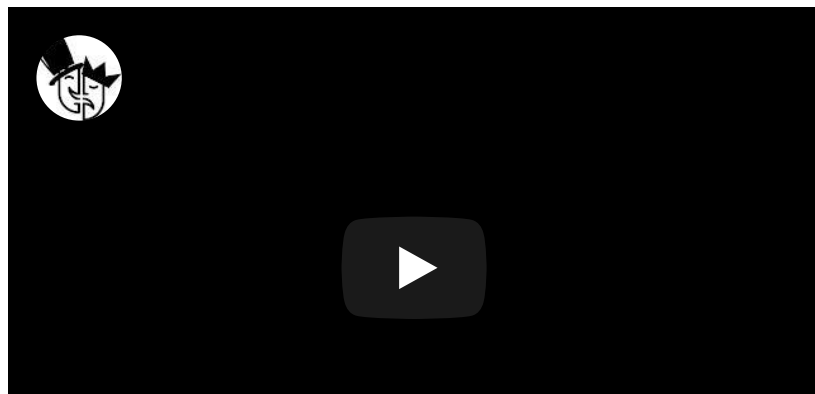
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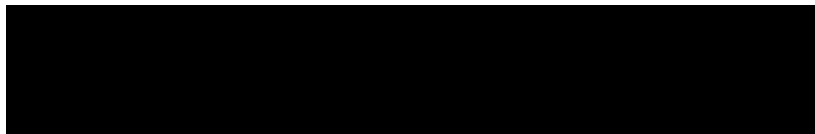
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I can see why *Bombay Black* directed by Rohit Chokani won Pick of the Fringe last year. Although the setting doesn't really stray from a home in India, this 2 hour production at the Firehall Arts Centre takes you on a journey through it's characters, with it's twists and turns. A mother doing her best to make ends meet with the only resource she has, her beautiful dancing daughter, and a visitor.

Not being familiar with



Nimet Kanji and Arshdeep Purba, photo by Raymond Kam

playwright Anosh Irani's original from 2006, I can't speak to the director's change of making the visitor to their home blind. However I definitely appreciated the sensory exploration that he took us on. The mother-daughter relationship was also an intriguing one with the struggle between control, dependency and love. What surprised me the most was the amount of humour in the first act and that

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Founded by Danielle Benzon, a self-professed theatre addict.

Live performance is essential to create human

they even managed to sprinkle some in to the second act for a performance that was overall quite dark. This was mostly in part to Nimet Kanji's exquisite performance as the mother who had me laughing in moments and whom I abhorred the next.

Perhaps not for younger audiences with content sexual in nature, it is however an entertaining evening out for those looking for some suspense and mystery but with some light laughs to balance it out.

Bombay Black is playing at the Firehall Arts Centre until 15 December 2018. Tickets at: <http://firehallartscentre.ca/onstage/bombay-black/>
(<http://firehallartscentre.ca/onstage/bombay-black/>)

~ reviewed by Karen Roller



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Brutal truths rise to surface in Bombay Black

Poetic Anosh Irani play remounted at the Firehall Arts Centre

[Jeremy Shepherd](#) / North Shore News

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Arshdeep Purba plays the role of Aspara in Bombay Black, North Vancouver playwright Anosh Irani's take on the gender wars in present-day India.
Photo SUPPLIED

Anosh Irani's Bombay Black, Firehall Arts Centre, until Dec. 15. For details visit firehallartscentre.ca.

The customers may not touch the dancer.

It's a necessary rule for Aspara, the dancer at the centre of Anosh Irani's play Bombay Black.

A steady stream of clueless, aroused men pay to be seduced by Aspara's artistry and tartistry so of course they must be barred from pawing at the object of their infatuation.

It's a good rule. But it seems to extend past the customers to everyone on the planet except Aspara's exhausting mother, Padma.

Poetic, darkly funny and mythic, the play begins with Padma instructing her daughter on the finer points on using exotic dance to render the customer's higher brain functions nonexistent.

After Aspara declines to take an evening walk with her mother and thank the sun for its service, Padma employs emotional tactics that may be recognizable to those familiar with mothers and/or guilt trips.

"If the sun doesn't rise tomorrow, it will be your fault," she tells her. "The whole world will be plunged into darkness because you are a selfish little bitch."

The life of the passive-aggressive mother and her aggressively passive daughter are upended by the entrance of a blind man.

He wants to be in Aspara's presence and perhaps, he will reveal the real reason he's there.

Director Rohit Chokhani first staged the 2006 play for the 2017 Vancouver Fringe Festival. Chokhani is once again in the director's seat for what Firehall Arts Centre artistic producer Donna Spencer says should be a more fully-formed version of the play.

"At the Fringe you have to get in and out in 45 minutes," she says. "Here, it's really got a full lighting design, a full sound score."

Part of the aim of the Firehall is to provide a nurturing atmosphere for artists, Spencer says, explaining that instead of scraping together the cash to hire actors and rent a space, Chokhani can work with the theatre staff to ensure his "technical aspirations" for the play are realized.

"It gives them, in terms of creating the work, less to worry about," she says.

Spencer was enthusiastic to help Chokhani bring the play to a wider audience.

The production will provide work for South Asian theatre artists, while helping Chokhani develop as a director and producer, Spencer says.

"He's got a drive that should be encouraged," she says. "It was one of those: 'All right, you want to do this. We have a theatre. We'll help you.'"

Bombay Black is replete with challenging subject matter. The drama delves into the challenges single mothers face while raising children in India, Spencer notes. The show also deals with the practice of children being: "betrothed to others before they're even thinking about things of love," she says.

"It is sad, but I think it's kind of a love story, too."

It's also somewhat timely, she says.

"I certainly don't believe the problems are solved in India but there certainly is an awareness of young girls being bought for dowry . . . that's much more on the radar than it was when Anosh (Irani) first wrote the work."

Now in her fourth decade with the Firehall, Spencer remains passionate about supporting theatre.

"I wish I could support more work," she says. "In actual fact we can't support a lot so we do the best we can."

She began what she thought would be a three-year stint with the Firehall in 1981, she recalls.

"I don't think I ever aspired to run a large organization. It was more about how theatre could impact people's lives," she says. "It's always rewarding when somebody says, 'You know, I saw a show here when I was in high school and that's why I come now.' And that actually has happened."

By its intimacy and uncertainty, theatre remains distinct and valuable.

"When you go to the theatre you're actually living the experience with the people that you're seeing on stage," she says. "Everyone should try it."