

Finding Home in the World Stage: Critical Creative Citizenship and the 13th South Asian Theatre Festival 2018

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The South Asian Theatre Festival (SATF) is held annually in New Brunswick, New Jersey. The thirteenth edition of the festival was held on August 4th and 5th, 2018 at the George Street Playhouse. The festival featured seven one act plays in four Indian languages beside four short segments of improvised and devised performances. The festival, now an important fixture in the socio-cultural calendar of the Indian diaspora in the New York-New Jersey area, is not only a celebration of South Asian theatre, but also a confident stride made by the community to organize itself as a significant American subculture. The 2018 edition of the festival and the plays that it offered made it abundantly clear that the artists in the diaspora are ready to celebrate their identity distinct from and yet firmly intertwined with their home culture of the United States. This critical take on the festival offers an insight into the various layers of performance that were evident during the 2018 edition.

True to the nature of any South Asian event in the diaspora, the SATF was not simply a theatre festival but became an extended community affair. Packed into the George Street Playhouse lobby were several vendors selling jewelry, clothing, and even insurance and finance products. One of the halls in the playhouse was temporarily converted into a cafeteria where patrons took a break between watching plays to sip on tea and feast on deep fried Bengali delicacies like the vegetable chop.^[1] The fair-like atmosphere at the George Street Playhouse made one forget, after crossing the threshold of the auditorium, that this was not suburban India, where theatre festivals like SATF are a regular feature of the milder winter months.

The SATF opens up room for the South Asian community to claim cultural citizenship in the United States. In doing so, it becomes an act of creative citizenship by the diasporic subject. In 2008 playwright Sudipta Bhawmik observed that, “[i]n parts of the [United States], the South Asian population has reached the critical mass to be able to sustain a South Asian-only kind of theatre and arts”.^[2] With a large concentration of South Asian Americans, the New York-New Jersey area certainly boasts the critical mass that Bhawmik describes in his comment. And the playwright’s prediction seems to have held its ground in the case of the SATF and the popularity that it has enjoyed over the last fourteen years. The festival by virtue of using the more inclusive South Asian in its title rather than Indian or Bengali has also been able to appeal to an audience and a group of performers that do not always and necessarily conform to those geographic, linguistic, and socio-cultural boundaries. In the discussion that follows I examine the SATF as a space for the South Asian diaspora to claim cultural citizenship and how the festival itself is an act of creative citizenship. I argue that each play presented at the festival and the festival itself are creative acts corresponding to various levels of cultural and creative citizenship substantiating the South Asian American claim to achieving cultural citizenship in the adopted homeland.

Scholarship on South Asian American theatre is scant. The scholarship that exists is often focused on the

more visible and public examples of South Asian theatre. Essays by Aparna Dharwadker (2003) and Sudipto Chatterjee (2008), while taking insightful peeps into South Asian community-based theatres, spend time examining artists who are crossovers in the American mainstream or on the cusp of breaking into it. While an analysis of recognized artistic voices certainly adds to the conversation on South Asian American theatre, it does so at the expense of the everyday creative acts that form the mainstay of the diasporic subject's confident strides towards asserting cultural citizenship. Theodore Zamenopoulos, Katerina Alexiou, Giota Alevizou, Caroline Chapain, Shawn Sobers, and Andy Williams write in their 2016 article that, "[c]reative acts are [...] expressions of *originality* and *meaningfulness* within a certain context".^[3] Overall, the South Asian Theatre Festival, as well as each performance within it hold specific meanings for specific sections of the community within the context of their diasporic experiences. Zamenopoulos, et al. continue to elaborate on one of the challenges surrounding any discussion of creative acts: conflating creativity with "an *exceptional* product, process, or person".^[4] Dharwadker and Chatterjee seem to have stepped into the same trap even as they set out to look at everyday acts of creativity in their analyses. The ensuing discussion, like the festival at its center of inquiry, recognizes that "creativity is also a general human capability". Taking a cue from Jean Burgess's "vernacular creativity," Zamenopoulos et al add to the potential of creative acts, calling them acts "that help to unearth a hidden potential in a given situation".^[6] The SATF appears to be no more than a public event featuring plays on the surface. Yet a closer analysis of audience participation, festival curation, and the overall presentation of the festival reveals that there is significantly more at play than what meets the eye in a surface evaluation. Dharwadker and Chatterjee's assessment of local community-based South Asian American theatres gets mired in contemporary dramaturgical concerns not addressed by these community-based theatres themselves. Both scholars seem to be searching for an exceptional product, process, or artist at the expense of evaluating the creative acts playing out in the local desi stage.

Ashish Sengupta, on the other hand, erroneously conflates mainstream South Asian thespians like Ayad Akhtar with the large number of South Asian community theatres peppered across the United States as part of the same continuum.^[7] Sengupta, of course, has the disadvantage of being at a geographical and therefore critical distance from the subject of his inquiry. A professor at the University of North Bengal in India, for Sengupta, the South Asian roots of Ayad Akhtar are no different than those of the anaesthesiologist Manoj Shahane, who dons a playwright and a director's mantle outside of the operating theatre. In reality though, and as I hope to demonstrate, Shahane's theatre is a far cry from those of artists like Akhtar. Akhtar and other artists like him (Asif Mandvi, Ranjit Chowdhry, Aditi Brennan Kapil etc.) are representative examples of what Royona Mitra refers to as the "New Interculturalism," Shahane's theatre is fueled by a completely different and distinct set of motivations.^[8] Mitra studies British choreographer-dancer Akram Khan's body of work and the ways in which it seamlessly integrates Khan's astute understanding of the South Asian kathak and his formal training in Western modern dance. The resulting New Interculturalism, Mitra demonstrates, celebrates cultural similarities without discounting differences.^[9] Akhtar, Mandvi, Chowdhry, Kapil, and others represent the New Interculturalism in American mainstream theatre. They are definitively moored in their South Asian milieus but taking confident strides to change the ways mainstream American drama represents the subcontinent. Although an intriguing subject unto itself, plays by seasoned and celebrated artists like the roster presented above, are representative of the exceptional that Zamenopoulos, et al. mention. Conflating them, as Sengupta does in his analysis, with everyday creative acts of cultural citizenship is therefore erroneous and misleading. Before delving into the particulars of how this suburban New Jersey festival galvanizes a community together, it is imperative to understand what I mean by cultural citizenship and what constitutes creative acts.

Toby Miller writes, “the last two hundred years of modernity have produced three zones of citizenship, with partially overlapping but also distinct historicities”.[10] Miller’s “three zones of citizenship,” political, economic, and cultural, correspond to the history of the South Asian diasporic subject in the United States, which is a history that has its roots in the nineteenth century British system of indenture and immigrant labor, as discussed by Vinay Lal and others.[11] But for the present context, I will look at two pivotal historical episodes from the twentieth century that shifted the ways of South Asian immigration and integration into American society.

In its 1923 verdict on the *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind* case, the Supreme Court, referring to Section 2169, revised statutes, had opined that the “Naturalization Act ‘shall apply to aliens, being free white persons, and to aliens of African nativity and to persons of African descent.’” [12] The following Immigration Act of 1924 further specified that, “no alien ineligible to citizenship shall be admitted to the United States”.[13] These two pieces of legislation effectively ended Indian immigration to the United States for nearly four decades. The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 significantly altered this by declaring that “No person shall receive any preference or priority or be discriminated against in the issuance of an immigrant visa because of his race, sex, nationality, place of birth, or place of residence.” The new legislation re-opened the doors for South Asians to claim legal and uncontentious political citizenship in the United States.

Vinay Lal writes, “The vast bulk of Indians arrived in the US following the immigration reforms of 1965, and though they occupy a disproportionately significant and highly visible place in the professions, Indians also ply taxis in New York and dominate the Dunkin Donuts franchises around the country.”[15] In 2017, there were nearly 4.1 million South Asian Indians in the United States with seventy percent of the population above sixteen employed in, “management, business, science, and arts occupations” with a median household income of \$114, 261.[16] As is evident from above, in the five decades since South Asians attained political citizenship, they have made significant strides towards economic citizenship too, becoming one of the most successful ethnic minorities in the United States.

Yet the third zone of citizenship, cultural, has eluded the community for a long time. Cultural citizenship calls for “flexible citizens” who are able to navigate the transcultural and intercultural worlds that we inhabit today.[17] Miller says, “it *does* appear as though more and more transnational people and organizations now exist, weaving political, economic, and cultural links between places of origin and domiciles.”[18] Although South Asians are one of the most well-educated ethnic groups in the United States, the community has thus far fit itself smugly into the melting pot metaphor. This means that the community has chosen to not distinguish itself as a subculture, focusing instead on living up to Franklin Roosevelt’s insistence on the “swift assimilation of aliens” through the “language and culture that has come down to us from the builders of the republic.”[19] The SATF challenges the narrative of assimilation and opens up a space where the transnational/transcultural South Asian diasporic subject can counter the mainstream American cultural hegemony. In other words, the festival corroborates Miller’s observation that the United States cannot continue with its cultural nationalism of being a “Monolingual Eden.”[20] The SATF space for claiming cultural citizenship is facilitated through acts of creative citizenship involving the production, creation, and consumption of theatre that is aesthetically similar, yet culturally distinct from the theatre in the country of origin as well as the country of domicile. Before examining the acts of creative citizenship witnessed during the SATF and discussing how each performance in the festival fits into various levels of creative citizenship, it is imperative to understand the many layers of cultural citizenship at play within the South Asian community.

In the South Asian context, cultural citizenship is itself multi-layered. Each generation of immigrants has their own version of cultural identity that they want to claim within the same space of the festival. For some, the festival and especially the plays performed in it represent a nostalgic hook, a reminder of the country left behind at the time of the start of the diasporic movement. For others, the festival is the opportunity to relive an idyllic irrecoverable past left behind in India. And yet for others, the festival is an opportunity to find themselves and their culture being valued, nurtured, and adapted to its current environment, that of the adopted homeland. These multiple levels of cultural citizenship are celebrated over the course of the festival through creative acts. These creative acts, as Zamenopoulos, et al. demonstrate happen at four levels: doing, adaptation, making, and creating. The festival itself is of course an example of doing which Zamenopoulos, et al. define as “acts with the purpose of ‘getting something done.’” [21] The various plays individually fit the other criterion of creative acts, making the festival an act towards claiming creative citizenship. In the examples that follow, I map the various levels of creative acts onto the layers of cultural citizenship that I outlined above.

I have written elsewhere describing the beginning of the diasporic movement as a crisis that is eventually mitigated by social dramas of community events in the adopted homeland. [22] The older generation of South Asian immigrants, especially the first wave that arrived in 1965 or immediately thereafter, did not seem to have the recourse to resolve the crisis of their diasporic movement. These community members were pioneers of the new wave who created the diasporic version of “South Asian-ness,” themselves existing in what Victor Turner calls “an instan[ce] of pure potentiality,” allowing the generations that followed an avenue to mitigate their crises. [23] Certain performances at the SATF like *A King’s Tale: Shiladitya*, which draw on a well-known children’s book *Rajkahini* by Abanindranath Tagore (1871-1951), serve as a conduit for the older generation of South Asian immigrants to witness stories that connect them to a distant and yet beloved past left behind in India. *A King’s Tale* becomes the nostalgic hook from the structure outlined above for this section of the audience. Seeing younger members of the community, children born and raised in the United States, assume the roles of princes, princesses, and sages from the Indian folklore allow older immigrants to not only celebrate their presence in the United States but also the success and resilience of the community for having been able to pass on vital cultural knowledge intergenerationally. For the community, therefore, it does not matter that the performance of this particular play did not rise to a professional caliber or that an operatic piece was forcibly appended to it. All of these dramaturgical concerns, which bothered the critic and the theatre educator in this correspondent, were dwarfed under the celebration of children successfully embracing, albeit temporarily, their South Asian-ness. This play, directed by guest director Parthapratim Deb, from India, became an act of doing with some adaptation (the operatic addition) to cater to the section of the audience for whom the festival is the nostalgic hook to a distant past.

For a different section of the audience the festival is itself a social drama, a set of redressive actions that facilitate social reintegration into the diasporic forms of South Asian-ness. This section of the audience, comprising students turned professionals, or professionals seeking a creative outlet, forms the largest spectator subgroup at the festival. Consequently, the material catering to this section of the audience is very often either sourced directly from, or owes serious allegiance to, the homeland. In other words, this is the section of the audience that is seeking to relive the irrecoverable past left behind in the homeland, in this case, South Asia. The homeland continues to hold a position of extreme significance for the South Asian consumers of festivals like the SATF. A large majority of the attendees are first generation immigrants and suffer from what Anita Mannur has described as “the desire to simultaneously embrace what is left of a past from which one is spatially and temporally displaced, and the recognition that

nostalgia can overwhelm memories of the past.”[24] Strategies of negotiation with this in-betweenness have resulted in a longing for ethnic authenticity which has propelled diasporic subjects to turn towards the home to provide cultural markers of continued belonging. These take the form of tours by performers from the homeland which “add to the memory archive of the diasporic community and create a new bridge to ‘home.’” [25] Other coping strategies take the form of creating “social dramas.” These take the form of the annual Durga Puja amongst South Asian Bengalis or the Navaratri observation amongst Gujaratis, etc. These celebrations seek to restore the rupture caused in the continuum of performing ethnic identity by the diasporic movement from the homeland to the host country.[26]

In SATF 2018, the Spotlight Columbus production of popular Bengali playwright Tirthankar Chanda’s *Achin Doshor* (The Unknown Partner) catered to this white-collared middle-class audience. Spotlight Columbus, or Spotlight, has been a longtime supporter of the SATF and since 2014 has been hosting their own version of the festival in Columbus, Ohio to cater to the burgeoning South Asian population in the midwestern town, a growing demographic that comprises of the second category of audiences mentioned above.[27] The performers at the 2018 Spotlight offering were all amateurs with a majority holding day jobs as software professionals and graduate students of the Ohio State University. The group invited noted Bengali actor Debshankar Haldar from Kolkata to direct this play. Haldar is a much celebrated and feted stage performer in Kolkata. This performance of *Achin Doshor* demonstrated Haldar’s astute understanding of Bengali Group Theatre and its characteristic qualities.[28] He directed a flawless albeit ordinary script with finesse and careful attention to specific comic moments. These moments punctuated the narrative at regular but never overbearing intervals, ensuring that the narrative’s forays into everyday middle-class “Bengaliness” and its pitfalls were highlighted, laughed about, and then ultimately glossed over. The play’s frequent jokes landed well with the Bengali-speaking audience while those unfamiliar with the language were invited to follow along with supertitles.

It was interesting to observe the ease with which Spotlight has been able to recreate a performance culture in the American Midwest that comes remarkably close to the Bengali Group Theatre in Kolkata. The Bengali Group Theatre makes a virtue of its poverty and amateur status.[29] While Spotlight’s financial health was not available for scrutiny, it was evident that almost the entire group was comprised of amateurs with a passion for the stage. In fact, Haldar, now a successful stage professional, was an amateur himself when he made his first foray into performance nearly three decades back in Kolkata. Haldar’s shepherding of the 2018 Spotlight presentation was a rite of passage for this young performance company, one that mimics the redressive action of the Turnerian model towards mitigating the crisis of the diasporic movement. In this instance, the redressive action took the form of being able to successfully recreate a slice of urban India and its many foibles in America, thus allowing the dominant section of the audience to relieve their idyllic Indian past. Several other plays over the course of the two-day festival also targeted this section of the audience. The highlight of these offerings was the adaptation of Federico Garcia Lorca’s *Blood Wedding*, led by Indian thespian Mahesh Dattani, titled *Rakt Phera*.

The Hindi adaptation of Lorca’s 1932 masterpiece *Blood Wedding* is a translation of the Spanish classic by Indian playwright Abhinav Grover. The performance was directed by the noted Indian-English playwright Dattani and presented by the Indian Cultural Society of New Jersey (ICS). Dattani, recipient of the Sahitya Akademi Award, one of India’s highest literary recognitions, for his anthology *Final Solution and Other Plays* in 1998, is also an accomplished director. His films *Morning Raaga*, and *Mango Souffle* were critical successes. Dattani has been directing for some time with North American performance companies and on North American college campuses and this was the veteran thespian’s

third presentation at SATF. Dattani's directorial vision lived up to his reputation as a master craftsman.

The audience trickling into the theatre were greeted with a haunting light scheme bouncing off smoke and haze on a stage space, empty except for a few small stools. Haunting music, part of Vikram Kumar and Aditya Datey's original score for the piece, pervaded the environment. In this version of the play, the action shifts from the Spanish countryside to North West India, at the borders of the states of Rajasthan and Haryana. The socially conservative and deeply religious content of the play finds a perfect home in its new setting. Rajasthan and Haryana are notoriously conservative and are often the subject of national and international news thanks to their ignominious human rights and women's rights records.^[30] The ensemble excelled under the able guidance of the seasoned director. *Rakt Phera* revealed an imaginative directorial vision that encompassed every theatrical element, from lighting, to music, to scenic elements, to create a truly excellent if not always engaging theatrical experience. The adaptation of a foreign context to a completely novel one echoed the creative act of adaptation. Zamenopoulos, et al. define this creative act of adaptation as "acts with the purpose of 'making things my own.'"^[31] The ICS adaptation of *Blood Wedding* succeeded in transporting the Spanish classic to a new South Asian context while not compromising the narrative integrity of the original. Not unlike the Spotlight presentation of *Achin Doshor*, *Rakt Phera* was an attempt for South Asian immigrants, otherwise employed, to recreate a cultural space for themselves in their adopted homeland. It was an interesting choice to adapt a foreign text to cater to a South Asian milieu. The adaptation reverses the diasporic processes undergone by South Asians adjusting to life in a foreign land. The Spanish idiosyncrasies of the original are replaced with their Indian counterparts in the same way that the South Asian diasporic subject has to adapt to life in their adopted homeland. And yet the act of adaptation shifts the message of the Lorca original to address gendered violence in South Asia. The shift echoes the ways in which South Asians, or any other diasporic community, alters the adopted homeland ever so slightly with their presence. It was not clear how familiar the audience was to Lorca or his work, but it was evident from their response that *Rakt Phera* had succeeded in transporting the audience to North West India.

Lorca was not the only European author lending creative inspiration at the festival. The festival also featured *Four Walls*, a stage adaptation of novelist Dr. Rajeev Naik's *Manoos Ghar* (A Doomed Home). *Manoos Ghar* is a freewheeling South Asian American adaptation of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll House*. *Four Walls*, the stage adaptation of Naik's novel, was done by writer/director Manoj Shahane. Shahane, an anesthesiologist by the day, has been involved with South Asian American theatre in all imaginable capacities for more than a decade. The play, presented by the New Jersey-based Theatrix, took the story of Ibsen's Torvald and Nora and located it in an upwardly-mobile South Asian diasporic residence in the United States. The content, context, and setting for the play fit well with current hot button issues in the South Asian diaspora community, including domestic abuse. The adaptations of Lorca and Ibsen represent the diaspora's journey from the creative act of adaptation to that of making. The creative act of adaptation as defined by Zamenopoulos, et al. is akin to improving a ready-to-eat meal, by say, adjusting condiments, or adding a splash of lime. Whereas the making refers to creative acts undertaken "with the purpose of making things 'with my own hands' (such as cooking a recipe from scratch)."^[32] Lorca and Ibsen's original narratives serve as the recipes for Grover and Shahane's theatrical adaptations. The theatrical adaptations (different from the creative act of adaptation) make the original narratives their own by situating them in a South Asian socio-cultural context.

The final play that embodied the creative acts of adaptation and making was the finale performance of the festival. *Nirastra* (Unarmed) was presented by Epic Actors Workshop and directed by Golam Sarwar

Harun and Gargi Mukherjee. The story takes its cue from the Magsaysay award-winning Bengali author Mahasweta Devi's short stories on the denotified tribal communities of India. The play puts a special emphasis on the story "Draupadi," which first appeared four decades ago in 1978 as part of a set of loosely connected political narratives *Agnigarbha* (The Womb of Fire).[33] In their freewheeling adaptation of this story along with others by Mahasweta Devi, Harun and Mukherjee took the specificities of the stories and gave them a more universal framework. In their version, the firebrand tribal woman Draupadi, or Dopdi Mejhen as she is colloquially known in the forested hinterlands of tribal India, stands in for a whole community of oppressed people.

Dopdi and her husband Dulan, played emotionally by Harun and Mukherjee respectively, fight on behalf of the disenfranchised tribal people even as government forces aided by local money-lenders launch a severely repressive counter-strike to quell any rebellion. Eventually, Dulan is brutally gunned down while Dopdi is arrested. While under arrest, the Senanayak, the unscrupulous chief of the government forces, played admirably by Sajal Mukherjee, leads a gang rape of Dopdi. In a moment of severe retaliation, Dopdi strips her clothes and offers her body to her oppressors while screaming, "Are you a man? There is no man here to be ashamed of. I'll not let anyone put a cloth on me. What more can you do? Kill me?"[34]

Both Mukherjee and Harun are well-known names in the South Asian American theatre community in the New York and New Jersey areas. Both hold daytime jobs as advertising executives and have appeared in critically successful South Asian American films. The producers, Epic Actors' Workshop, have nurtured South Asian theatre in its diasporic home over the last several decades. Although the group primarily produces work in Bengali, it has made concerted attempts to attract the larger South Asian community as supporters and stakeholders in the work of promoting and upholding South Asian theatre in the United States. Not unlike the performances of *Achin Doshor* and *Rakt Phera* discussed above, *Nirastra* was also aimed at audiences seeking reintegration into the diaspora version of South Asian-ness and reeling under the crisis of the diasporic movement. Mukherjee's heart-rending disavowal of the hyper-masculinity of the state represented by the oppressive police chief Senanayak at the end of the play therefore takes on several more layers of meaning beyond a fearless heroine's last act of resistance. At that moment, Dopdi Mejen rejects any and all state machinations, including those of repressive immigration regulations that continue to deny the South Asian diasporic subject unencumbered access to political and economic citizenship. The clarion call that emanates metaphorically from the hearts of the tribal hinterlands of India is also a firm affirmation that in spite of all odds, the South Asian subject is here to firmly celebrate their cultural ubiquity unfettered by the need to assimilate. The title of the play, *Nirastra*, meaning unarmed, is symbolic perhaps of resolute steps that the community has taken and continues to take to become equal stakeholders in the evolution of America as a modern nation-state.

For the older generation of South Asians who use the festival as a nostalgic hook to connect with their South Asian-ness, plays that correspond to the Zamenopoulos, et al. model of adaptations and making (i.e. *Achin Doshor*, *Rakt Phera*, *Four Walls*, and *Nirastra*), are opportunities to update their vocabulary on what constitutes the cultural ethos of the homeland since the beginning of their diasporic movement. As an audience, this generation responds to the dramatic ingenuity of the presentations, even if the content does not hold as much significance for them. In a similar vein for the white-collared audiences seeking redressive action through the festival and its contents, and arguably the largest section of the audience, a presentation like *A King's Tale* is an indulgence to allow the second and third generation South Asians to regale the older members of the community. Not unlike the response outlined above, this

section of the audience is hardly moved by the folklore but rather celebrate being able to offer the community elders the opportunity to celebrate intergenerational knowledge transfer. In addition to the above, the third section of the audience, drawn from a wide heterogenous cross-section of the community, use the entirety of the festival as an act of celebrating creative citizenship. For this section, the redressive action represented by SATF as a whole supersedes the dramatic merits (and demerits) of individual presentations at the festival. The mere act of being able to celebrate their South Asian-ness while soaking in the festive atmosphere of the occasion is a resounding reminder of the community taking confident steps towards cultural citizenship in their country of adoption.

Aparna Dharwadker warned and reminded South Asian American theatre enthusiasts that a new theatrical language cannot emerge in the diaspora unless the theatre practice “distances itself from the culture of origin and embraces the experience of residence in the host culture.”^[35] I contend that most South Asian American theatre artists have embraced the experience of being resident in the host culture. It is only that they have adopted a more circuitous route to celebrate their presence in the United States. Playwrights like Sudipto Bhawmik, amongst a few others, have tried including the diasporic experience in their vernacular plays.^[36] However, the plays have continued to be written with, primarily, a South Asian audience in mind. It is so because, as the discussion above has demonstrated, the community is still grappling with achieving cultural citizenship while negotiating with the crisis of the diasporic movement. For the community, the performances and the festival become critical creative acts towards achieving cultural citizenship in their adapted homeland.

To substantiate and complement the claim of creative acts towards cultural citizenship further, I now turn to the Subhasis Das-led “Theatre in Break” team, an experimental breakout performance component that continually accompanied the more traditional performances at the SATF. The team’s work took performances outside of the proscenium’s confines and into one of the banquet halls of the George Street Playhouse. The celebratory nature of this experiment was evident from the way the space had been set up to resemble a cheery children’s party. The performance segment (a total of four segments would be presented over the two days) was based on classic improvisational workshop modules and Augusto Boal exercises. Das drew on his experience of working with Badal Sircar and his company Satabdi in Kolkata to inform these routines and practices.^[37]

In the first segment, titled “Hamelin – a Musical Path,” Das and his crew of actors demonstrated basic improvisation exercises based on the prompt “Yes, And...” Audiences were encouraged to provide actors with prompts besides asking actors to use props creatively in their improv routines. The whole demonstration seemed to excite the audience, many of whom were perhaps being exposed to this kind of a performance rhetoric for the first time. The final segment of the Theatre in Break, titled, “Jukti Tokko Gaal Goppo – A Debated Path,” however, did inspire significant audience engagement beyond effervescent enthusiasm and evoked some strong inspired reactions from the audience. As opposed to the largely unscripted improvised bits of the previous three segments, this segment was planned more as a traditional play. Das and his team asked audiences to engage in on-the-spot conversations about marijuana legalization. The audience reflected the mood of the larger community, which is sharply divided on whether to support or denounce this legislation. Das beautifully navigated around the troubled waters of the argument to allow parties on both sides to present their cases without talking about which side of the spectrum he identified with. The conversation on marijuana was followed by a heartwarming presentation on transgender issues. Weaving together Tagore songs, contemporary poetry, and a brief but compelling narrative, actors Tandra and Aparna Bhattacharya created a beautiful moment on stage. While

there was certainly some room and possibility for dialogue at the conclusion of this piece, Das chose to postpone that, suggesting instead that while the issue of trans rights was as relevant to the South Asian community as it is to any other, he would rather wait than take an immediate plunge.

The Theatre in Break segments represented the fourth level of creative acts in the Zamenopoulos, et al. model, “creating.” Breaking through the imaginary mold of traditional South Asian performance and narrative drama, Das and his team showed the possibilities of a distinctly South Asian American theatre aesthetic, an aesthetic that relied as much on the South Asian-ness of the performers as it did on their American experiences. Filmmaker Jayasri Hart had lamentably written, “In our country of adoption, ours has long been an assigned identity,” an identity forcibly assigned by the American civic bureaucracy.^[38] Das’ team demonstrated that the everyday regular South Asian American diasporic subject is finally ready to unfetter themselves and assert their own identity rather than accept any monikers arbitrarily assigned to them. The team successfully celebrated this assertion by showcasing improvisation techniques and by sharing stories that are idiosyncratically South Asian American.

Over the last thirteen years, the SATF has certainly created a niche for itself. As I hope to have demonstrated, the festival has opened up a space for the South Asian community to engage in creative acts of cultural citizenship. For the 2018 festival, the Middlesex county of New Jersey formally endorsed the festival. This was evidenced by the two county advertisements in the festival brochure and by the attendance of a county representative at the opening ceremony. The presence of the official seal lent further credence to the idea that the festival is not simply a community event, but a formal stride towards cultural citizenship. Incidentally, South Asians are represented fairly strongly in all levels of the New Jersey administration. The formal endorsement and its presence at the festival signified the “osmosis” between first and second generations of South Asian immigrants and “their combined interaction with the U.S. mainstream,” which Chatterjee identifies as the marker of South Asian creative success.^[39] At the time of this writing, the 2019 SATF has been held. The 14th edition of the festival, drawing on the critical mass of South Asians who call the New York-New Jersey area their home, continued to make definite and deliberate strides towards guaranteeing cultural recognition through the creative acts of doing, adapting, making, and creating. The SATF has scripted a success story for itself and has created the space for South Asian Americans to practice and hone their theatre skills and stake their claim as a unique American subculture. The 15th edition of the festival, scheduled for summer 2020, promises to be the biggest and the best edition of the festival and is slated to be held at the new facilities of the George Street Playhouse in downtown New Brunswick. The move to this more centrally located and easily accessible location would have signified the metaphorical move of the South Asian diaspora subject from the assimilative goo of the melting pot to a bright, vibrant, and unique presence in the cultural salad bowl of the South Asian experience in the United States. The COVID-19 pandemic has however cast a spell of doubt over the future of the 2020 edition of the festival.

In a recent conversation, the founder and the artistic director of the festival Dr. Dipan Ray mentioned, he was hopeful that the festival will be held sometime in the fall. In the meantime, Ray and his team are not sitting idle. In the cards is a virtual theatre platform, launching on May 23, 2020, that will bring together creative voices from India, Bangladesh, and the South Asian American theatre community to discuss the life and legacy of the recently deceased Indian director-manager-actor Usha Ganguly (1945-2020). Incidentally, Ganguly had served as one of the biggest supporters of the festival when it first started in 2005. She mentored both the New Jersey and the Columbus, Ohio festivals in their early years. Irrespective of whether the 2020 edition of the festival happens or not, the yeoman work that the SATF

has done to foster a community of dedicated South Asian American thespians will undoubtedly allow it to return with more aplomb. The formidable groundwork that the festival has laid down bears the promise that it will continue to celebrate South Asian America's confident stride to achieving cultural citizenship in America, their adopted homeland.

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[1] A deep fried cutlet made of beets and other vegetables, see "Vegetable Chop," YouTube video, 08:44, posted by BongEats, December 21, 2017, <https://youtu.be/VOKgeZMwrv4> for more.

[2] Sudipto Chatterjee, "South Asian American Theatre: (Un/Re-) Painting the Town Brown," *Theatre Survey* 49, no. 1 (May 2008): 116.

[3] Theodore Zamenopoulos, Katerina Alexiou, Giota Alevizou, Caroline Chapain, Shawn Sobers, and Andy Williams, "Varieties of Creative Citizenship," in *The Creative Citizen Unbound: How Social Media and DIY Culture Contribute to Democracy, Communities and the Creative Economy*, eds. Ian Hargreaves and John Hartley (Bristol, UK; Chicago, IL, USA: Bristol University Press, 2016), 106.

[4] Zamenopoulos, et al., "Varieties of Creative Citizenship," 106.

[5] Ibid, 106.

[6] Ibid, 106.

[7] Ashis Sengupta, "Staging Diaspora: South Asian American Theatre Today," *Journal of American Studies* 46, no. 4 (November 2012): 831-854.

[8] Royona Mitra, *Akram Khan: Dancing New Interculturalism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

[9] Arnab Banerji, "What lies Beyond Hattamala? Badal Sircar and his Third Theatre as an Alternative Trajectory for Intercultural Theatre," in *The Methuen Drama Handbook of Interculturalism and Performance*, eds. Daphne P. Lei and Charlotte McIvor (London and New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020), 56.

[10] Toby Miller, "What is Cultural Citizenship,?" in *Cultural Citizenship: Cosmopolitanism, and Television in a Neoliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2007), 35.

[11] Vinay Lal, 1999. "Establishing Roots, Engendering Awareness: A Political History of Asian Indians in the United States," in *Live Like the Banyan Tree: Images of the Indian American Experience*, ed. Leela Prasad (Philadelphia: Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies, 1999), 42-48; Brij V Lal, Peter Reeves, and Rajesh Rai, *The Encyclopedia of the Indian Diaspora* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006).

[12] Jayasri Hart, "Meet the Filmmaker," *Roots in the Sand*. Accessed March 10, 2020. <https://www.pbs.org/rootsinthesand/filmmaker.html>.

[13] "The Immigration Act of 1924 (The Johnson-Reed Act)," United States Department of State Archive, accessed on March 8, 2020. <https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/ho/time/id/87718.html>.

[14] Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, Pub.L. 89-236, 79 Stat. 911 (1968), accessed March 8, 2020. <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-79/pdf/STATUTE-79-Pg911.pdf#page=7>

[15] Vinay Lal, "Diaspora Purana: The Indic Presence in World Culture," *UCLA South Asian MANAS* (n.d.), accessed on May 15, 2020. <http://southasia.ucla.edu/diaspora/indic-presence-world-culture/>.

[16] "Selected Population Profile in the United States: 2017 American Community Survey 1-year Estimates," United States Census Bureau, accessed on March 10, 2020. https://factfinder.census.gov/facestableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS_17_1YR_S0201&prodType=table.

[17] Miller, "What is Cultural Citizenship?," 50.

[18] Ibid, 54.

[19] Ibid, 52.

[20] Ibid, 53.

[21] Zamenopoulos, et al., "Varieties of Creative Citizenship," 106.

[22] Arnab Banerji, "The Social Drama of Durga Puja: Performing Bengali Identity in the Diaspora." *Ecumenica: Performance and Religion* 12, no. 1 (Spring 2019): 1-13.

[23] Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1982), 44.

[24] Anita Mannur, "Culinary Nostalgia: Authenticity, Nationalism, and Diaspora," in *Culinary Fictions: Food in South Asian Diasporic Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010), 28.

[25] Chatterjee, "South Asian American Theatre," 114.

[26] Banerji, "The Social Drama of Durga Puja."

[27] "Ohio Asian Americans." Ohio Development Services Agency, accessed on March 12, 2020. <https://development.ohio.gov/files/research/P7004.pdf>.

[28] Bengali Group Theatre is the dominant form of theatre in Kolkata, West Bengal, India. For a precise definition of this form of theatre and some of its distinguishing characteristics, see Ananda Lal, *Oxford Companion to Indian Theatre* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), 139. The specific qualities reproduced in this performance were the sparse suggestive staging and the melodramatic tendency in individual performances.

[29] Lal, *Oxford Companion to Indian Theatre*, 139.

[30] Nishu Mahajan, "Honour killing continues unabated in Haryana," *The Pioneer*, 27 August 2018, <https://www.dailypioneer.com/2018/state-editions/honour-killing-continues-unabated-in-haryana.html>; Dev Ankur Wadhawan, "Rajasthan's shame: It's paying a heavy price for killing the unborn girl," *Daily O*, 28 February 2017, <https://www.dailyo.in/politics/female-infanticide-rajasthan-sex-ratio/story/1/15896.html>.

[31] Zamenopoulos, et al., "Varieties of Creative Citizenship," 106.

[32] *Ibid*, 106.

[33] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "'Draupadi' by Mahasveta Devi," *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 2 (Winter, 1981): 383.

[34] "13th South Asian Theater Festival," (New Brunswick: Epic Actors' Workshop, 2018).

[35] Aparna Dharwadker, "Diaspora and the Theatre of the Nation," *Theatre Research International* 28, no. 3 (October 2003): 305.

[36] Bhawmik's plays *Ron*, *Taconic Parkway*, *Curious Case of a Casual Terrorist*, and *Nagorik* come to mind.

[37] Banerji, "What Lies Beyond Hattamala?," 43-59. Badal Sircar (1925-2011) is one of the most celebrated playwrights and directors in modern Indian Theatre. Sircar devised the third theatre borrowing extensively from Western avant-garde theatre practices.

[38] Hart, "Meet the Filmmaker."

[39] Chatterjee, "South Asian American Theatre," 112-113.

[31] Dipan Ray, phone conversation with author. May 14, 2020. Dr. Ray became emotional while discussing the selfless guidance offered by Ganguly as a mentor, guest director, and performer to the New Jersey and Columbus, Ohio editions of the festival throughout their fifteen and six year journeys respectively.



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