

# The bitter sweet experience that is migration

An Indian-themed play at this year's Short + Sweet festival holds universal appeal for migrants



BY PREETI THADANI

Leaving one's birthplace to make another country home is a multi faceted experience. The sadness of bidding goodbye to loved ones is coupled with the challenge of navigating and embracing life in an unknown place which promises excitement and new opportunities.

One such story touched a chord with the audience at the recent Short + Sweet Theatre Festival held at King Street Theatre, Newtown.

The ten-minute short play *Roopa's Goal* was written by Carol Dance, directed by Lenore Robertson and starred Neel Banerjee and Pragati Bhatia.

It is a dialogue between a young Indian woman Roopa and her father-in-law Vikram. Roopa dreams of moving to Australia, but her father-in-law Vikram wants her to help him run their family guesthouse in India. Having lived in London during his younger years, Vikram scutely felt the pangs of leaving his family behind as he struggled to carve a new life in a foreign land. He faced hardships that were insurmountable and ultimately returned to India where his roots lay. His years of experience have taught him that home is where the heart is and Vikram's heart lies in India. He reminds Roopa that she too belongs at home and that the golden soil of Australia may promise dreams of a better life but in the end all she will find is alienation and despair. Vikram's arguments stem from experience and wisdom but the free spirited Roopa wants adventure and excitement. Vikram wants grandchildren and Roopa wants a western lifestyle. Conflict is pivotal to this relationship, and this intensifies when the generation gap is juxtaposed with the extended family system. It is a battle of wits - old vs new, tradition vs progress. Just as the audience are drawn into Vikram and Roopa's world the story takes a turn as Vikram reveals his deepest and darkest fear. Having repressed the pain of losing his wife and daughters in the Bhopal

disaster, Vikram is reluctant to relieve his anguish when Roopa encourages him to unburden his pain.

*Roopa's Goal* left the audience wanting more, pondering on questions that remained unanswered. Is Vikram averse to Roopa's ambitions because he now clings to the only family he has, his son and daughter-in-law? Can Vikram fully reconcile his loss after all these years? Is Roopa motivated by altruistic notions to help Vikram grieve the loss of his wife and daughters thereby helping him move on? Or is Roopa pushing Vikram to recall the past opening up old wounds only to manipulate him into accepting her arguments for migration to Australia in his vulnerable state? Is the bitter sweet pain of migration, leaving behind your culture and loved ones at home, for a land that promises new opportunities, worth it in the end? The themes of *Roopa's Goal* hold a universal appeal to all migrants.

Neel Banerjee played the role of Vikram remarkably, his performance powerful and his characterisation of Vikram moving the audience. Pragati Bhatia brought Roopa to life with her effervescent streak. The lighting was vital to the evocation of the mood especially the conflict as it built to a crescendo and enhanced the audience's experience.

Carol Dance has written with much wisdom and insight. Her own migration from USA provided the inspiration for some of her writings. Her travels to India sowed the seeds for a full length play titled *Indian Bhowani* which captures the disenfranchisement felt by migrants. It is about an Australian family who migrate to India: as their lives intertwine with those of a local Indian family, they realise that while they are from different cultures they are bonded in a common human experience. Carol's writing about the Indian ethos is discerning and perceptive. In addition to having two of her full length plays produced, Carol is also a talented painter. Her paintings, in which modern interpretations are applied to ancient figures, expose the similarities between cultures and show the continuity between the



Photo: Sybil Sze

Neel Banerjee and Pragati Bhatia in *Roopa's Goal*

past and the present.

Director Lenore Robertson too has a particular passion for working with cross cultural themes. A highlight for her in this project was "gaining experience of Indian culture through the in-depth and authentic characterization that Neel and Pragati brought to their roles. Both are proud of their Indian heritage, but presented different aspects of migration: Neel migrated to Australia 10 years back to pursue post graduate studies, whereas Pragati grew up in Australia yet identifies strongly with her Indian background". Having directed *Roopa's Goal*, Lenore now looks forward to travelling to India and experiencing the culture and people first hand.

Neel Banerjee, an acclaimed thespian, writer, producer and director, has been actively involved within the Australian-Indian theatre scene since 2003. He has formal training in both analytical and physical theatre, Tagore Song, Tabla, Indian folk instruments and Chhau Dance and has performed interstate and overseas. Neel's last theatrical production was *Bharjua...the sacrifice*. His theatre ambitions lie in the subject matter engaging

abstract pleasure and spirituality. He founded Nautanki Theatre ([www.nautanki.org.au](http://www.nautanki.org.au)) a registered incorporated organisation which provides a valuable platform for cross cultural exchange between the Indian subcontinent and Australia through theatre shows and drama workshops. Nautanki Theatre's productions maintain authenticity by showcasing relevant societal issues highlighting the dynamic and evolving culture that has become a trademark of Australia.

Pragati Bhatia has been working in theatre, film and television over the past decade. She relocated from Melbourne to follow her acting aspirations. Her most recent theatre credits include *Ground (La Mama Melbourne)* and *The Visit (NIDA Melbourne)*. Pragati has also choreographed Bollywood performances and recently did a reading for *Darti Daughters* with the Abhinay School of Performing Arts.

Short + Sweet, the largest festival of ten-minute theatre in the world, features over 150 of the best ten-minute plays from local and international writers each year. Conceived in Sydney over a decade ago, it has now gained international recognition, travelling to many countries including India.



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