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"Change the World One Play at a Time": Playwright and Activist Rahul Varma on Socially-engaged, Diasporic Theatre in Canada

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"You turned my crime against my wife into a crime against the colour of our bloody skin. You abused us. You wanted to win..." (Rahul Varma, *Counter Offence*, 1995:77)

Biography

- 1 Diasporic drama stands out as a unique site of reflection and debate, a place that both brings the community together, and informs the society at large about marginalized groups. It is also a place where both the community and the nation-states (of origin and of installation) can be questioned and challenged by socially-engaged playwrights. According to Aparna Dharwadker, "In Canada ... an emergent culture of original playwriting and performance has offered a critique of the nation-state as well as of conditions in the diaspora" (Dharwadker 2003:305).
- 2 Rahul Varma is a Canadian playwright of Indian origin. He is also a life-long activist, who explores the intersections of racial, gendered and socio-economic marginalization, and uses drama as a powerful and interactive means to create "a shared social space in which visible minorities are recognized as different but equal" (Varma 2009:193–94).
- 3 Rahul Varma was born and grew up in Uttar Pradesh, India. He came to Montreal in 1975, at the age of 24, and co-founded the Teesri Dunya Theatre in 1981—the first socially-engaged and multicultural theatre in Canada—thus paving the way for a few others. In 1998, he co-founded the quarterly *alt.theatre: cultural diversity and the stage*. He

was awarded honorary membership by the Canadian Association for Theatre Research, and The Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Award (EDI) by the Conseil des Arts de Montréal and the Montreal English Theatre Awards Committee. He also received a special Juror's Award from the Quebec Drama Federation, and the South Asian Theatre Festival Award. His work, written and performed in English, has been translated into French, Italian, Hindi and Punjabi, and been performed in North America as well as India.

- 4 What stands out in Rahul Varma's productions is his artistic rendition of historical facts and multi-layered socio-economic issues, staged in different locations and interpreted by a very diverse cast of actors. Through his plays, he contributes to informing a large public on a wide spectrum of inter-connected themes which cover globalized capitalism, environment and development issues (*Bhopal* 2001), the marginalization of Indigenous people in Canada (*The Land where the Trees Talk* 1998), migration and exploitation (*No Man's Land* 1995), the interplay between domestic violence and racism (*Counter Offence* 1995), war and occupation in Iraq (*Truth and Treason* 2017). He also gives his audience an opportunity to speak up during post-performance discussions, forums, or interactive, therapeutic sessions for victims of trauma such as racism or sexual violence.
- 5 Beyond the stage, Rahul Varma gives of himself for the causes he defends. The year after the Bhopal disaster,¹ he ran a marathon to raise awareness and funds for the victims. To keep the memory of the tragedy alive, he did a 36 hour fast on the 35th anniversary of Union Carbide's explosion, in 2020. He is a member of a number of militant associations, and he tirelessly writes columns, signs petitions or presents papers calling for a better representation of diversity and a fairer distribution of resources.
- 6 In this interview, Rahul Varma was invited to discuss the conjunction of his reflective approach about his personal journey as a Canadian of Indian origin, his artistic production as a ground-breaking playwright, and his active mobilization in favor of social justice, pluralism and gender equity. This conversation, which aims at better understanding the multi-layered mobilization of South Asian activists in Canada, was conducted in a socially distanced format, transcribed and annotated (in footnotes) by the author, and edited by Rahul Varma.

Figure 1

Rahul Varma, Playwright, Activist and Director of the Teesri Duniya.

Credit: Teesri Duniya.

ANOUCK CARSIGNOL (AC): Rahul Varma, what brought you from India to Canada, of all places?

RAHUL VARMA (RV): I came here to join my family, who was already here. My father came to Montreal first in 1959, to do his PhD at McGill, after which he stayed here. We were left behind with my mother, my sister and my brother. We came in 1975. The goal was to re-unite us but that didn't work out and my family fragmented. I stayed here, in Quebec.

AC: In 1981, you co-founded the Teesri Duniya Theatre (Third World Theatre), a socio-politically engaged stage dedicated to the promotion of pluralism, the first of its kind in Canada. What made you an activist? Did anything trigger your sense of social justice, or was it in line with your family's values?²

RV: My activism is a combination of both, but it predates my coming to Canada. I regard myself as having been an activist for as long as I can think of. I was born in Uttar Pradesh, in a rural setting, and I grew up in a very stratified society in terms of rights and wealth. The caste issue was prominent. It was very clear to me that this was not right. My greatest influences were my grandparents—at a very early stage, they taught me that this had to change. My grandfather was a farmer and a teacher. My grandmother was not formally educated, and worked with him on the farm. They were not comfortable with that situation of socio-economic stratification. They gave me a streak to see the world differently from what it was. When I moved to the city of Lucknow to pursue my education, all these things became intensified. The caste system was so blatant, so prominently taught by teachers, neighbors; it was impossible to avoid it. I grew to oppose this. So I trace my activism back to my

childhood; my growing up in rural India, watching Dalits grow more conscious, watching land violations. The seeds were sown there.

AC: Did migration amplify your awareness of social justice?

RV: Yes. There were several layers to this. In the South Asian community, which I come from, there is a dominant drive to maintain traditions. I am happy with my heritage and my background but I was not happy with certain traditions, such as the excessive religiosity, which bleeds into social division, whether that be in relation to caste issues, sectarianism, or communalism, effectively resulting in a Hindu-Brahmin dominance in India. I had to question that. There was a transference of the ideas that I had grown up with. Watching those same ideas unfolding here in Canada, I reacted to them in an oppositional manner. At the same time, it was also very clear that there was a disparity between people from the "Third World" countries, and the kind of treatment they received in the "First World." Exploitation of workers and immigrants was quite prevalent. I realized that I was encountering the situation of the Third World, in the First. That is when this whole sense came that the discrimination on the basis of race, gender and nationality that had taken its roots in Canada, had to be countered. So the struggle did not change, it expanded, in some sense.

In India, I was aware of the First Nations' situation in Canada. When I picked up my visa, in the Canadian High Consulate, I saw a pamphlet saying that the First Nations and the Explorers bartered in Canada. I knew that the settlers had not bartered, they colonized. That historical lie was told to me even before coming to Canada. When I came here, I saw that First Nations' conditions were very depressed, they were worse than the conditions of new immigrants. Their numbers had declined, they had no control over their resources, they lived in reserves. They needed our solidarity. I connected with them, presenting the plays on their plight and their struggle.

AC: What made you choose theatre as a way to call for social justice and to give voice to marginalized groups?

RV: Multiple factors. Theatre is a very powerful medium of communication, where the product and the means of communication is prepared by you and presented to the public. Interactivity is an important factor. You cannot just watch my play and go home. There is an open invitation to the audience to discuss the play. It is a practice that we started and that is common now. Many companies organize talk backs, seminars. Whatever was referred to as a dialectic at the time has become a conventional practice. Now, even school foundations give funds to initiate such conversations.

I am deeply interested in creating art with a sense of duty. I do not want to create art only because it achieves certain aesthetics. I pay a lot of attention to the craft, the dialogue has to be delivered right, the actors, the design have to be right because it adds to the impact that is being produced. Once you begin to do something with artistic duty, it becomes more acceptable to the public.

When I first came to Canada I saw the theatre, I saw the stage, the actors, the dance floor... It was all very monochromatic. People of color were not there at all, they were not there in presence, they were not there in content. If they appeared at all, it was in marginal roles.

Now, representation is very important in any society that is diverse. Representation is best seen when it is on the screen, in the literature or on the stage. The drive to have a representation of diversity as an expression of the Canadian nation was an important factor when I started Teesri Duniya Theatre. From the very inception, I had an inclusive approach, dedicated to presenting work for the minorities, but always interacting with the rest of the group, so the minorities were interacting with each other, as well as in relation to the dominant group. I use the word "dominant" on purpose, because there is a stratification, there is a dominance and a marginalization, and it is important to work with it. I think theatre was very colonized, and Canada was aware of it. It was aware, and it did not care. Now, Canada is taking note that theatre is colonized and wants to rectify it, it is struggling to rectify, and that is a good thing. This is what gave me the idea to start a company that would address all those things from a progressive point of view.

Teesri Duniya Theatre is primarily a Canadian theatre; it is committed to diversity and is a politically relevant theatre that speaks for social change; it has a decidedly political mandate which is expressed in our moniker "*Change the World One Play at a Time*." We respect the idea that theatre by its very nature is a subversive art that affects change within society.

AC: In diasporic literature, there used to be a prevalent sense of loss and nostalgia for the homeland. In your work and the work of other playwrights of South Asian origin, such as Rana Bose³ or Sadhu Binning,⁴ nostalgia for the homeland has been replaced by a more militant narrative encompassing not only the homeland, but also the country of adoption, and other communities as well. Your generation inaugurated a new style of activist theatre that has changed the scene of Drama in Canada. Does this make your work less diasporic, more cosmopolitan? Is it a sign that the South Asian diaspora is taking root in Canada?

RV: Yes, Rana Bose, Sadhu Binning and I didn't do theatre reminiscing nostalgia for the homeland; dealing with local realities was more important. Sadhu Binning's work is very important. It is very dedicated to the Punjabi working class, and focuses on addressing immigrant issues in the context of his local community in British Columbia. Rana Bose is a theatre artist, an activist, and the founder of the ground-breaking magazine *Montreal Serai*. His theatre presents socially relevant art in a multitude of diverse mediums, and is the first of its kind in that regard. Of all of us, I was very dedicated to mainstream theatre.

The work I do covers three areas: 1. Culturally diverse plays on local themes with burning social need; 2. Global themes with local significance; and 3. Diversifying into new areas: disability, sexual orientation, life-style and mental health.

However, global themes mean less to us if Canada is excluded from the plot. Similarly, culturally diverse plays also mean less to us if they deal exclusively with material from the playwright's ancestral country at the expense of exploring intercultural experiences occurring locally. We choose culturally diverse plays that maintain a dual vision of the world and transcend differences in culture, color, race, gender, sexuality, and politics.

AC: This year is the 40th anniversary of the creation of the Teesri Duniya theatre. Do you still meet resistance or opposition in the processes of showing a play, fundraising and getting recognition?

RV: I meet resistance all the time, but it is not cultural resistance. The work I do is progressive, and progressive theatre always comes into conflict with what is

conventional. People have a larger tendency to dismiss the political theatre more than the theatre of the minorities. Many minorities attune their work to suit the needs of the dominant group, and make it more "exotic" rather than more meaningful. I don't do that. Rana Bose doesn't do it. More and more companies don't do it. Political resistance: I expect it and it is a good thing, it gives me an opportunity to open a discussion.

AC: Where does the resistance come from?

RV: Resistance comes from multiple, different sources: it comes from the South Asian community, which is largely focused on saving face as opposed to challenging the status quo to critically engage with issues. It comes from the dominant community, and it does come from the fight of Quebec nationalism versus Canada. This to me is more of a colonial battle which solidifies cultural stratification and biases; it is a nationalist struggle on land stolen from Indigenous peoples, so it has no value. But it gives us more opportunities for discussion.

Among the difficulties, funding is a big problem. I didn't get any funding until 1995, and the reason is totally racial. Prior to 1995, our initial support was from the South Asian community, in particular from an organization called *Indian People's Association in North America* (IPANA).

In Canada, new regulations were instated in the early '90s to guarantee racial equality in the Arts; that opened up new funding opportunities. Companies such as mine, which are more progressive, diverse, and actually endorse a more national view, gained access to funding opportunities. This improved our activities and our ability to pay our actors. Now, we have an office. Before, it was denied to us. Is there an inequity? Yes. And it is racialized. The companies here, whose outlook was very colonial, who were producing very Eurocentric, monochromatic, upper class plays, are still doing the same, and are still benefitting from the larger portion of the funding. That disparity does exist. Yet the system opened up, there are more people doing other things and getting funding, and we are part of that.

Not only did we get public funding, but we did it without giving up our progressive tone as a theatre. It is very important that the Canadian system acknowledges the professional accreditation of actors of color. I was very interested in actors of color getting salaries for their artistic labor; I was very interested in joining actors' unions and the Professional Association of Canadian Theatre, and paying everyone a fair salary. I am clear about that. The politics doesn't prevent me from professionalism. I have a professional, political theatre.

Quebec is a different problem. It has a hard time acknowledging diversity. It doesn't make sense to me that a Province that has gone through a Quiet Revolution—and rightly so—is not able to see beyond its very Franco-ethnic viewpoint. Quebec is about 50 years behind in terms of acknowledging diversity. Quebec's definition of diversity is that anyone who comes from outside is diverse. The standard Canadian definition is that visually identifiable minorities such as people of color, and groups such as the disabled community, the LGBTQIA2S+ community, that are generally marginalized on the basis of appearance, identity or ability, constitute diversity. Quebec has to do some serious thinking as to what its view of Others is, but it is changing. Ideologically, Quebec opposes multiculturalism, and promotes interculturalism instead.⁵ I think that is foolish. The recognition of cultural identities

(as equal) is essential to establish inter-community relationships. If you don't do that, you are talking about a very homogeneous model, which is not working. I think interculturalism and multiculturalism are two sides of the same coin. They depend on each other.

AC: Is there any progress in terms of inter-community relations and solidarity, in Quebec and in Canada?

RV: Has there been more unity and more relations across cultures? Yes. It has been triggered by difficult times. In Herouxville, Quebec, the mayor had passed a resolution banning flogging, stoning, the hijab, excision etc... creating fear, in a small town where there were no people of color, no Muslims, no women with a hijab, no Sikhs with a turban. This led Jean Charest to establish the Bouchard-Taylor Commission.⁶ It was a road show, but it made good recommendations, stating that communities should connect with each other. For this to happen, there has to be government support. It has not been supplemented financially. Then it was followed up with the Charter of Values (2013), Law 21 (2019) and Bill 61 (2020). All that to say that Quebec is struggling very hard with knowledge and representation of other communities within its society. In reaction, minorities began to connect with each other better. A sense of solidarity across communities began to emerge through a recognition of similar struggles that stem from the same systems. An example of this is the solidarity between First Nation communities and various ethno-cultural visible minority groups. This can be seen in practice through looking at the multicultural demographics at local protests. This comes from a basic phenomenon which is that once there is repression, there is resistance, unity and solidarity. Now governments are aware of the importance of representing diversity. In that way, I think things have moved forward.

AC: For the past 60 years, Canada has seen immigrants of color coming in and diversifying the population, which was, until then, mostly of European descent. The second and third generation grew up in a multicultural society where diversity is promoted as the national identity, a source of pride. They embraced pluralism in all its forms: inter-marriage, food, music, cinema, literature, theatre. Will these generations naturally change Canada's landscape and mentality? What else can bring communities together?

RV: All this is happening, but that is only one aspect. Diversity by itself is not sufficient. You need a socialist state. If there isn't a proper and equitable distribution of resources, of public goods, then eventually people will once again be fragmented, and the triggering factor will be race and ethnicity. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that inter-cultural relationships, inter-marriage, all that is very good, it is happening but it has to be backed-up by economic equalization.

AC: Last year, George Floyd's killing epitomized anti-Black police brutality and anti-Black racism, in North America but also in the world at large. In response to this tragedy, a large number of South Asians in the diaspora have shown support to Black Lives Matter (BLM).⁷ Whether this inter-ethnic solidarity is pure tokenism or deeply sincere, this movement generated a debate about racial biases and prompted a public, collective introspection among people of South Asian origin themselves. One year later, what is left of this inter-group solidarity and infra-community introspection?

RV: It is a little bit of everything. George Floyd's killing became an event because of the words he used: "I can't breathe," that went viral. It produced a dramatic impact across the world. That doesn't deny the fact that Black people have been killed before, and they continue to be killed as we talk. But the South Asian community was

forced to look into it, and came out, in large part, to publicly speak in favor of BLM, to the point that some have formed their organizations in support of BLM, and I was part of that. A colleague and dancer, Ina Bhowmick, started that movement: *South Asian Canadians for Change*.

At the same time, there was also a recognition that colorism in the South Asian community is an ancient problem. As much as they see the political advantage there is in connecting with the Black community, South Asians are also aware of the fact that historically, they had held a disapproval and disregard for darker-skinned people within their own community. We had to do some soul searching, and that was very good. Because of this tragedy, members of the community were forced to say things that they were not able to express before. You see, India is a country where celebrities advertise whitening skin creams. They clearly indicate that your color should be fair. In other countries, it would be classified as racist. In South Asia, it is considered normal. Every movement triggers a certain degree of re-evaluation of the society and inter-community relationships. BLM did that in a profound way, and I am pleased that the South Asian community got politicized because of that.

At the same time, I have to say that a large part of the Indian community is very pro-Modi, who is extremely nationalist, racist and fundamentalist—he is a divider and a communalist. That contradiction exists in the South Asian diaspora.

AC: There is a tradition of activism within the South Asian community in North America, that goes back to the Ghadar movement.⁸ The South Asian diaspora in Canada mobilized against discrimination and for social justice. It focused not only on the homeland, but also on the diasporic community and on the society at large. How would you define South Asian activism in Canada today?

RV: Today, there is nothing that can be compared to the Ghadar movement. The Ghadar had a very clear call for global justice, it was fighting the repercussions of, or the fallout of India's independence, and it was very dedicated to the working and the farming class in South Asia and in the diaspora. By the 1970s, some of those movements that became more politicized on the political-left lacked unity and were unable to come together against the common enemy, capitalism. As a result, that kind of movement doesn't exist anymore. But movements for the rights of the lower classes, women, Dalits... have sprung up all over. It is more a rights-based movement. Environment is also a key factor, a federative movement where the community can get together. South Asians are part of global human rights, environmental and feminist movements.

At the same time, there is a religious movement among the South Asian community in the West, and it is not very good. As much as religion is important, it is very politicized, very tied to dominant, national, majoritarian discourse. Today in Canada, most of the Hindu temples are very tied to Modi. There is a transference of traditions and ideologies from South Asia to North America, and it has its downsides. Many people have come here; some of them are progressive and some are reactionary.

Overall there is a feminist movement, a human rights movement, an environmental movement, and an artistic movement, that are global. South Asians who grew up here are fighting for these causes. There are many social services and organizations, community centers, focused on education, language, human rights, arts and culture... Those are much more in line with people's struggles.

Figure 2

A Leaf in the Whirlwind (2007) featuring Aparna Sindhoor and Anil Natyaveda. Playwright and Director: Aparna Sindhoor. A creation of the Teesri Duniya Theatre.

Photo by Amar Khoday.

AC: In your plays, you focus not only on the South Asian community in Canada, but also on other vulnerable groups such as women, Indigenous people, children in countries at war, people of color. One key word that describes Teesri Duniya is intersectionality. Do you find that your position as a Canadian of Indian origin allows you to dissociate yourself from both the nation-state and from the community, in order to question issues such as power relations, patriarchy, racism etc...?

RV: I would say partially yes to both. There is no disconnection with the country of my birth, it is rather a selection. I remain connected to India through my family, and on some restricted areas: human rights, women's rights, war and peace, environmental justice. I do not particularly align myself with electoral politics in my country of origin; that is something very domestic and the people who live there day-to-day are in a better position to decide.

In my plays, I use my experience of the West, and the knowledge of the country of my birth, and that gives me an advantage. In the play *Bhopal* (2001), India was side-by-side with Canada and the USA through characters, situations, stories. All those identities were woven into the play itself. I decided not to do the conventional thing that was being done on industrial disasters, which is to say that machines behaved badly. It was not the machines, but people who behaved badly. It was the corporate people versus the common people. Multinationalism played a big role in the Bhopal disaster. The generation of the people who have been affected by that, the pregnant women and the children that were to be born, that was the major aspect I wanted to cover. I was able to see all these problems through the prism of internationalism,

feminism, human rights, anti-industrialization and anti-globalization. So intersectionality⁹ for me is about finding a meeting point between otherwise distinctly defined identities, by combining them into the same story. It may be easy to isolate one identifying factor and discuss it theoretically, but in practice people hold multiple identities at once that often intertwine, compete and coexist. It was not establishing the boundaries but rather meeting at the cross-section of all the complexities. My problem is to be a hyphen, Indo-Canadian. It is the source of all my troubles. (*chuckles*)

AC: Isn't this hyphen an advantage, that allows you to complexify our perception of social and power relations, individual and collective identities, and that pushes us to rethink categories, to question our behavior, and to feel more connected to the world? Being a person of Indian origin in Canada seems to have given you not only the "double-consciousness" of "here" and "there" described by Du Bois¹⁰ but also a multiple-consciousness or "omni-sensibility" to social, racial and sexual injustice, that transcends time, space and national, ethnic or gender borders.

RV: Yes. That has been my approach. In my play *Truth and Treason* (2017) on the war on Iraq, I basically refuted the notion of the war on terror and 9/11, because there were many 9/11s that had happened before. So much material is written in the West about the war, about PTSD experienced by returning soldiers. Here is the dilemma. These soldiers went on a wrongful political escapade initiated by their leaders. They were involved in the destruction of lives, property, and as a consequence, they suffered trauma. They came back here and we are supposed to sympathize with them. But who is sympathizing for the 650,000 Iraqis who died?

Similarly, I wrote the play *State of Denial* (2012), on the Armenian and Rwandan genocides. The two of them were put together and characters interacted in Canada, so Canada becomes a meeting ground for two events that happened a hundred years apart. Our world is so interconnected, our relationships are so interdependent, that stories have to be created in a manner where all the competing political forces can be brought together to manifest themselves in a dramatic way.

One of the most prominent examples of that is our play *Counter Offence* (1995), on violence against women, intersecting with race. Racism must end, gendered violence must also end, but what do you do when the two collide with each other? If you do a play on racism, to establish the virtue or lack of it, it is going to be re-telling a story we already know. If you do a play on violence against women, we know what moral side we have to stand on. But if you connect the two of them, then you get a better picture of the basic political, social forces that are colliding with each other. In *Counter Offence* we see gendered violence perpetrated by a husband. At the same time, we have racialized policing systems, and a lawyer whose long-term mission in his work has been to tackle them. So what intersectionality allows me to do is not to look at dramatic conflicts in a standard way, but to tackle competing and simultaneous realities, competing conflicts, and sometimes conflicts of virtues themselves.

For the public, it becomes very clear. Issues are relational. When you create a story that is relational, it only gives you a sense of clarity. Take the questions of race and violence. The issue is not that race becomes an excuse to perpetuate violence. It is that if this is the case, then there is a reason to hate racism more than we are hating it. And that is the message that comes out of *Counter Offence*.

AC: Political theatre is a privileged arena for the debate on identity. A diasporic, intersectional perspective adds other layers of complexity to political theatre, that makes it unique. Where does Teesri Duniya Theatre stand in Canada's contemporary drama stage?

RV: It is important to see the power dynamics and structures. We all come from a position of deprivation. Therefore, the interpretation of struggles is slightly different. In Canada, there is a political theatre. Many years ago, there was a play called *8-Men Speak* (1993). It was working-class theatre and it was shut down. Later on, more plays came out on a political stand, but they did not tackle the power structures.

A good example is that after 9/11, there was a large body of plays written on war. There were very few that talked about militarization and the complexity of war. Most of the plays focused on the American soldiers, their sacrifice, their missing sexual contact, their suffering, their PTSD, and their complaining about the government, which simplified world politics.... Very few had a representation of Iraqis in their characters. *Truth and Treason* (2017) was one of the few. It was not picked up by most places. I had to struggle very hard to make a place for that play. Now this play stands out. Most plays are about the soldiers, not about the war.

When you are not diasporic, when you present things from the point of view of conventional power structures, your representation is still colonized. Here is another example: a few weeks ago, Israel attacked Gaza and killed more than 260 Palestinians. There are major organizations here in Montreal, I am on the board of some of them. Not a single one was allowed to make a public statement about the war. There is a trail from how 9/11 is viewed, to the way the strike on Gaza is viewed. The silence is deafening.

AC: When you present your plays in India, how are they received?

RV: Two of my plays have been presented extensively in India. Bhopal has been translated into Hindi and Punjabi and has been very well received. The critique I have received is that Bhopal is a more comprehensive play than what has been written in India.

The other is *Truth and Treason*. They have both done very well in India. But the community in India is a bit confused: people want to know if I am from India or from Canada. In Canada, I want to be recognized as a Canadian, I have a passport, I pay my taxes, my daughter was born here, that's where my family is and that's where I cast my vote, so I want to be recognized as equal to the rest of my fellow Canadians. But in India, people are not sure whether they should consider me as an Indian or as a Canadian.

AC: How different is activist theatre in India from activist diasporic theatre in Canada?

RV: The two differ both in form and content. From what I have seen India's activist theatre is deeply concerned with the everyday issues that impact people's lives, e.g. poverty, social injustice, racism, casteism, government callousness, religious rivalry, land-relations, and so on. I can think of groups like Lt. Gursharan Singh's Amritsar Natak Kala Kender and Sudhanva Deshpande's Janam. These theatre groups do not invite people to their venues, instead they travel to communities and perform in their localities. Such a theatre has made a huge impact on people's lives. The power of theatre is well recognized, hence many community and interest groups use theatre to convey their messages. Non-activist theatre, which is how I would categorize the

proscenium arch theatre performed at established venues, is generally concerned with the urban middle and upper classes, doing what is pleasing to the senses rather than work that is politically engaging. Too often they perform lavish epic stories (Ramayana, Mahabharata), and translations or adaptation of Western plays or classics, which are often an escape from the social reality we live under. While activist theatre in India may lack resources, it engages with real issues; in contrast, generally, the non-activist theatre, while well-resourced and lavish in form, is escapist in content.

In Canada the activist theatre clearly defines itself as political, such as Teesri Duniya Theatre, dealing with issues of social justice across class, gender, and race. It is deeply concerned with minorities and marginalized communities. There is a rich tradition of activist theatre among the LGBTQ+ communities, highlighting issues related to sexual identities. By its very nature, Indigenous theatre is always an activist theatre. It stands out from the rest in the ways it tells indigenous stories about healing, reconciliation and the trauma that communities have experienced due to colonialism. The conventional mainstream Canadian theatre has certain elements of social justice and feminism, but overall it is only acutely aware of the colonial legacy it carries on. There is a healthy body of non-urban theatre among the farming communities, and there is little in the way of working-class theatre.

AC: Where do you draw the line between inter/multiculturalism and cultural appropriation?

RV: Multiculturalism is an egalitarian cultural context suited to substitute bi-cultural dominance with cultural diversity, one in which people of different cultures can maintain their cultural heritage whilst being a part of a larger social fabric. Multiculturalism is a framework to tell the stories of communities that are marginalized by the dominant cultures. Interculturalism allows communities to interact with each other as equals. Occurrences of cultural appropriation are frequent, and in most cases artists of dominant cultures appropriate expressions from minority cultures that the minority cultures are not able to present themselves due to systemic discrimination. Cultural appropriation is an assertion of power by the dominant groups; it misrepresents people, their history and takes away agency from the very people whose stories are being appropriated. Cultural appropriation is a historical distortion, as it simulates rather than represents other peoples' stories. I wrote an article on cultural appropriation in the context of Robert Lepage using white actors to act as cotton pickers. It was an ugly act by one of Canada's foremost artists.

An alternative to cultural appropriation is cultural exchange, in which people from diverse cultures and ethnicities would come together as distinct equals to learn from each other and create art. Inter/multiculturalism allows that exchange without compromising the authenticity of identities, histories, and specifics.

AC: As a concluding remark, there is a tendency for academic researchers, political discourses and media to define diasporas as conservative and traditional, whose members typically mobilize for external pluralism in their host society so their specificities are recognized, and at the same time mobilize in favor of internal homogeneity within their community, to preserve their identity. It is interesting to see how you stand out, mobilizing

for a better representation of diversity at the society level, without making your theatre culturally exclusive, at the community level.

RV: I am opposed to cultural homogeneity in India and I am opposed to it in Canada. It is not natural; from their origin, human societies have been strengthened by diversity. Differences are natural. Homogeneity is not a virtue for any society. The country that I come from, India, as well as the neighboring countries like Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Afghanistan, and for that matter the rest of the world has been heterogeneous by origin. Canada is not homogenous. Pre-colonial Canada was similarly not homogenous. The Indigenous communities that are the custodians of this land were multicultural and multilingual prior to western contact, and remain so to this day. Diversity is as ancient as our origins. Homogenization is a form of religious or majoritarian nationalism. My work and the work of Teesri Duniya Theatre is defined by heterogeneity as opposed to homogeneity; multiculturalism as opposed to mono or biculturalism; diversity as opposed to uniformity.

Teesri Duniya Theatre doesn't intend to be an exclusive theatre; it is an inclusive organization creating politically relevant theatre aligned with social justice and human dignity.

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NOTES

1. On December 2nd, 1984, the Union Carbide India Limited (UCIL) pesticide plant in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh, leaked and released a highly toxic gas (methyl isocyanate) into the city. Official reports claim 3,787 deaths and civil organizations estimate that up to 25,000 people died weeks or months after the tragedy. More than 600,000 people suffered long-term injuries or health effects. The victims of Bhopal are still waiting for justice, and are particularly vulnerable to other health hazards such as the current COVID-19 pandemic.
2. Rahul Varma's father, Daya Ram Varma, founded, supported or influenced progressive organizations such as the Indian Peoples Association in North America (IPANA), South Asia Research and Resource Center (CERAS), Kabir Cultural Center, the South Asia Women's Community Center, and many others. As a secularist, he championed the cause of peace, social justice and human and minority rights in the sub-continent. He mobilized in particular in favor of the de-nuclearization and the de-militarization of India and Pakistan, and against religious extremism in both countries. Rahul Varma's mother-in-law, Shree Mulay, is a professor, an administrator, a researcher and also a community activist. She directed the McGill Centre for Research and Teaching on Women and she has dedicated her life to Women's Empowerment, in the South Asian community, in South Asia as well as among the First Nations.
3. Rana Bose is a Canadian playwright and novelist of Indian origin, living in Montreal, QC. In his plays, set either in Canada or in India, he explores the theme of social injustice and protest, and gives it a global resonance.
4. Sadhu Binning is also a Canadian playwright and poet of Indian origin, living in Vancouver, BC. He co-founded "Vancouver Sath," a theatre whose plays were devoted to societal issues encountered by the South Asian community—blue collar groups in particular—in Canada.
5. In Canada, multiculturalism was adopted in 1971 as the national motto, which aimed at making diversity the new mainstream identity of the country. In response to what was perceived as an attempt to dilute its distinct identity, the Province of Quebec adopted interculturalism, which defends inter-community dialogue in a majoritarian setting defined by Quebecer French language and culture, and Catholic religion (Jopkka 2018).
6. Quebec's Consultation Commission on Accommodation Practices Related to Cultural Differences was launched by premier Jean Charest in 2007.
7. BLM is a liberation, anti-racist movement, based in the USA, Canada and the UK, founded in 2013 in response to the acquittal of Trayvon Martin's murderer. It aims at eradicating police brutality and achieving social justice in particular for Afro-Americans, who are among the main victims of structural racism in North America.
8. The *Ghadar* (Revolt) movement was an international liberation movement founded in 1913 in the United States and particularly active on the West coast of the USA and Canada until 1917. Its two main goals, which were interconnected, were to defend the farmers and workers of South Asian origin in the diaspora, and to overthrow British rule in India (Puri 1980).

9. Intersectionality is a term that was coined by Kimberle W. Crenshaw in 1989 to describe the fact that interconnected individual characteristics such as ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion or physical health, combine and influence power, privilege and oppression.

10. W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co., 1903.

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