

Hi,



I am Kristine Landon-Smith. I was brought up in Australia but went to the UK in my 20's to study acting. I moved into directing and producing early on in my career in the UK and have only recently returned to Sydney to take up a position as Lecturer in Acting at NIDA. Since my work has been mainly situated in the UK I thought the most useful thing I could offer was a case study of the organisation Tamasha that I co-founded and I'd like to speak about the work we did around bringing new audiences to main stream London and regional venues over a period of twenty five years. I am speaking about audience activation for culturally diverse work within a mainstream environment as this is mainly where my work has been situated. However I recognise that both here and in the UK there is a breadth of work that may not be labelled main stream which successfully attracts it's own large and diverse audiences.

Tamasha was set up in 1989 to bring stories of the Asian diaspora (Asian in a UK context meaning people of Indian or Pakistani descent) to the British stage. Over time we evolved to expand our horizons and the current mission statement says:

Tamasha produces new plays inspired by the diversity of a globalised world. Our work places the voices of emerging and established artists from culturally diverse backgrounds centre-stage.

We present [new plays](#) from seldom-heard voices, charting the reality of lived multiculturalism, we train theatre artists and young people through '[Tamasha Developing Artists](#)' and facilitate theatremakers to engage creatively with communities and audiences.

About Tamasha

"Tamasha is a mirror reflecting a nation of continuing change and creativity, of mixings and mergings. British culture needs reminding it has always been global. Tamasha's stirring, audacious work makes sure the nation never forgets what it is." Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, cultural commentator

Tamasha is Britain's foremost touring theatre company producing new plays inspired by the diversity of a globalised world. Our work places the voices of emerging and established artists from culturally diverse backgrounds centre-stage.

Our approach is boldly investigative and located along 'cultural fault lines', leading the debate around the meeting points and multiple narratives of contemporary Britain and beyond. We:

- present new plays from seldom-heard voices, charting the reality of lived multiculturalism
- train theatre artists and young people through 'Tamasha Developing Artists'
- facilitate theatremakers to engage creatively with communities and audiences

Founded in 1989 by director Kristine Landon-Smith and actor / playwright Sudha Bhuchar, the company played a key role in driving the crossover of Asian culture into the British mainstream. Successes like *East is East*, *Strictly Dandia* and *The Trouble With Asian Men* has won acclaim from critics and audiences alike.

world. Our first production *Untouchable* was an adaptation of a book by the same name by Mulk Raj Anand and told the story of a latrine sweeper in 1930's India and drew parallels with street life in India today.

The work drew huge new audiences from mainly Indian communities to the Riverside Theatre in Hammersmith and from those early days our company had a momentum of its own. This was largely due to the fact that many venues who were struggling to attract new audiences were taken aback, when with no reputation we managed to find and draw a completely new audience to a venue that had never been able to attract that audience that came in their droves to see our first production. What was also very interesting for the venue was that our audience displayed very different behaviours to other audiences. Our audience thought nothing of travelling 12 miles or more to come to see the work, they often booked in parties of five or more and would also tend to purchase top price tickets. So we were swiftly approached with offers of collaborative partnerships by various producing houses particularly those that had a large Asian constituency on their doorstep that they wanted to attract.

The early reputation we built for ourselves was a double edged sword... We were thrilled to bring audiences to venues for the first time but as artists to also have the label "audience developer" attached had its own pitfalls which I will talk about later in more detail.

My business partner, Sudha Bhuchar who is Punjabi and myself (I should say here that I am half Indian with a Punjabi mother and Australian father) were driven to set up our company when we saw there was very little on our British stages telling stories with contemporary theatre practice about contemporary life of Asian communities around the



Untouchable 1989

How did we bring new audiences to theatres? : we provided product which spoke very directly to particular groups of people . In our minds we wanted our work to speak to all audiences but clearly the particular nature of the work attracted particular audiences and those audiences were hungry for stories about themselves. It was thrilling to witness diverse communities coming to the theatre and seeing their lives represented on stage in London and elsewhere for the first time. Many audience members commented that they had previously felt that the particular theatre venue was “not for the likes of them” but on seeing their stories played out on these stages they were happy to keep coming whilst there was something on offer for “the likes of them”.

The stories and communities we represented were very specific and also distinct from each other eg: The Hindu Sindhi community in House of the Sun, The Birmingham Muslim Punjabi community in Balti Kings, The Gujarati community of North London in Strictly Dandia ...

We were telling specific stories that spoke directly to particular groups of people and critical to our development as a company was the fact that so much of our work was made through a very tangible and deep engagement with these particular communities. House of The Sun was researched in Mumbai and London with the Hindu Sindhi community, Balti Kings in Birmingham amongst the Punjabi Muslim community and Strictly Dandia in the Gujarati areas of North London. (*Strictly* This early engagement sewed the seeds for a growing curiosity, a sense of ownership and advocacy from these communities who then became our audiences. Through their enthusiasm and backing for what we were doing our audiences grew and over our twenty five years we understood that it was this consistent and close engagement that we maintained with our audiences that was a key factor in the development of our organisation.

With the creation of particular product, which brought particular audiences also came opportunities for a community of artists who were desperate for experience and exposure. The architecture we put in place to support these artists was critical and had to be managed carefully. Once we commissioned a piece of work, a date for

production was also attached and there was only one commission in our 25 year history that we had to lose because it was not ready. We had many fearful moments however when writers with a natural flair for dialogue and character with little experience of narrative arcs delivered drafts that seemed to get worse rather than better. In these circumstances however, the priority was to have the work meet it's production date and we always found ways of working that propelled a commission forward. With budgets and reputations at stake it is easy to develop a risk averse approach where new work can stay in development for a protracted period of time and it was our belief that the learning curve found through production deadlines and audience response was a sure way of developing talent.

For actors – there was somewhere to go and we were able to provide those early critical experiences that set artists on their career trajectories : House of the Sun marked the first job for Nina Wadia, (*slide of Nina Wadia*) Archie Panjabi and Sunetra Sarker. East is East in the theatre was a debut for Jimmi Mistri (*slide of Jimmi Mistri*) and Parminder Nagra (*slide of Parminder Nagra*) in the lead role of our Bollywood musical Fourteen Songs Two Weddings and A Funeral was spotted by Gurinder Chaddha and went on to star in the film of Bend It Like Beckham. These actors and many more who have had extremely visible careers in film, television and theatre also became role models for others wanting to broach a career in the entertainment industry with their parents.

Our landmark production East is East in the theatre was described by Chris Smith the Culture Secretary at the time, as the first cross over of culturally diverse work into the main stream. Ayub Khan Din who was the script writer for the stage play went on to write the screen play for East is East, which became one of the biggest grossing films in British cinema history.



I give these examples to demonstrate how from very small beginnings where there is a consistent commitment to particular representations things can grow beyond expectations. Its not a quick fix, it's a long project but has the potential to change the ecology of the arts landscape. Placing “seldom heard voices” centre stage and nurturing the audience for those voices was a 25 year project for me in my work with Tamasha and it's probably not done yet.

Very recently the Chair of the Arts Council Sir Peter Bazalgette gave a speech signalling a “fundamental shift” in the Arts Council's approach to diversity, acknowledging that the Arts are still not reflective of society and that a shared responsibility now needs to be placed on all organisations to make their programme of work more reflective of the communities they serve.

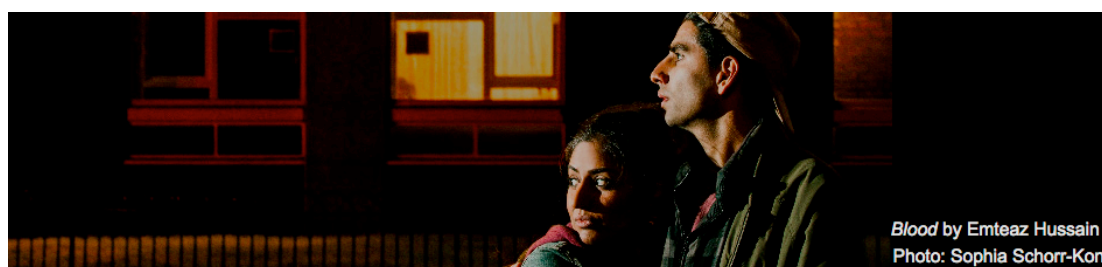
Whilst on the surface this might sound like a positive message from The Arts Council many of us from the “under resourced” BAMER (Black and Minority Ethnic Refugee) sector who had done “a terrific job” as described by Sir Peter, felt nervous that this was an indication that more resources would travel mainstream and that smaller companies would be pushed out.

I wondered on hearing this whether the argument we thought we had won over a long period of time had not been won at all and that we would need to brace ourselves for another twenty five years of persuasion, positioning and lobbying.

Top down agendas can assist but they can also serve to keep you in your place and one needs to be very resilient when gatekeepers resist a consistent programme of work from a broad range of perspectives.

I spoke earlier of the danger of being labelled an “audience developer” first and an artist second. Throughout my career I have had to answer the question: “if this is theatre made by a particular community and for a particular community, it can be seen as community theatre and therefore is it really part of the theatre community?” This constant questioning of quality which comes from viewing work through one lens only is something that I have come up against through my whole career and sadly continue to encounter. This attitude is very damaging to the artist. Not only over time can it erode confidence but left unchallenged it keeps so many out and allows only a certain few in.

In the UK The Arts Council states that 93% of the cultural workforce is white with currently only two theatre buildings black led. The overwhelming majority of BAMER artists work in minority led companies which the mainstream institutions only flirt with. Mainstream institutions cannot represent the range and diversity of voices in BAMER communities and they often overlook or simply cannot see the value of work that some BAMER artists propose. This tension between artists from BAMER backgrounds seeking regular spaces to show their work and the resistance from the main stream to regularly programme this work is one factor that contributes to the sad fact that in 2015 our theatres are still largely monocultural both in terms of the people on stage and the people watching the work.



In Australia in the short time I have been here I have seen three excellent examples of diverse audiences in performance spaces and they each seem to bear out some of the things that I have been discussing.

William Yang’s *Stories Then and Now* achieved a virtually 100% South East Asian audience on the 6pm Saturday evening show that I saw at CarriageWorks. A collaborative venture with Performance 4a which I am sure Annette can speak about

in much greater detail , but I had a sense that their had been a deep and long engagement between the artists and their extended circle of family and friends which then seemed to extend its reach out further to an audience hungry for this work.

The Prophet at Bankstown Arts Centre where BYDS commissioned a work that involved a large number of local artists making responses to the 26 chapters of **Kahlil Gibran's The Prophet** across dance, spoken word poetry, installation, photography, video and visual arts. Each artist seemed to attract their own following and I also got a sense that the audience felt a sense of ownership : the Arts Centre really was there for them, a place that could be used regularly for their creative endeavours.

And similarly more recently at Blacktown Arts Centre Leyli and Majnun where a diverse group of artists told this Arabic love story with a multi lingual text and a range of different musical traditions which also seemed to draw a diverse audience enthralled by the particularity of the style and content.

I am off the opinion that there must be an infrastructure in place for smaller companies and single artists who create culturally diverse work on a consistent basis to thrive. It is these companies and individuals who know their own communities, know how to bring their stories with nuance and complexity to our stages and know how to bring audiences for that work along with them. But the relationships we forge must be meaningful and honest – they can't be of a tick box culture where there is not real curiosity and desire for work that sits outside certain parameters and ways of working. If we want diversity in our stories and audiences then the only way to go is through rich and meaningful relationships with the people who live and breathe this reality on a daily basis.

Thankyou.