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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

extremist in the U.S.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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