



Shyam Bhatt: Treya's Last Dance

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Being very warm and forthcoming herself, it's not surprising that actress/writer Bhatt's performance emerged as such and more. Part of a series of underrepresented stories – collectively dubbed the Untold Stories Festival – a platform that the award-winning Bhatt also co-produced – her own dramatic monologue, Treya's Last Dance, formed the final, luminescent vignette, last weekend at SLAM King's Cross. Focussing on the cultural stigma of identifying with the LGBT community as a British-Asian, Treya's story is both a moving journey of emotional introspection, and a subtle showcase of Bhatt's charismatic stand-up skills. Dipping delectably in and out of local impersonations, from scathing Indian relatives to Jamaican preachers and Brooklyn women, Treya's character itself is a portrayal of an outspoken, working-class, second generation immigrant who struggles with cultural reconciliation. "The story arc came organically from my inhabiting of the character of Treya; a personality type I didn't think was adequately represented in society," Bhatt told us. "What I love about her is that she is a foul-mouthed British-Asian woman. You see uncensored women in shows such as Lena Dunham's Girls, but it's never been done from an Asian perspective. The

oppositional aspects of British and Indian culture are further explored and represented through the alternative lifestyle of Treya's brother, 'T', and her relationship with Indian classical dance. They are elements that are at odds with each other."

Indeed, this deeper – in many ways gendered – social discord is beautifully signalled as Bhatt's performance opened on an unsure Treya, clad in clinging, feminine lilac-patched garments, attempting the soft and delicate movements of a traditional routine, but tripping up to say the least. As Treya is encouraged to start speed-dating to find herself 'a life partner' – a sure fix according to her opinionated mother – we find out more and more about the exact nature of her personal conflict. As the character herself says at one point, though her family and their practices come from abroad, she and her bestie brother 'grew up here'. As the questions from her potential speed dates grow increasingly inappropriate and bold in equal measure, Treya is slowly forced to confront a tragic family grief: "when I wrote as Treya," Bhatt commented here, "I did feel as if her relentless humour was a way of running away from the pain. It's a common social phenomenon. But what's also wonderful is that if you talk over serious issues enough – humour easing these discussions – you lessen the topical charge and actually break down disruptive boundaries." This certainly felt the tear-jerking resolution as the show ended with a newly assertive Treya, knowingly tying on a shiny, ornate anklet and finishing with one single, reverberating stamp. The strong beat-laden, cultural fusion music which follows accentuates this as the echo of Treya's final self-reflective freedom from stereotypical restraints. No longer feeling the need to perform – or be 'flowery', an adjective used in the show – about her identity, she not only honours the importance of progressive community values, but one's complex, original self. A meta-narrative of sorts, Bhatt aptly emphasised: "I wrote this piece as an angry actress who was facing a dearth of inclusive parts! I've always loved issue-based, political comedy and, honestly, one of my proudest achievements has been touching at least one person in the audience through the universal appeal of Treya's particular experience."

How exactly do you feel the telling of these niche stories can help while we fight for equality and better representation overall?

I'd need to write an essay on this, but speaking very broadly, there is space for both! There are overarching cultural tropes that run through every tradition as much as each individual, and this is equally valid. With stories such as the Untold Stories series (which also includes the story of a frustrated, wheel chair-bound teenager and an over-fifties date night), we create little pinpricks of light that provide valuable insights. The end goal is that everyone has a voice; this creates a reliable social framework through which to communicate. And the best part is most people love hearing these stories. That's why we share anecdotes at the pub, and are drawn into varying viewpoints. For example, I know I love Salman Rushdie for his rich storytelling. The more stories the better! People aren't a branding exercise – we don't go into one box over another.

Who have been some of your favourite writing/acting influences?

Jim Carrey, Eddie Murphy. Also - Jo Brand!

Do you have more career highlights?

Being so well-received in New York was incredible. That was a lovely bit of artistic validation. I've also performed to very flattering reviews in LA where I also trained with The Groundlings.

Do you think humour has helped you better access good stories because it's a mode that's light and open?

Yes, it must have done. I do like to travel to places using humour. Treya is very humorous and loud, and I let her tell me her story.

You run The Stick Man Monologue Night too; do you prefer using your own empathy and connection to personas over simply observing and writing down what you see?

I am currently doing a project with Kali Theatre, and people are more focussed on the writing. Personally, the words do come more naturally to me by finding a physical way into the character. I think it's more and more common as people discover the power of writing themselves onto the stage – it's very immediate and connective and exciting to see.

Would you recommend formal training to aspiring actors?

Yes, it gives you good acting tools to draw upon and helps a lot with networking.

Finally, what's your advice as a female comic in this particular political climate?

Make whatever material you want and take it to open mic nights – this will help you grow the elephantine skin required to succeed. Fail hard; fail better.

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