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A Vancouver Guldasta: welcome nuance

October 4, 2018 by [Colin Thomas](#) [Leave a Comment](#)



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Rani (Arshdeep Purba) hugs her mom Niranjana (Gunjan Kundhal) in *A Vancouver Guldasta*. (Photo by Paneet Singh)

It was like meeting real people. And they took me places I'd never been.

In *A Vancouver Guldasta*, playwright Paneet Singh introduces us to the Dhaliwals, a Sikh Punjabi family living in South Vancouver in 1984. It's June. Sikh militants who want to create a new nation called Khalistan have occupied the Golden Temple in Amritsar, the holiest site of Sikhism. Then, on the orders of Prime

Minister Indira Gandhi, the Indian army invades the temple with the stated purpose of removing the militants.

According to Wikipedia, the army's invasion resulted in the deaths of over a thousand activists, soldiers, and civilians.

In *A Vancouver Guldasta*, Chattar, the dad in the Dhaliwal family, is desperately trying to make phone contact with his brother, who lives near the Golden Temple, but telephone communication with the Punjab has been cut off and, like many families in Vancouver, the Dhaliwals twist in uncertainty.

It was a polarizing time and one of the strengths of Singh's script is that it refuses to take sides. Instead, it offers a compassionate meditation on politics, identity, and practicality.

Struggling to form a coherent sense of herself, Chattar and Niranjana's teenage daughter Rani is desperate to attend the enraged protests in downtown Vancouver. But Chattar isn't having it. He's worked hard to establish his restaurant business and he doesn't want it to suffer. He's also afraid of government reprisals, including the potential refusal to grant travel visas.

But, for me, the most sympathetic character is Rani's friend Andy, who lives downstairs in the Dhaliwals' house with his parents. Andy fled Vietnam with his family and his recollections of the concrete horrors of violence are among the most affecting passages in the script.

Singh's characters don't just assume positions and holler at one another; they genuinely—and actively—listen.

The production and performances are also nuanced. Last year, SACHA (the South Asian Canadian Histories Association) produced *A Vancouver Guldasta* as a site-specific work in a Vancouver special on the south side. I didn't see that version but, snuggled into Skye Dyken and Lauren Jamie Homeniuk's period-perfect set, this mounting in The Cultch's Vancity

Culture Lab achieves a palpable sense of intimacy.

To a significant degree, that's because of the tone that Singh establishes as a director. He and some of his actors work in both theatre and film and, in their hands, a series of often short scenes play out—mostly—with filmic naturalism. There are silences. There's space.

The quiet ferocity that Lou Ticzon brings to the role of Andy broke my heart. Gunjan Kundhal (Niranjan, the mom) is every bit as thorough. Arshdeep Purba and Parm Soor are also impressively strong as Rani and Chattar.

A Vancouver Guldasta isn't perfect. Off the top, Singh's direction of the teenage characters veers towards cliché, which contributes to the sense that the performance styles haven't found a common groove yet. Some of the exits feel arbitrary: "Let's go play basketball again." On opening night, some of the transitions felt a bit glitchy. And, for folks who don't clearly remember the events at the Golden Temple, more focused contextualization earlier would help.

But I'm grateful for *A Vancouver Guldasta*. It seems that, as theatre has lagged behind in terms of diversity, film and television may have been acting as incubators of significant talent. That we're seeing this show is yet more evidence of the programming vision of Heather Redfern at The Cultch and Rohit Chokhani of Diwali in BC.

There were times in *A Vancouver Guldasta*, when I knew that I wasn't fully understanding the characters' motivations. And I'm certain that I missed scores of details in the script and production that will resonate strongly with Sikh Vancouverites. But that's great. It's all part of the adventure.

A VANCOUVER GULDASTA Written and directed by Paneet Singh. A SACHA production presented by The Cultch and Diwali in BC. In the Vancity Culture Lab on Wednesday, October 3. Continues until October 13.

Tickets.

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