

Mother in Another Language

A South Asian American play conveys the balancing act between cultures with touching characters.

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Meenakshi Rishi as Meena, Nitya Venkateswaran as Nalini and Angela DiMarco as Karen in a scene from ReAct's world premiere of "Mother in Another Language." Photo credit: David Hsieh.

Communication and collaboration are the watchwords of an upcoming theatre production, "Mother in Another Language."

Presented jointly by ReACT, Pratidhwani, and The Central Heating Lab at ACT Theatre, "Mother in Another Language" is co-directed by David Hsieh and Agastya Kohli, and had its roots in an earlier collaboration between Pratidhwani and a non-profit organization, People for Progress in India (PPI).

"PPI invited Pratidhwani to be the 'entertainment' portion for their annual fundraiser," explains Kohli, the Drama Wing Lead for Pratidhwani since 2005. "They were looking for a theatrical presentation that would appeal to a mixed 50-50 Indian and American audience."

Kohli searched for scripts, and found "a very fun and funny script" written by Taniya Hossain. "The play was a little longer than what PPI was looking for, but it was perfect in all other ways. I discussed the idea with the organizers, and we decided to present it as a staged play reading."

Later, Kohli approached Hsieh about developing a full production. "It was obvious to me that this is not an exclusively south Asian story," Kohli says. "This is as much an American story as it is Bengali, and the only way to do justice to this play is to guarantee that every performance of this play attracts a cultural mix of audience."

Kohli believed collaboration was the best way to achieve this goal. "While Pratidhwani will do what it can to reach out to the mainstream audience, our patrons are still primarily south Asian," he says. "The best way to produce this show would be to do it as a joint collaboration with another theatre company so that between the two partners, we can reach a diverse audience base."

Hsieh agreed. "It was a charming script which I thought fit well with our mission," Hsieh says, "and so we started looking for a venue and good time to schedule it."

Hsieh also reports, "We'd been talking with ACT about presenting as part of Central Heating Lab for the past year, but it seemed like their available slots were often when Pratidhwani or ReAct were busy with other projects of our own until now."

Hsieh and Kohli report that their collaboration has had the benefit of several years of working on projects, primarily at ReACT. "Agastya and I have a great working relationship," Hsieh says. "It's nice to be able to share the responsibilities, and also have an expert source of knowledge regarding the ethnic elements of the production."

Kohli, for his part, feels this collaboration is a good next step, after serving as Hsieh's assistant director on previous ReACT productions. "I learned a lot from working on these shows with David, while in parallel, I was developing and growing my own directorial skills on Pratidhwani productions," Kohli says.

"This project is a great experience to once again collaborate with David – to learn from his experience and to contribute to it, from my cultural vantage point," Kohli reports. "ReAct's mission to produce theatre with multi-ethnic casting, and Pratidhwani's objective to create acting opportunities for south Asian artists are mutually compatible – almost as an extension of each other. To work on a play about mixed cultures and races, while bringing that same mix to our production has been a very enriching and fun experience so far."

Executing that collaboration in the theatre venue of a third collaborator, ACT Theatre, has added another level of complication to the production. "The Bullitt Cabaret is a unique performance space, and creating a basement mother-in-law apartment with many specific requirements has been a challenge," Hsieh says.

Add in the actors, from both the South Asian performance community and the professional Seattle theatre community, and the project was ripe for the complexity of ensemble theatrical collaboration.

To help smoothe the process, Kohli and Hsieh decided to cast actor Waylan Sharples, who had played Blanch in the earlier staged reading for Pratidhwani. "I was thrilled to be included in this production," Sharples says. "Blanch is unlike any mother I've

ever played and has allowed me to look at the challenge of a single mom forced to make ends meet however she can.”

The two South Asian actors were drawn to the play’s theme and have learned from the artistic team. Bikas Saha, who plays the role of Tarak, has found a welcoming environment in which to nurture his blossoming acting skills. “I have been only involved in Pratidhwani events in the past and this was a great opportunity to interact with people from a diverse set of backgrounds, both cultural and technical,” he says.

Nitya Venkateswaran, in the role of Nalini, adds: “I think the play portrays a realistic picture of what South Asians might experience when trying to balance two cultures in a funny and touching manner. As a South Asian American, I can relate to how the characters negotiate their relationships with the added influence of cultural taboos.”

Kohli, in particular, was surprised by the depth of potential disagreement about the play text, “the amount of time we ended up spending in reading and understanding the play!”

He explains: “This is a story of misunderstandings, miscommunication, and misinterpretation – some of it driven by individuals, and how they differ from each other. But some of it caused by the differences in their cultural preconceptions and language barriers.”

Playwright Taniya Hossain purposely planted most of these miscommunications in the script. “While the characters are written to fall into some of these obvious traps, what was unexpected for me,” Kohli reports, “was that all the actors interpreted them so differently from each other, that we had to spend hours discussing each scene, to truly understand the motivation and objectives of each character.”

Angela DiMarco, who plays the role of Karen, says, “Working with actors, non-actors, and two directors is a very different process than I am used to. But everyone shows up to rehearsal and gives one hundred percent to telling this story.”

Kohli confirms the fruitfulness of the ensemble’s work. “The fact that we as actors had the same problems understanding each other, as the characters do in this play, is nothing but a compliment to the writing, and is a great indication of how easy it will be for our audiences to relate to this story!”

“Mother in Another Language” runs from February 18 to March 6, at ACT Theatre, 700 Union St., Seattle.