

Family Business: Affect and Reconciliation in *A Brimful of Asha*

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MONTHS AFTER SEEING *A Brimful of Asha*, I am still tasting the text. (I enjoyed the *aloo gobi*, and now I'm about to make the kidney bean *rajma*.) I've long been mindful of Bertolt Brecht's coinage of the term "culinary theatre" to disparage theatre that merely satisfies sensory appetite ("Modern Theatre" 35), but as I walked into the performance of *A Brimful of Asha* and found myself eating a samosa the term took on a new meaning. Although this essay responds to the printed text of *A Brimful of Asha* (published in 2012), it addresses that text as an instance of performance, and I probe my own experience of the performance against the specificity of the text, which, it tells us, is an exact transcription of a different performance in a different city. (The text was recorded on 18 February 2012 in the Tarragon Theatre's Extra Space in Toronto; I saw the play in the MT Space in Kitchener on 2 May 2014). My experience of walking into the show was — and was not — the experiences of others as recorded in the text. In that indeterminate gap, the samosa that I ate at the start of the performance was an ambivalent token. It was a talismanic device that personalized the experience of the show to create an affective, somatic relationship with the text that would continue long after the performance was finished. At the same time, the samosa — as object and gesture — was both evidence and material consequence of the reconciliation of the deep family conflicts that the performance re-enacts.

The performance that I saw was well into the three-year history of the play, during which time it became something of a legend in Canadian theatre. That legend sprawls across the Internet in a vast number of published reviews. As summarized on the website of the originating theatre company, Why Not Theatre, "Real-life mother and son, Asha and Ravi Jain, share the stage and tell this true (and very Canadian) story of generational and cultural clash. When Ravi takes a trip to India, his parents decide it is the perfect time to introduce him to potential brides. Ravi is not sold on the idea of getting married — at

least not yet — but Asha fears that time is running out.” The show that we see is a staged autopsy of family crisis and reconciliation, replayed as an extended monologue by Ravi, performed with the informal ease of a stand-up comic, with interventions and interruptions by Asha. While Ravi roams the stage, speaking to the audience familiarly and at times with manic affect, Asha sits at a table, speaking demurely in a quiet but insistent voice. Ravi’s skill as a trained actor burnishes the performance with theatrical legitimacy, while Asha’s obvious lack of training promises testimonial authenticity. *New York Times* critic Eric Grode captures the effect lucidly: “Asha has plenty of lines, and she generally says them in the right order. But she needs the occasional reminder from Ravi to make them audible to the audience, and she often punctuates them with the sort of self-conscious half-grin one sees during a wedding toast from a sheepish relative who didn’t expect to get a laugh.”

For Ravi Jain, the theatrically and (we are led to believe through our experience of watching the show) personally bold decision to bring his mother into the performance of his own history is matched by her boldness in stepping onto the stage with him. Together they restage the fundamental logic of the autobiographical performance. In her essay “Performing the Auto/Biographical Pact: Towards a Theory of Identity in Performance,” Sherrill Grace offers the idea of “*Performative auto/biographics* — the practice of creating a life story in a script and on stage that *becomes* a version of that life” (67), in which “performance enacts the performative in that the performer changes, adjusts and modifies identity and life stories in the process of playing the part, and we are able to watch and possibly learn that identities need not be prescribed, interpellated, and fixed” (76). In *A Brimful of Asha*, mother and son perform a shared, if conflicted, understanding that the subject of auto/biographics emerges on both sides of the slash that Grace places in the term and that the life of the individual is the life of the family. That the two cannot be separated is the lesson that emerges from the incident that the play relates and the production reconciles.

The negotiation of subject and performativity produces the imbalanced affect of the show, in which Asha’s low-affect performativity counters (and indeed controls) Ravi’s high-affect performance. “Affect” might be one of the most stressed terms in theatre studies because it cannot be contained in a single definition; my use of the term here speaks to the capacity of the production’s theatricality and the actor’s theatrical

presence to transmit feeling and generate response. Erin Hurley refers to affect as “specifically theatrical mechanisms of emotional provocation, differentiation and management” and “emotional effects and lures” (7). The study of theatrical affect is the study of how and why performance transmits feelings (historically theatricalized as “passions”) and how this transmission is felt. In that interaction, performance and spectatorship attune to each other. But this relationship is always coded semiotically and physically. Our somatic reception is subject to materiality (in space and proxemics) and embodiment (in sensory environment and mood) and is shaped by the theatrical and mimetic codes that govern our expectations of performance. For the spectator, feeling response to theatrical allure scales according to the conventions of genre and mode. A markedly high-affect performance, such as a Broadway “show-stopper” musical number in which the production of affect disrupts and overrides the text, seems to be excessive (“over the top”) in realist drama, for example. Brecht’s term for this is “artificial heat,” contrasted to “natural warmth” (“Notes” 248).

We are introduced to *A Brimful of Asha* through taste, and we are thereby invited into the show as feeling, sensing participants. The personal warmth of our meeting with Asha is complicated by a discomfiting breach of theatrical decorum. In my seat with my samosa, I’m not sure what to do with the crumbs, so I stuff the used napkin into my pocket rather than drop it on the floor. It feels awkward. We might be habituated to rituals of eating in the cinema, where we pretend to be alone in the dark together, but in a formal theatrical space (unlike a cabaret or dinner theatre) eating is indecorous because we communally share the affective presence and attention of the performer(s).

In the performance that I saw, that attention was personalized when the usher who took my ticket told me, “Asha would like to meet you.” I shared this moment of receiving-line obligation with the rest of the audience as we stood in line to say hello and were bid to take a samosa from the table that would soon be the set of the performance. The audience in the small theatre of the MT Space (a Kitchener theatre company dedicated to intercultural performance and audiences) was culturally diverse; Muslim and Hindu signifiers were prevalent, and the atmosphere was festive.¹ We shared food, and in so doing the theatrical house became Asha’s house. Asha addresses this point explicitly: “I welcome you all to my house. This is not my home, but let’s pretend for tonight. You have

not come to see a play. You have come to help me sort out a dispute” (Jain and Jain 4). In the theatrical sense, it was indeed her house. She fed us, and then she and her son told us a story.

In that telling, Ravi’s presence is theatricalized; Ravi commands the space, makes frequent eye contact with the audience, and sustains the rhythm of the show. In contrast, Asha speaks quietly, often looking down at the table or at Ravi. Her contained presence contrasts sharply to his expansiveness. This is not a matter of the self-conscious amateur, as Grode suggests it is, but a strategic theatrical choice. Asha’s affect might be low key, but theatrical affect is not innate; it is produced by mediating theatrical values of disciplinarity and coherence in performance. Disciplinarity refers to the markers of professional skill and training and to the expectations that we bring to the performance as spectators. Grace makes the point that “My theatre-going is a socially sanctioned and learned identity role that I take on, a role scripted by aspects of class, race, education, profession and economic status” (69). That role is also scripted by our experiences of disciplinarity and our understandings of mastery, complexity, and artistry that enable us to appreciate a performance as “good” or “bad.” I assume, for example, that an actor playing Hamlet at Stratford has attained a level of artistic mastery, but I have a very different expectation of an actor in an amateur production. I might enjoy both equally, but my response is contingent on my expectations of disciplinary value.

If our expectations are contingent on a complex set of factors that can be gauged in terms of disciplinarity, then we resolve the paradox that, while all actors act, not all actors can act. We expect a polished performance from Ravi because he tells us from the beginning that he is a theatre professional with a graduate degree, and we expect that Asha will be more “authentic” and less “theatrical” because we are told that she is not an actor. Consequently, his high-affect performance and her low-affect presence invite polyvalent modes of response, depending on each spectator’s expectations of, or familiarity with, disciplinarity. Hence, the *New York Times* offers the patronizing comment (in a very positive review) that Asha “has never been (and does not appear likely to become) an actress” (Grode). Calgary mayor Naheed Nenshi provides an example of a low-disciplinarity response in a comment quoted on Why Not Theatre’s website:

I'm a huge theatre fan and like to think I'm pretty discerning. I loved Ravi and Asha Jain's *A Brimful of Asha*. It was gutsy, it was real, and it hit the heart like a spicy samosa. You don't have to be a single Indian guy with a mother who really wants a daughter-in-law to enjoy it, you just have to be human. My mother also loved it, though she didn't laugh at the same parts I did, strangely."

The spectrum of disciplinarity in performance can be plotted axially against a spectrum of organizational capacity that defines the expectations of procedural formality that we bring to the theatre as a producing entity. My use of "capacity" here refers to the ability of the theatre to make optimal use of its resources to produce disciplinary value. The Stratford Festival markets a tight and highly formal institutional capacity: we expect a Stratford production to be of a high calibre of technical skill, and we expect to see fully mounted shows with peak-quality production values. At the opposite end of the spectrum, we find the incoherent disorganization of the refusal of theatrical value, as in anarchist agitprop. *A Brimful of Asha* has moved through many different venues, each of which produces a different set of expectations. But in each case, the beginning of the show is a deliberate rupture of theatrical coherence that eases the audience from the restraints of theatrical decorum and generates a less formal atmosphere. When playing in a formal theatre space, even a small, underequipped one like the one where I saw it, the show mixes high and low organizational codes, again enabling a polyvalent response.

A Brimful of Asha establishes mixed theatrical coding by acknowledging members of the (samosa-eating) audience and giving them space to respond (and, in so doing, asserting the authority of the actor).

RAVI: Okay! Ladies and gentlemen, thank you so very much for choosing to spend your Saturday evening with us. We're thrilled to have you here. Most of you have met my mother.

ASHA: Hi!

The audience responds by saying "hi" and clapping.

RAVI: Oh, you got a "hi." There you go. My name is Ravi. Hi. (*The audience says "hi."*) Oh, you got more "hi's" than I did. That's not good for me. (*laughs*) Uh. Thank you so much for coming! So, tonight my mother and I are going to have a conversation and we

are going to tell you a story. A very true story of something that happened to me in 2007.

ASHA: Hey! It happened to me too. (Jain and Jain 4)

The invocation of the truth claim at the onset of the performance (it's not just true, it's *very* true) situates the play in a tradition of non-fictional performance that has generally fallen under the label of "documentary theatre." That label is contested and imprecise because it embraces historical practices that have little in common other than a claim that the text is derived from actuality. In this sense, "documentary" is not a formal category or genre but a stance. Carol Martin questions the representational strategies of documentary efforts and identifies six "functions": "to reopen trials," "to create additional historical accounts," "to reconstruct an event," "to intermingle autobiography with history," "to critique the operations of documentary and fiction," and "to elaborate the oral culture of theatre" (12). She argues that "The paradox of a theatre of facts that uses representation to enact a relationship with the real should not be lost in the enthusiasm for a politically viable theatre" (13).

The foundational fact established and critiqued in theatrical documentaries is most commonly the social production of the performance itself. In this line of thought, the "content" of documentary theatre is not the textual topic of contestation or engagement but the very paradox that Martin identifies. The subject of documentary theatre, in this reasoning, is the actor, specifically the actor's affect. And in the end, the audience has no easy way of ascertaining the authenticity of the truth claim. Affect becomes factuality: I accept that Asha really is Ravi's mother and that the person on stage really is Asha.

In documentary performance, the actor embodies an actuality perceived primarily through his or her affect and effort. "Reality" folds into the presence of the actor who stands before us as subject and object, document and documenter, biography and biographer, whose authority derives simultaneously from the representation and the erasure of actuality. The documentary process seeks typifying figures and moments, a selectively particularized construction of the real, and embodies it as a totality. The phenomenal presence of the enacted typification becomes the actual as we experience it, somatically and sensorially, in the theatrical moment. But the more we experience the performance as the phenomenal reality, the wider the gap between subject and object. The

performance threatens to become more “real” than the actuality that it enacts. Consequently, it is not unusual for documentary theatre to offset this by resorting to endorsement of the informing actuality — which the performance has particularized as the experienced *totality* of the actuality.² This is in fact Asha’s dramatic role: to endorse and restore the actuality that the performance erases.

The claim to authenticity that underpins the show begins when the audience is invited to share food with Asha. The transaction of feeding/eating invokes a pact that the show that we are about to share is personal and meaningful. The hosting action of sharing food establishes her maternal authority over the space of performance; what we are about to see happens because Asha *permits* it, just as she *allows* Ravi to allow her into his theatrical world. We don’t know that she actually made the samosas (that seems unlikely), and we don’t know that she paid for them (it seems logical that the cost was covered by the production budget), but we identify the food with her. Asha is the provider who establishes somatically the framing imperatives of ethnicity and tradition, and divides the audience into camps of experience, between those, like me, who accept the samosa as a sign of unitary Indianness and those who appreciate from their own history the significance of the choices that have led to the samosa in their hands and can discern the cultural codes in play.

In her discussion of the complex “language of food, nostalgia, and desire” in South Asian diasporic experience (3), Anita Mannur argues that

The desire to remember home by fondly recreating culinary memories cannot be understood merely as reflectively nostalgic gestures; rather such nostalgically-framed narratives must also be read as meta-critiques of what it means to route memory and nostalgic longing for a homeland through one’s relationship to seemingly intractable culinary practices which yoke national identity with culinary taste and practices.” (13)³

In this light, the affective transaction encoded in the samosa recruits us to support Asha’s position that the conflict in the re-enacted disputes that follow is fundamentally one of diasporic cultural identity, as opposed to personal preference — although we do not really know that it was Asha and not Ravi who decided to include food in the per-

formance. Asha visually underscores her position by wearing a sari, in contrast to Ravi's street clothes.

The performance begins with the assertion of diasporic Indian identity and prepares us for the conflict of cultural values and the failed family negotiation that it produced. In that narrative, Ravi wants to live his life his own way; his parents, educated and financially successful immigrants, want to choose a wife for him in the best interests of the two families involved. When he and a friend decide to go on a six-week trip to India, Asha and her husband set up meetings with prospective brides and their families behind his back. Mother and son debate this story, which culminates in an explosive family argument that ends with fondness and firm adherence to their respective positions. As they contest the auto/biographical facts, they summon evidence, using a familiar range of documentary authenticators, including projected photographs and emotive testimony. At the heart of the play is Asha's insertion of her own autobiographical statement. In a long monologue, Asha describes her early life in India, her initial refusal to give up her studies to get married, and finally her agreement to enter into an arranged marriage as long as the man lived abroad. This is her testament to the endurance and power of an arranged marriage.

This cultural conflict over marriage and family obligation, which pushes cultural definitions of social agency into opposition, is the ostensible issue and affective subject of the play, and it speaks to audiences whose sympathies might reside on either side (or who don't really care). Conflicting imperatives, of obligations to self and to family, pit individual happiness against familial well-being and social presence. This is a familiar narrative in diasporic life writing, but in *A Brimful of Asha* that conflict is deeply encoded in the particular theatrical form of the play, which suggests that the real conflict that is reconciled is not about marriage but about theatre. This conclusion becomes more apparent when we consider the show in the context of the cultural economics of independent, actor-generated theatrical production in Canada.

The asymmetrical disciplinarity of *A Brimful of Asha*, in which the "amateur" Asha intrudes into and mediates the aesthetic space of the "professional" Ravi, suggests that in its theatrical form and performance genealogy the play belongs to a particular tradition of the solo show in Canada. In the Canadian theatrical context, solo shows can be understood both as artistic forms and as economic practices. They have

operated as what I have called “a play for distinction, by which the actor/author capitalizes the self as a market commodity. In functional terms it is a constant process of auditioning to ensure future work: . . . a successful auto-performance is the quickest, most accessible and cheapest route to theatrical celebrity” (Filewod, “Actors” 55).

By electing to tell his personal story in a direct-address monologue, Ravi Jain built onto a tradition that has become well established and enabled other racialized actors to circumvent the disciplinary procedures of the theatre profession to attain distinction as playwrights. The stand-out pioneers were Djanet Sears with *Africa Solo* in 1987, Monique Mojica with *Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots* in 1990, and Guillermo Verdecchia with *Fronteras Americanas* in 1993. For Sears and Verdecchia in particular, the solo shows re-enact their experiences when not engaged in theatre work. They are acting not-acting. The performance transforms not-acting into acting, between-work into rehearsal work. They fulfill actor/playwright Carol Sinclair’s admonition that, “If you have more actors than you have acting jobs, the obvious job for actors is to create acting jobs” (61). *A Brimful of Asha* has its sources in this tradition and replicates the close-up intimacy that creates the theatrical power of the solo show. But it diverges from the template by exposing the fundamental feature that many solo shows obscure, and that is the collaborative practice of theatre work.

We can see the effacing of collaboration re-enacted as a theatre myth in Laurie Lynd’s 1995 film of Daniel MacIvor’s solo play *House*. We first see the narrator/character of Victor (played by MacIvor) getting out of a bus in a small town, and we follow him as he sets up his performance. The film reduces the process to one man, one chair, and an audience. But a solo show is invariably the product of collaborative labour, regardless of the scale of the production. There is an industrial apparatus of sound and lighting; an economic apparatus of budget, costs, and box office; and a creative apparatus of dramaturgy, directing, and design, no matter their affect. In the case of *A Brimful of Asha*, the collaboration is brought into the performance in two ways. It is present in the narrative track of projected images, family photos, sample “biodata” forms (one-page resumés of potential marriage partners), maps, and location shots. And it is corporeally present on the stage. Asha’s presence in the performance affirms the role of family members as collaborators, and

this points to the significance of the deep reconciliation of the play. *A Brimful of Asha* redefines the solo show as the familial.

The solo show has been one of the most effective methods of bypassing the systemic racism that has historically sidelined and excluded minoritized theatre artists. In that sense, the solo show pays its capital dividend in critical distinction and theatrical legitimacy. In contrast, the other cultural bypass routes (sketch comedy, stand-up, music) reward with celebrity and financial success. In this, Ravi Jain's career trajectory can be usefully compared to that of another Indo-Canadian performer from an immigrant family who grew up in the Greater Toronto Area, Russell Peters. In his worldwide tour performances, Peters has become a stand-up superstar who enacts the shifting social semiotics of the Indian diaspora with raunchy but affirming racialized humour. Typically, in his performances, Peters begins by singling out various cultural and ethnic differences that he sees in the audience and launches into a series of raced jokes, sparing none. In his world, all cultures are equally ridiculous and subject to lampooning, including his own. Peters often situates himself as a liminal occupant of the in-between by explaining his descent from an Indian minority who carry British names and refer to themselves as "Anglo-Indian." Following the dominant convention of transgressive ribaldry in stand-up, he tackles the subject of arranged marriage by reducing it to a gag:

Arranged marriage is a big problem in my community, man. Well, it's not so much a problem, it's a problem if you want it to be a problem, man. It's a problem for me, you know what I mean. My parents tried that on me last year. They came up to me, like, my mom goes, "Russell, you're getting older now. And you're not married. Why don't I bring some nice girls home for you." "Mom, I bring nice girls home all the time. They just leave in the morning, you know . . . that's a nice girl right there." "No no, I will pick some girls and you can choose the one you like." *Are you out of your mind?* My Mom wanted to pick my *wife!* I won't even let her pick my *clothes!* ("Arranged Marriages")

Peters is a global entertainment star, and the reach of his celebrity can be tracked by the show listings on his website ("Russell Peters"). He is also an entrepreneurial success whose fame began with YouTube videos. As his following grew, he retained control of his marketing, and, like

Ravi Jain, he draws on his family as business collaborators; his brother manages his tours and merchandise sales.⁴

Jain, equipped with comparable talent, wit, and performance charm, has taken a different direction, albeit one that shares a set of performative conventions. Solo shows and stand-up depend equally on the charisma of the performer who can respond nimbly to changes in the audience. Both follow a script, but the solo show typically fixes the script in theatrical conventions. Stand-up toys with its theatricality and performs demonstrative instances of improvisation and response. Stand-up comics encourage us to think that anything can happen, even though they cycle through a repertoire; theatrical solo shows typically push us along the narrative of unfolding story with a feeling of intimacy. Peters plays to houses of thousands (one of his self-produced DVDs captures a performance at London's O2 Arena, which seats 20,000), and Jain plays in houses of 200.

But stand-up and solo performance, though at times they might appear to be the same, emerge from very different cultural economies. In a cultural economy, the circulation of value embraces more than financial costs and revenues in the marketing of products. The currency also comprises reputation, prestige, and professional opportunity. Both stand-up and solo performance can produce celebrity, but in Canada theatre work rarely produces fame, certainly not the kind of fame that Peters has attained. It can produce, however, critical distinction and cultural power, and it is in this context, in the consolidation of cultural capital, that *A Brimful of Asha's* reconciliation can be understood.

On the narrative level, *A Brimful of Asha* is a story about a family crisis over arranged marriage, but the conflict that Asha's presence on stage reconciles is a deeper family crisis about theatre. This deep narrative is a restaging of the play's origins, because the performance is both the result of and the solution to the family crisis. The conflict over marriage is part of a larger conflict over Ravi's direction in life and his commitment to his family. They have supported Ravi in his elite education, briefly alluded to in the play when he says, "So our story begins in 2007. I arrive back — I was living abroad for two years; I had been working as an actor and actually I was teaching at a university in Athens, Greece. Because I had just finished my graduate studies in theatre" (Jain and Jain 7). His theatrical education was as elite as it gets, at three prestigious (and very expensive) conservatories: the London

Academy of Musical and Dramatic Art, New York University's Tisch School of the Arts, and L'École Jacques Lecoq in Paris (one of the most influential conservatories in the world, where students learn Lecoq's methods of personal clown and mime). Armed with this pedigree from the imperial triangle of London, New York, and Paris, Ravi established his own theatre company in Toronto with friends, and he developed *A Brimful of Asha* as the Urjo Kareda resident artist at Tarragon Theatre.

This is the profile of an artist who professionalized himself with extremely distinguished credentials, but to his family his theatrical work was no more than a youthful apprenticeship for the business path that they hoped he would follow. Asha responds to his reference to his training with an exclamation: "Theatre! What a proud profession for Indian parents." Ravi is under pressure to establish himself as a professional and settle down domestically: "You've got your profession," Asha says to him, "now I think this is the time to get married and settled" (7). Later she dismisses his theatre work with the phrase "Actor is not a profession" (31). His profession, though impeccably credentialed, is precarious at best. The crisis that exploded on Ravi's trip to India is re-enacted in the show: accusations of betrayal are hurled across continents over the telephone and culminate in the family home. Career, marriage, and family are bound together as a life decision in which the entire family has a stake; for his parents, his refusal of that shared ownership is a painful betrayal of family and culture, and to Ravi their continuing deceptions (lining up prospective brides, lying to him, circulating his biodata, and placing newspaper ads) are a betrayal no less extreme. The crisis climaxes in an argument:

RAVI: . . . And we start going at it, shouting at each other in the kitchen for about an hour and a half. Just going at it. My dad comes home from work, takes off his jacket, puts on his boxing gloves, and gets in the boxing ring and we're just sparring. "Oh, you're a liar." "I'm not a liar! Who's a liar? Don't blame me! You should get married." Raw-raw-raw-raw-raw. Three and a half hours. Shouting, screaming, and then finally by the grace of some miracle, my mother says:

ASHA: I'm sorry.

RAVI: My dad says, "I'm sorry." And then I say, "I'm sorry." And we resolved it. (63)

A Brimful of Asha is a comedy, so it comes as no surprise that it has a

punchline; as they recover from the argument, his mother hands him the biodata of yet another woman whom she wants him to meet. The argument is cathartic, but the entrenched positions have not shifted. The play winds down with gentle but insistent back-and-forth nattering until Ravi says, "Mom, the lights are out. You're supposed to stop" (69).

Although the play emerges from that argument, nothing is said of the conditions of its creation or of the negotiations that brought Asha into the production or what role she played in development of the script. Her participation is a manifestation of family acquiescence to Ravi's theatre career, and that reconciliation might have been eased by his growing artistic reputation, professional distinction, and awards (including the Pauline McGibbon Award from the Ontario Arts Council, which annually honours an early career theatre artist, and the Ken McDougall Award, given by Buddies in Bad Times, Theatre Passe Muraille, and Platform 9 Theatre to an emerging director). Ravi has thus been validated by both the cultural establishment and his peer community, and in a relatively short time he has acquired the reputation and resumé that ensure a viable theatre career. And in so doing, he has acquired the prestige and horizon of possibility that his family had expected him to find in the business world. It is in this context that the play's deep conflict is resolved by the very issue that has produced it. At stake in the generational dispute has been the well-being and social position of the family, and it is resolved by the same leap of courage and risk that brought Asha to Canada in the first place. In this reconciliation, played out in hundreds of performances over three years, marriage is an afterthought because it was never the real issue. The reconciliation enacts the entrepreneurial skill that has made the family successful in business by transforming a family crisis into a theatrical hit and demonstrates the initiative, adaptability, and resourcefulness of an immigrant family willing to try something radical and new to make a better life. If Ravi will not join the family business, the family must join his.

The published text of the play captures a performance and fixes it as dramatic literature, which opens the possibility that at some point the play might be performed by other actors (which would pose a considerable challenge to an actor tasked with re-enacting Asha's low-affect countertheatricality).⁵ But the text cannot reproduce the dynamics of the performance and the doubled presence of re-enacted past and performed present encoded in Asha's presence on the stage. Ravi's animated

affect shines through and dominates the script in print; missing is Asha's imposing presence that in performance reminds us that it is *her* house as we watch Asha watch Ravi.

Her framing presence in the show manifests in the printed text by prominence on the front cover (which depicts her as a young woman with her toddler son) and by the ingenious device of a pocket on the inside back cover that contains nine printed cards. Seven of them are reproductions of photographs that we have seen in the show. They recreate the visual environment of the show and, as in the performance, function as documentary evidence to substantiate the truth claim. They are deliberately low affect, reproduced on card stock in the muted palette of 1970s polaroids in a semiotic citation of authenticity. As I handle the photos, I arrange them in different sequences and find myself engaging in the family history that they assemble. The photos cannot replicate the performance, but in this way they extend its performativity. In linear sequence, we see a teenaged Asha with her family in India, her wedding to Ravi's father (never named in the show), Asha and her husband, Ramesh (named on the photo but not in the text), on their honeymoon, Asha with the newborn Ravi, a studio portrait of the infant Ravi, Ravi and his brother at a childhood birthday party, and finally the entire family, parents and sons, sitting in front of the Taj Mahal. However we mix the photos up, the same narrative of a happy and loving family emerges, the same narrative that Ravi's refusal of tradition disrupted and that *A Brimful of Asha* restores. Quotations on the backs of the photos embed moments of performance and reinforce Asha's agency; these are her photos, chosen by Asha and carrying her words. On the wedding photo, for example, we read, "Yes, I am thirty-eight years married. I am happy. I love my husband more every day than before."

The remaining two cards are Asha's recipes for *aloo gobi* and *rajma*. Asha leaves us as she welcomed us, with food. When I cook using her recipes, she comes into my house. Six months after I saw her on stage, I am still eating her food and savouring its flavours. Flavour, too, is affect, and for a moment as I cook my house is her house.

NOTES

¹ The name of the company, MT Space, is both an acronym for Multicultural Theatre and a pun on *The Empty Space*, the landmark book by Peter Brook, whose improvisatory and rigorous physical rehearsal methods formed the basis of founding director Majdi Bou-Matar's theatre training in Lebanon.

² The discussion of documentary draws on my article "The Documentary Body: Theatre Workshop to Banner Theatre."

³ I thank Mariam Pirbhai for drawing my attention to Mannur's work.

⁴ I am grateful to Mirali Almaula for pointing this out.

⁵ Although it might be incongruous that a play that documents the personal experience of the author-performer would be performed by others, it does happen. There have been numerous restagings of Theatre Passe Muraille's pioneering *The Farm Show*, and Verdecchia's *Fronteras Americanas* has had several third-party performances. In these cases, the truth claim is mediated but not mitigated by the actor who reimagines but also re-enacts the original.

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