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FRINGE FESTIVAL

Executive director Rohit Chokhani organized a local theatre extravaganza from halfway around the world



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With lockdown, Vancouver Fringe Fest was formed from afar

New executive director Rohit Chokhani has created a pandemic-ready event from the other side of the planet

by Janet Smith on September 9th, 2020 at 9:00 PM



While working from his parents' home in Mumbai, Rohit Chokhani found ways to realize some of his long-term plans for the Fringe Festival, even in the face of COVID-19.

RAYMOND KAM

It speaks to these bizarre times that the Vancouver Fringe Festival's new executive director

should have found himself running the annual theatre event from 12,243 kilometres away.

The unique situation called for a personal pivot as dramatic as the one being made at the Fringe itself, as the fest moves to a staggered series of performances—indoors, outdoors, and live-streamed—throughout the fall.

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Vancouver Fringe Festival tip sheet

Back in February, Vancouver theatre artist, producer, and cultural leader Rohit Chokhani decided to visit his elderly parents in Mumbai before he dived into his new position. India went into full lockdown in March, and until recently he'd been stuck there. In the last few weeks he's watched his populous home nation's COVID-19 numbers skyrocket.

“One sixth of the world lives here and numbers are high, but I've felt like I've been safe in my parents' home,” he told the *Straight* philosophically over What's App when he was still quarantined in India. “But it's been difficult for the folks out there on the street.

“Once I started in the job, I had this huge sense of disconnect between being here and majority of my team being in Canada,” he admitted. “I am born and raised in India, but I've been gone for two decades, so my entire social life and professional life was in Canada.”

Still, like the rest of the world, Chokhani learned to adapt—starting with his sleep patterns. Mumbai sits 12-and-a-half hours ahead of Vancouver.

“In India, my work day starts at 9 p.m. and I go to 3 or 4 a.m.,” he said. “I sleep from 4 to 8 and then take more calls. I sleep again for four hours in the afternoon.”

Flexibility was essential

The Fringe team had some months to prepare for the new pandemic reality, so it started with its artists, sending out surveys to find out how they wanted to proceed—acknowledging that any troupes travelling long distances internationally or nationally were off the table.

“It was clear we were not going to find a one-size-fits-all solution,” said Chokhani, whose diverse credits include heading up the Monsoon Festival of Performing Arts, codirecting an Indian-set *All's Well That Ends Well* at Bard on the Beach, and directing Pick of the Fringe award-winner *Bombay Black*.

“There were artists who were not wanting or comfortable with live performance. What we also heard was there were significant concerns about productions that were [created to be] live and how significantly they'd have to be translating that over to the digital realm.”

The manifold solution is a far cry from last year's celebration, which hosted more than 700 performances around town by more than 90 artists over 11 days.

This year, the Fringe allows artists to withdraw applications and get a refund, and reduces fees for those who want to take part in a few concentrated series over the autumn. Events are going to happen live in several limited-audience indoor and outdoor venues, and digital content will be largely offered for workshops and gatherings.

The first block of programming takes place from Thursday (September 10) to September 20 on Granville Island at Performance Works, the Picnic Pavilion, and the Yellow Crane Pad. Further intimate programming will be announced for blocks running October 1 to 10, October 29 to November 8, and November 26 through December 6.

“We managed to do certain things I would have done even pre-COVID—long-term visionary ideas,” Chokhani said.

Quelemia Sparrow, seen above in this year's *Skyborn: A Land Reclamation Odyssey*, will be part of a curated series of staged readings at this year's Fringe fest.

📷 EMILY COOPER

An inclusive Fringe

One of those pillars—equity, diversity, and inclusion—has been a mandate the Fringe has been working aggressively toward since about 2017. Though it also encompasses structural changes at the organization, it plays out immediately in 2020 Fringe programming such as *Advance Theatre: New Works by Diverse Women*.

The staged readings curated by Métis, Cree, and Haudenosaunee artist Tai Amy Grauman feature pieces by Quelemia Sparrow, Yvonne Wallace, and Lisa C. Ravensbergen.

“I’ve been an artist at the Fringe and I was already a part of the conversation as a community representative and consultant, so these lenses give me a certain understanding of the festival,” said Chokhani of the diversity push. “We want to include these folks and invite them in, but also we want to do it right. The last thing we want is folks who are marginalized to come here and not have a good experience.”

He’s also committed to turning the Fringe into even more of an incubator for new work than it already is: “If a show is successful at the Fringe, what happens to get it into another city, what does the second show look like?”

For the present moment, however, the intricacies of health and safety measures may pose the biggest logistical leaps. The shows’ limited capacity will meet the guidelines in the B.C. Restart Plan for patrons, volunteers, and artists.

“It’s been quite a ride,” Chokhani reflected. “Of course, I’m saddened by the impact and deaths. But I feel like there’s an opportunity for change in all this. And the amount of love and support from volunteers and donors and community is really heartwarming.”

The [Vancouver Fringe Festival](#) runs at various Granville Island venues and online from Thursday (September 10) to September 20, October 1 to 10, October 29 to November 8, and November 26 through December 6.

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British Columbia

New head of Vancouver Fringe Festival takes remote work to another level – 10,000 km away in India

1st 10-day phase of B.C.'s largest theatre festival kicked off Sept. 10

[Ben Mussett](#) · CBC News · Posted: Sep 12, 2020 10:00 AM PT | Last Updated: September 12, 2020



Rohit Chokhani became the Vancouver Fringe Theatre Society's executive director this past spring. He helped curate this year's festival from India, where he's been working nights. (Ben Nelms/CBC)



How do you plan an arts festival in Vancouver when you're stuck in Mumbai, more than 10,000 kilometres away?

According to Rohit Chokhani, the new executive director of the the Vancouver Fringe Theatre Society, you ignore the local time zone and commit to working nights for four months straight.

"It's been a wild ride," said Chokhani. "I definitely never imagined that in my lifetime I would have to do it during a pandemic while being locked down in a different country."

Chokhani secured the position to oversee the city's annual theatre festival before he travelled to India to visit family in February. At the time, Vancouver's 37th Fringe had already been planned with hundreds of shows scheduled across the city over 10 nights.

- [**Festivals, arts events experiment this fall, bringing big experiences to tiny audiences**](#)
- [**Montreal Fringe Festival goes virtual, staging comedy, dance, storytelling from afar**](#)

Then the pandemic upended life everywhere — and made live theatre, with its close, physical intimacy, seem practically impossible. Major productions on Broadway and in London's theatre district ground to a halt. Many Fringe festivals across Canada have been [cancelled altogether](#).

So Chokhani and his team — some of whom he's yet to meet in person — had to start from square one.

From his family's home in Mumbai, the curator worked from 10 p.m. to the early morning, finding time to sleep during the day.

"Everything was on the table," he told Stephen Quinn, host of CBC's *The Early Edition* on

Thursday.

"[But] our starting point was that health and safety was the priority."

Chokhani returned to Vancouver about two weeks ago and just recently finished quarantine.

- [Winnipeg Fringe to present 4-day live-streamed Virtually Yours festival during pandemic](#)
- [Saskatoon, Regina fringe festivals cancelled for 2020](#)

Normally, the festivities would only last for 10 days in September. This time, organizers hope to curate in-person and digital shows and workshops for four 10-day stretches between September and December.

This year's theme is "A Shift in Perspective." Unlike years past, the 2020 festival will only feature local artists. Performances will take place before no more than 50 patrons, the maximum amount of people that can currently gather at one time in B.C.

The first phase of Fringe Fest, B.C.'s largest theatre festival, kicked off Thursday and runs until Sept. 20. Those interested can learn more at the festival's [website](#).

With files from The Early Edition

Vancouver Fringe Festival takes off despite COVID odds

MARSHA LEDERMAN >

VANCOUVER

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On Friday night, against all odds, and with many safety precautions, the 2020 Vancouver Fringe Festival opened with a live show to in-person audiences. It was an outdoor, site-specific, physically distanced, carefully orchestrated participatory work co-created by Fringe stalwart T.J. Dawe and Ming Hudson. I watched in a mask and with a hunger I could not have anticipated at the Fringe festival a year ago.

In spite of the pandemic, the Vancouver Fringe has mounted a small-scale festival, with plans to do the same in October, November and December – the COVID-19 gods willing.

“Nothing can completely replace the live experience and human to human experience when there’s a body performing in front of you,” Vancouver Fringe executive director Rohit Chokhani said in an interview.

In addition to planning a live theatre festival during COVID-19 – challenging enough – Chokhani, who is brand new to the job, had to do most of that planning from India. He travelled to his hometown of Mumbai to visit family in February and was unable to leave once the pandemic hit. He almost didn’t make it back in time for the festival, but he managed to find a flight, finally, in late August. He ended his quarantine on Wednesday, the day before the Fringe held its opening event – online.

“I’m extremely grateful for my staff who had to work across the planet and across the time zones,” Chokhani said during the digital kickoff.

When it came to deciding whether to go ahead with live performances, the Vancouver Fringe asked for opinions from stakeholders – donors, audience members, volunteers, artists. At the same time, for months during the pandemic, artistic leaders throughout the wider Fringe festival network held weekly calls, sharing information and ideas and cheering each other on. Being at the end of the Canadian Fringe circuit was a plus, giving Vancouver some breathing space to figure out what to do.



Fringe artistic director Rohit Chokhani planned his first Fringe from India, where he was stuck due to COVID-19 until a couple of weeks ago.

RAYMOND KAM

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DIANE SMITHERS/HANDOUT

“We’re the first ones able to experiment with going live because of the timing of our festival,” Chokhani said. “And we see that moving forward as a victory for all Fringes.”

The kickoff event included congratulatory appearances from organizers of Fringe festivals in Victoria, Edmonton and Toronto.

“It’s so exciting to have an actual Fringe festival happening in real life,” Toronto’s executive director Lucy Eveleigh said.

Performances in Vancouver began Friday night with *Art Heist*. Directed by Dawe, it is being performed for audiences of 10 or fewer people, who move from one outdoor location to another. Start times are staggered by 20 minutes, so several groups can be accommodated in an evening or afternoon. It was a lot of walking and standing, but at least we were outside. And watching a show! Live! In person! (And chairs are available for people who need them.)

Safety protocols are in place. We were asked the standard COVID-19 detection questions, signed liability waivers and provided information for contact tracing. The actors kept their distance – from us and each other. We were each given a number and had to find that number on the ground at each location and stay there to keep us distanced from the rest of the audience. The safety plan calls for no acting while on the move to avoid people gathering around to hear.

Behind the scenes, props, costumes and sets are kept in separate bins, one for each cast member. The bins' exteriors are disinfected every time they change hands between the actor and the production manager.

The show is based on the real life theft of art from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston; 13 works of art valued at half a billion dollars were stolen in March, 1990. The show offers up real-life prime suspects and encourages the audience to ask questions in order to help crack the case, which remains unsolved.

What a pleasure it was to think about something other than the pandemic we’re all living through, for 100 minutes or so – even if it was to consider a major crime. And even if the smoky air from the wildfires burning south of the border was a reminder of another current catastrophe.

Theatre fans have been robbed of so much; this was a joy.

This month, Fringe is also offering a series of dramatic readings of works written by Indigenous women; an outdoor variety show; and a one-man show, *Hard 2 Kill*, by Richard Lett, who has survived alcohol addiction, cancer – and now COVID 19. The variety show is outdoors, but the others are indoors, at Granville Island’s Performance Works.

Programming for the remaining mini-festivals later this year will be announced at a later date. The staggered schedule is designed to be fluid and responsive in case anything changes – such as an outbreak, a change to British Columbia’s 50-person limit rule, or what have you.

“We thought chunking it down in a way where we do limited performances each month over the next four months would give us the ability to shift,” Chokhani said. “We are praying that none of that happens, but it does give us options.”

The Vancouver Fringe’s September programming runs through Sept. 20.

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September 12, 2020 · 2 min read



How do you plan an arts festival in Vancouver when you're stuck in Mumbai, more than 10,000 kilometres away?

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Fringe fest finds ways to play with past formulas

Proven successes presented with new twists amid pandemic

10 Sep 2020 [+1 more](#) STUART DERDEYN sderdeyn@postmedia.com twitter.com/stuarderdeyn

When the Fringe kicks off this week it won't be the same event theatregoers have come to know and love so well.

COVID-19 saw to that as it has with all other arts and cultural events. Surprise.

Rohit Chokhani was appointed executive director of the Fringe Festival when the pandemic hit. He was in Mumbai visiting family.

On a Skype call from India, the founder of Diwali in B.C. and Fringe Fest veteran discussed "shifting the Fringe," to reflect the priority given to maintaining community safety while still presenting a showcase for unique, delightful and entertaining theatre.

For Chokhani, re-envisioning and organizing the event from another continent for the past few months fit the weird new reality of producing arts and cultural events across a digital landscape.

"I wanted to visit my family before things picked up later in the year and I actually finalized the particulars of the contract after I'd already arrived here," said Chokhani.

"Now, finally, I have a return ticket at the end of August, which gives me just enough time to complete quarantine and still be able to open the festival. I've been on other sides of the equation — wearing hats from production manager, to producing and directing — which has meant I've felt a

part of this community for a long time."

Chokhani was production manager on the 2011 production of *Siddhartha: A Journey Home* at the Dr. Sun Yat-sen Garden. In 2015, he and South Asian Arts co-produced *Mr. Singh and Me* (Public Market Pick of the Fringe Award), and in 2017 directed Anosh Irani's *Bombay Black*, which also won the market award. His initial Fringe entry into the local community was quickly developed into his powerhouse roles with *Diwali* in B.C., *South Asian Theatre (SAT)* and as the co-creator of the *Monsoon Festival of Performing Arts*.

"It feels exciting to have been part of the Fringe community, looking at it through all those different

lenses, and to now be in a leadership position," he said. "From day one, we wanted all possibilities on the table and we were in regular contact with all of the other festivals discussing everything. One option we had — as we fall late in the Fringe season — was to break up the event into a number of smaller segments after contacting all of the artists who were booked to appear at the time."

Seeking that level of engagement with the 100 or so artists who were booked took time, as did soliciting surveys from all other stakeholders involved in the Fringe Festival. But in the end, it produced this year's staggered model of a series of four shorter "segments" to the Fringe. Each of these includes a mix of live theatre, workshops,



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The Vancouver Fringe Festival goes virtual and more equitable

Nadia Elsherif // Culture, Festivals // Volume 21, Issue 16 - September 22–October 6, 2020

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Rohit Chokhani, executive director of the Vancouver Fringe Festival, led the shift to all-virtual organizing while he was quarantined in India.

He talks about the unexpected benefits of planning the theatre festival remotely, ongoing changes in response to the pandemic and how the festival is supporting its Black, Indigenous, and people of colour (BIPOC) artists and audiences.

The perks of going digital

Though moving to an all-digital approach had its technical challenges, Chokhani and his team found unexpected moments of joy and bonding while planning this year's festival.

“When you're in the office, you have friendly chats by the water cooler or during lunch breaks, and we wanted to make sure that we were still able to maintain that. As part of our team bonding sessions, we got to see each other's homes and family gardens and so we got to know each other more intimately in a different way,” he says.

In addition to staggering the dates, the festival is also introducing new digital components in order to make the event as safe for its artists and audiences as possible.

“The jury's still out in terms of what the turnout will be this year, and whether we're ready to engage with each other as humans, with social distancing and wearing masks, is a big question. But I do think that by staggering the festival, we might be able to attract certain other people who are usually unable to attend in September,” hopes Chokhani.

Working towards 'theatre for everyone'

Since 1983, the Vancouver Fringe Festival has aimed to produce 'theatre for everyone' as an incubator for independent artists to develop and share their work. After completing an online application and paying the participation fee (based on the length of the show), the lottery system randomly draws applicants to share

their work on the main stage. Other options include 'Bring Your Own Venue' artists which are approved on a first-come, first-served basis and must also pay a participation fee to the Fringe.

Chokhani believes that while the Fringe's vision of inclusion for all is still in sight, it is important to stay vigilant in updating the ways through which this vision can be achieved.

"Back in 2017, Vancouver Fringe acknowledged that although we tried to be anti-establishment and create an environment of 'theatre for everyone,' the systemic challenges of the industry, including how the lottery system works, do create some systemic barriers," he says.

Currently, the festival offers discounted participation fees for those who choose them, as well as an option for artists to participate exclusively through digital live-streamed performances.

Though Vancouver Fringe has committed to some internal changes, including recently hiring an equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) consultant, Chokhani is still looking forward to the forthcoming changes within the theatre community at large.

"As a person of colour myself, being appointed as executive director does mean that some change is happening," he says. "When I came to Vancouver a decade ago and was doing my first show at the Fringe, I don't know whether I could've seen myself getting a position like this, although I believe that I did have the skills and the talent."

Chokhani explains that hiring BIPOC artists cannot be enough if there aren't systems in place to support them.

"As a leader, I don't believe in a check-box approach. Oftentimes, white institutions hire BIPOC and other equity-seeking artists expect them to continue to create the same kind of Eurocentric theatre that is in the mainstream," he adds.

For instance, Chokhani explains that the current understanding and methods of mainstream theatre, including sheet music and long-form musical monologues, are not universal to all cultures, and he hopes to bring more diversity to the festival in the future.

On bringing the Fringe Festival one step closer to this goal, Chokhani believes that the challenge will be ensuring that artists can create the shows they want to create while feeling empowered and supported to



Rohit Chokhani believes that the Fringe's vision of inclusion for all is still a work in the making. | Photo courtesy of Rohit Chokhani

Theatre / Festivals / Entertainment

2020 Fringe Festival finds ways to play with past formulas

From his family home in Mumbai, Fringe Festival director Rohit Chokhani envisioned a different kind of festival.

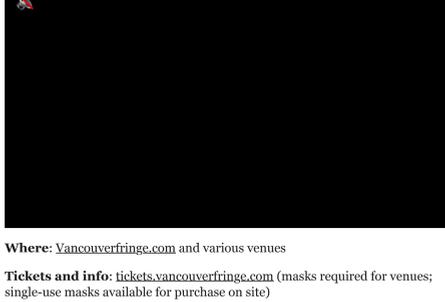
Stuart Darder
Sep 07, 2020 • Last Updated 4 minutes ago • 5 minute read



Rohit Chokhani is the new executive director of the Vancouver Fringe Festival. PHOTO BY RAYMOND KAM /jpg

Vancouver Fringe Festival 2020

When: Sept. 10 – 20 | Oct. 1 – 10 | Oct. 29 – Nov. 8 | Nov. 26 – Dec. 6, various times



Where: vancouverfringe.com and various venues

Tickets and info: tickets.vancouverfringe.com (masks required for venues; single-use masks available for purchase on site)

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Seeing that level of engagement with the 100 or so artists who were booked took time, as did soliciting surveys from all other stakeholders involved in the Fringe Festival. But in the end, it produced this year's staggered model of a series of four shorter "segments" to the Fringe. Each of these includes a mix of live theatre, workshops, readings and other performing arts so no one misses out on the usual Fringe smorgasbord if they can't do all the segments.

"The standard format for the Fringe is hundreds of shows happening at multiple venues in a short time period, and that just wasn't possible," he said. "By making it into smaller segments in a far more limited geographic area, we are in a far better position to provide the right levels of safety and service to staff, artists and patrons, and give a better entertainment experience. Also, by having it broken down like that, we are in a position to make changes quickly and efficiently as things develop or change."

For all that, Chokhani says that the shows are still coming from artists who were booked in "pre-COVID," so there isn't likely to be any kind of massive change in content unless artists are in frenzied rewrite mode at the moment. Where the changes will occur at performances such as Art Heist (Sept. 11 – 20, Yellow Crane Pad) or the Judith Fair: An Outdoor Variety Night (Sept. 12 -13, Picnic Pavilion) is more a case of nip and tuck shifts to the scripts.

"The reality we are in means some artists have had to adapt to the situation with a shift to a smaller capacity presentation or a rethink of how to break the fourth wall down without actually going into the audience and touching someone," he said. "But the whole idea of our non-juried/non-curated event is that we don't dictate content or anything else, usually. I see this year as an opportunity for modifications, change and re-envisioning how we do all of what we do."

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

One thing that the Vancouver Fringe Festival is dedicated to doing is providing greater opportunities to artists from communities that have not had the same levels of access to the event in its lifetime. No pandemic is going to put hold to the promises made to continue promoting programming to develop EDI (equality, diversity, inclusion) within Canadian theatre.

For this year, Ruby Slippers Theatre, Playwrights Theatre Centre, Playwrights Guild of Canada and Savage Society join up with the Fringe to present Advance Theatre: New Works by Diverse Women, 2020.

Curated by rising star tai Amy Grauman (Métis, Cree, Haudenosaunee), the dramatic reading showcase features five works by Indigenous playwrights all being presented at Performance Works, 1:30 p.m. — Yvonne Wallace's Utszan (September 14); Nyla Carpentier's The In-Between Place (Sept. 15); Quelema Sparrow's Women of Papiyek (Sept 16); Brenda Prince's Turtle's Island (Sept. 17) and Lisa C. Ravensbergen's The Seventh Fire (Sept. 18.) — with each helmed by a female director.



Actor/playwright Tai Amy Grauman. PHOTO BY VANCOUVER FRINGE FEST /jpg

"My play Her Name Was Mary, premiered at the Fringe in 2017, so it's certainly a familiar scenario, no one ever completely leaves the Fringe," said Tai Amy Grauman. "The cool thing about the advance series, which I've been in as an actor before, is that you get to workshop your work, have a reading, hear what the audience has to say and keep refining. I really adore all of these people as artists, with both Quelema Sparrow and Lisa Ravensbergen being mentors, and though having Indigenous stories from all over Turtle Island in the series would be cool."

Grauman actually used a part of Women of Papiyek as a monologue for her audition to UBC's theatre department and jokes about the play just waiting for her to appear in.

But all of the artists she has selected are well-known and established in their respective communities. She just wants to see them getting much wider exposure and knows that the Fringe Festival is a great jumping off point.

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Press Quotes For Rohit Chokhani's Direction for *Bombay Black*

"This is one of the most harrowing, unsettling, and mesmerizing plays I've ever seen. Ten hours after leaving the theatre, I'm still shaken by its uniquely poetic horror, and marvelling at the complexity of what acclaimed playwright Anosh Irani weaves in *Bombay Black*'s dense 75 minutes. The performances are all stellar, but Kanji is unforgettable as the diabolical Padma, who belongs in the hall of fame of horrifying fictional mothers " - - *Andrea Warner for The Georgia Straight*

"Blackest RomCom for deepest Kalyug. CultchLab lights up with Magic Realist vision of a City of Dreadful Night" - - *Liconln Kaye for Vancouver Observer*

"Bombay Black is a play that pulls at the emotions. It deals in betrayal and unmasks the ugly side of love lost. In the end it also unveils hope" - *Review Vancouver*

"I can see why *Bombay Black* directed by Rohit Chokhani won Pick of the Fringe last year. I definitely appreciated the sensory exploration that he took us on." - *Theatreaddicts.com*

"In this time of #metoo, the trauma that the two women are revealed to have suffered doesn't come as a surprise. As sad as that reality is, you'll emerge from this play reminded of the strength and resilience of women" - *Assaultedfish review*

"Chokhani puts us, again and again, in the dark—a state of "blindness" that reflects the male character. The blackouts are especially effective when the blind man tells the dancer stories that transport both of them out of their depressing realities... The stripped-down staging highlights the actors' abilities in three complex roles...The cast manages to make it all flow naturally. " - *Janet Smith for The Georgia Straight*

"There are fundamentally three aspects of Anosh Irani's play that magnetize the viewer in Diwali Artistic Director Rohit Chokhani's clever re-imagining of the script. Light/dark and chiaroscuro visuals. Terrific soundscape. And the acting. Oh the acting." - *brokenleg reviews*

"Director Rohit Chokhani has brought this vibrant feature to life for the 2017 Vancouver Fringe Festival's Dramatic Works Series. His cast and crew have done a great service to playwright Anosh Irani's lyrical, humorous, and somber work; fuelled with cultural depth and theatrical talent" - *Jorin McSween for SAD Magazine*

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**Press Quotes For Rohit Chokhani's Co-Creation and Co-Direction
for *All's Well That Ends Well***

"All's Well That Ends Well feels like an important cultural moment for Bard on the Beach. In part, that's because of decision to set this production in a British-occupied India at the turn of independence. It isn't just a compelling creative choice, but a powerful recontextualization of a 400-year-old text. It also paves the way for brilliant act of translation in Act 2, wherein Hindi is spoken on-stage, in multiple scenes, between several actors of South Asian descent. " ---*The Georgia Straight*

"Set in British India in 1946, just before independence and partition, the production explodes with Ruby Singh's joyful music, Poonam Sandhu's spectacular choreography and Carmen Alatorre's colourful costumes...The setting reshapes the play's dynamics. Bertram's inexplicable hostility towards Helena gets cultural context here in the brilliant wedding scene where he is surrounded, dumbfounded and perhaps disgusted by whirling, laughing, dancing Indian women who seem to mock his colonial British uptightness...The familiar Shakespearean bed trick gets a similar upgrade, and applause, when Helena and Bertram — who thinks she's Diana — have sex in a wagon screened by bright Indian silks, wheeled offstage by Diana's giggling village gal pals...A few of the second act scenes are played largely in untranslated Hindi, the dancing women are a knockout, and the sword dance of Bertram's Gurkhas is scarily superb...They scornfully toss their uniforms at his feet as the Brits leave, Indian and Pakistani flags are unfurled, and Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs begin brawling. The British have made a mess of things, as Bertram has, but no Viceroys or Helenas can't fix it as they can the romance plot...All's not so well and the end is yet to come in this fascinating staging" ---*Vancouver Sun*

"This All's Well That Ends Well looks and sounds gorgeous...And while it may not be good critical practise to talk about how beautiful a cast is, in this case it's unavoidable. Without doubt, this is the best looking, multi-cultural cast to grace the Howard Family Stage...Production is 10 out of 10 and I appreciated the open end. " ---*Jo ledingham*



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"Yes! This is the Bard on the Beach production I've been waiting for. This is the one to see...set the story in India in 1947, in the last days of the British Raj, and that choice unleashes myriad pleasures. It's exciting to see more of Vancouver represented onstage and in the audience, thrilling to hear Hindi spoken in a Bard production, a joy to be introduced to so much previously unfamiliar talent, and a treat to revel in the aesthetic exuberance...this production succeeds...team just keep offering sensual pleasures...Setting this production on the cusp of the Partition is a bold choice and, with hints of the violence that will follow, a dramatic one" --- *Colin Thomas*

"Saw All's Well That Ends Well at [Bard on the Beach] in Vancouver this past week. I was inspired by their inclusiveness and creativity. Set in India, it was a wonderful examination of identity through Shakespeare." – *Shaila - patron attending All's Well That Ends Well*

"Wow. [Bard on the Beach] thank you. Just saw All's Well That Ends Well and I absolutely loved it... Gorgeous set and lighting design, beautiful staging and performances, really interesting added layer setting it in India at the tail-end of British occupation (and cusp of Indian independence), and lovely moments of levity, dance, tenderness, and conflict. The use of Hindi and [Punjabi], the subtle mannerisms, the music, the costumes and setting transported us – really bringing the world to life." – *Anonymous Patron attending All's Well That Ends Well*

"Wow, what an amazing production. One of the best plays I have seen in my over 35 years of attending plays. I have been fortunate enough to have attended over 50 plays and so I have much to compare to." – *Cynda (Patron attending All's Well That Ends Well)*

"Indian All's Well gives Shakespeare an upgrade. Bard on the Beach offers up another fascinating production" -- *Jerry Wasserman*

"Bard's production digs deeper into that problem by setting the action just before and after the partition of British India into an independent India and Pakistan...the tensions are crystal clear: Bertram, a colonizer, isn't not-in-love, but is someone whose entire social standing means he can't (or won't) see Helena as a possible partner" --- *Montecristo Magazine*



 All's Well That Ends Well | June 26 – August 11, 2019
Bard on the Beach 



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Director Rohit Chokhani says the play's inclusion of Hindi creates a more authentic experience 0:32

Authenticity was a driver for the play's co-director Rohit Chokhani. He also feels that his home is both in India and Canada.

Although this play is firmly set in India, he hopes the audience will see themselves reflected in it.

"We as Canadians are also going through this question of identity. How do I fit in?" he says.



Rohit Chokhani wanted to explore issues of culture, race and privilege in this production. (Ben Nelms/CBC)

"Theatre needs to adapt to what the Canadian identity today ... which includes you and I and all these multigenerational, immigrant families and Indigenous families."

He wanted the play to feel authentic in language, so — as one would expect to see in 1946 India — both Hindi and English are spoken.

Parmar says theatre, and the arts in general, need to be more inclusive of different experiences and not tokenize for the sake of diversity. Casting a person of colour needs to make sense, she says.

On the other hand, colour-blind casting gives actors more opportunities.

- ['It doesn't matter what your skin colour is': Black actor stars as Father of Confederation](#)

"It doesn't have to be about me waving the Indian flag all the time," Parmar says. "I can just do some Shakespeare, too."

Parmar hopes that a more inclusive theatre experience might attract different audiences as well.

Bard on the Beach has been making a push for diversity, but even so, this is the first time it's had such a large South Asian cast.

"We're getting so many more South Asians coming to see the show and suddenly they can see themselves in the story in a way that maybe they couldn't before," she said.

All's Well The Ends Well will run until Aug. 11 at Bard on the Beach.

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Claiming Space

**How Rohit Chokhani is
blazing trails for South
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FRESH SHEET



CURATED THEATRE COVERAGE + FRANK REVIEWS FROM COLIN THOMAS

December 12, 2019

1. SIMPLY THE BEST

It's time to acknowledge some of the most meaningful theatrical experiences I've had over the last year. All of them involved a visceral sense of shift and expansion. I'm grateful.



This is not one of the backdrops that Fight With a Stick used in A Vista — but it could have been.



Jivesh Parasram — seen here in [Take d Milk, Nah?](#) — is a charming performer. He is also one of the newest shapers of Vancouver theatre.

More South Asian Art and Artists

It's been coming but, for me, it feels like 2019 was the year that the South Asian presence in Vancouver theatre definitively *arrived*.

Rohit Chokhani, the artistic director of [Diwali in BC](#), has been a huge player in all of this.

For Bard on the Beach, he co-directed with Johnna Wright a version of [All's Well That Ends Well](#) that was set in India on the cusp of the Partition. Helena (Sarena Parmar) started off Act 1 fully colonialized — in beautifully tailored costumes by Carmen Alatorre — and gradually reclaimed her Indian self until, in the final image, she stood alone onstage in a sari of seering pink.

It was thrilling to hear Hindi spoken on the Bard boards — and to see more of Vancouver represented both onstage and in the audience.

With its ongoing partner The Cultch and a plethora of other partners, Diwali in BC presented [Take d Milk, Nah?](#) as part of its annual festival this year. As

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Rohit Chokhani and Diwali in B.C. amplify South Asian voices

Partnering locally with the Cultch, the festival reaches out to wider audiences

by Janet Smith on October 3rd, 2018 at 12:32 PM

0



Diwali in B.C. artistic director Rohit Chokhani has had a direct role in bringing several recent South Asian works to the stage.

One way to describe Rohit Chokhani’s approach to curation at Diwali in B.C. is, as he calls it, “finding the diversity within the diversity”.

While putting together this year’s festival, the artistic director has found performances that cover vastly different South Asian experiences. There’s a U.K. play about online extremism, an intimate play about a Vancouver Punjabi family dealing with tragedy in their homeland, and a classical-Indian-dance rendition of a Bengali myth.

But Chokhani’s work is also about a kind of cultural diplomacy—a honed mix of collaboration, networking, and communication. And that’s no big surprise, considering this is the producer and theatre artist who won the Vancouver NOW Representation and Inclusion Award at July’s Jessie Richardson Theatre Awards.

Not only is this fast-emerging local arts leader working with such groups as SACHA (the South Asian Canadian Histories Association) and the Vancouver Tagore Society on this year’s Diwali shows, his provincewide fest is copresenting the Vancouver productions with the Cultch. All will be staged at its Vancity Culture Lab and York Theatre, and he’s worked closely with executive director Heather Redfern on programming.

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“I always believed that although Diwali has roots in India, we’re doing it in B.C.,” Chokhani tells the *Straight* over the phone. “How do we take that concept and make it welcoming to other cultures?”

For Chokhani, that’s meant not only reaching out to marginalized artists and arts groups within the South Asian community, but also teaming up with a more mainstream theatre to reach a wider audience.

Together, Chokhani and Redfern attended the 2017 debut of local writer-director Paneet Singh’s *A Vancouver Guldasta*, set in an actual Vancouver Special. In it, a Punjabi family struggle with the trauma of the 1984 armed invasion of the Sikh Golden Temple in India, while their daughter forms a growing relationship with their young Vietnamese tenant.

“Heather and I went into this small house and we said, ‘We have to do something with this,’ ” relates Chokhani. “It was actually very powerful—we felt like part of the family, and we felt the story was very Vancouver.” (Diwali in B.C. and the Cultch are now copresenting it with SACHA.)

Similarly, Chokhani and his mentor headed to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival last year and found *The Believers Are But Brothers*—a one-man play that encourages audience members to wire into WhatsApp as it draws parallels between the online actions of two ISIS recruits in Britain and a white alt-right

extremist in the U.S.

“It was taking me into a world I didn’t understand at all,” Chokhani says. “Why do certain young men feel powerless around money and power and sex, and what lengths will they go to get it?”

<p>The U.K.’s The Believers Are But Brothers.</p>

The U.K.’s *The Believers Are But Brothers*.

Chokhani looked closer to home to help develop *Shyama*, working as director for Bengali-Canadian artist Arno Kamolika, who’s interpreting fellow Bengali Rabindranath Tagore’s epic tale through the ancient Indian dance form of bharata natyam, working with the Vancouver Tagore Society and Mandala Arts & Culture.

Beyond that, Chokhani has spread Diwali in B.C. events as far as Vernon, Maple Ridge, and Nanaimo. He says that’s one reason he’s named this year’s fest New Horizons; the other is to position the programming as a way to look beyond our divisive world. As he puts it, “How do we look at things in a different way?”

Looking at things in a different way has been a part of the Mumbai-born Chokhani’s success in getting diverse voices heard on local stages.

He spent his early adulthood in computer programming, first earning his master’s in the field, then leaving it to delve into the arts after he arrived here in 2010, by way of the U.S. If you feel like you’re seeing more and more compelling South Asian stories on Vancouver stages, chances are the artist-producer has had his hands on the project.

In 2016, he worked, as part of Diwali Fest, with Touchstone Theatre to present *Brothel #9*, a searing account of sex slavery in Calcutta that won him a special Jessie award for “outstanding work in expanding the diversification of Vancouver theatre through excellence in festival programming”. Last year, his reimagined version of Anosh Irani’s



6 Two-year trial will allow Cactus Club and Boathouse restaurants to sell alcohol at two Vancouver beaches



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Woman with Traditional-Stitched Elephants...

Hi, I saw you tonight (Tuesday, October 2nd) at around 11:30 PM on the Millennium Line

Confessions

I'm not dating your friends

I don't get to sleep with them at the end of the night when we all go out for dinner. ...

Bombay Black, about a blind man’s love for a courtesan, blew away Vancouver Fringe Festival audiences and was reprised at the Firehall Arts Centre. In the summer, he cohelmed the Monsoon Festival of Performing Arts, programming strong work like Anita Majumdar’s *The Fish Eyes Trilogy*. And he’s also created Project SAT, an ongoing initiative to help South Asian artists develop, tour, present, and produce new theatre work across the country, through workshops, mentorship, and other programs. (Redfern has been a key mentor on the project.) And news recently emerged that Chokhani will codirect a 2019 production of Shakespeare’s *All’s Well That Ends Well* at Bard on the Beach—one set in India and spiced with South Asian music and dance.

It’s a lot to have achieved in a short time here, where a culturally diverse theatre production was once a rarity on the calendar. But Chokhani knows how to build bridges—an art he chalks up not only to his technology background but to living and learning.

“Sometimes my friends will ask me, ‘That master’s program for three years—do you feel all that work went to waste?’ But I think that’s where I get the strategic brain and communication skills: how to communicate with different communities, how to manage high emotional settings,” he says, and then offers: “But also, when I was younger, I made some mistakes. A lot of these conversations about culture and ethnicity would become more paralyzing. I’m older now, and I see we need to be more collaborative to understand what these systemic barriers are.” And then, strategically dismantle them, one by one.

Diwali in B.C. copresents *A Vancouver Guldasta* until October 21 at the Cultch’s Vancity Culture Lab; *Shyama* on October 27 at the York Theatre; and *The Believers Are But Brothers* from October 30 to November 10 at the Cultch’s Vancity Culture Lab.

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Monsoon career fits Chokhani fine

Festival co-creator has hands in several initiatives, with goal of expanding South Asian theatre

2018 MONSOON
FESTIVAL OF
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When: Aug. 9-19, various
venues and times.
Where: Vancouver and
Surrey, various venues.



learn more in the workshops in a way that is more inclusive in terms of access and interest," Chokhani said. "If you are from a certain culture, you may not be as interested in Shakespeare or Chekhov — both things that I do and enjoy — which are a focus of theatre schools. There's nothing wrong with that, but when I go to India, I see different ways of doing things and think we can bring them here using Project SAT as a platform."

Incorporating training platforms that are not so well known in Canada, such as Natyashastra workshop in the fall — which is a comparative study of Eastern dramaturgy based on the Bharata Natyashastra (historic performing arts text) and Aristotelian poetics — may sound pretty specialized. But if it results in interesting stories well told in unique ways, we're all the better for it.

Having succeeded in finding funding through Canada Council and elsewhere, Monsoon, Project SAT and Diwali in B.C. have all been able to offer the training for free. This is key to Chokhani.

"It needs to be free, because marginalized artists can barely make enough money to survive and I'm not going to charge them," he said. "I'm just so happy that we've been able to cater to this huge gap in the scene and not have to charge for it."

With a long-term vision to bring diverse South Asian artists and stories from all over the world to the Lower Mainland, he hopes to see local voices added to the global chorus. He's excited about the pace of expansion in each of these initiatives and hopes it continues this way. Chokhani is not someone who favours the word "no."

"If you want to step up, let's do it," he said. "We all live in a very interesting time with cultural differences and gender clashes, but we can't forget that there is an underlying humanity that we all have and we can come at our differences in a caring and loving way. Having a good conversation helps to understand each other."

"Project SAT is aiming to provide even more opportunity for the community to

sderdeyn@postmedia.com
twitter.com/stuartderdeyn

SCENE

A MONSOON OF PERFORMING ART

Event's co-creator manifests a formidable energy in promoting South Asian theatre

STUART DERDEYN

There is a perception that Rohit Chokhani doesn't sleep. The winner of the Vancouver Now representation and inclusion award at this year's Jessie Awards is preparing — with co-producer and co-creator Gurpreet Sian — to launch the third Monsoon Festival of Performing Arts, but he also just announced the 2018 programming for Project SAT (South Asian Theatre). This initiative aimed at developing a deeper infrastructure for touring, producing, presenting and creating national and international South Asian theatre projects in Canada is just one more way this active creator is doing his part to "represent the unrepresented" voices in this country's theatre scene.

Add in an artistic associate position at Bard on the Beach, helming Diwali in B.C. (Oct. 5 to Nov. 18, across the province), producing new plays and any number of other community outreach and creative pursuits and you can see why people question how Chokhani does it. He assures me that sleep plays a key role in keeping up the energy levels.

His master's degree in computer programming provides some key organizing skills that make him the rarest of creative types: an ef-



PREVIEW

2018 Monsoon Festival of Performing Arts
When: Starts today, runs until Aug. 19
Where: Vancouver and Surrey, various venues
Tickets and info: monsoonartsfest.ca

and interest," said Chokhani. "If you are from a certain culture, you may not be as interested in Shakespeare or Chekhov — both things that I do and enjoy — which are a focus of theatre schools. There's nothing wrong with that, but when I go to India, I see different ways of doing things and think we can bring them here using Project SAT as a platform."

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This is key to Chokhani. "It needs to be free, because marginalized artists can barely make money to survive and I'm not going to charge them," he said.

Monsoon Festival of Performing Arts, now kicking off its third season.

When some of my friends began to take the festival seriously, I was involved in the planning. Gurpreet Sian and I should be a hub and a place. Over the festival workshops, an

Hopkinson (Aug. 10-12, Vancouver Art Gallery) is about the 1914 Vancouver trial of Mewa Singh, who was accused of assassinating Canadian Immigration Inspector William Charles Hopkinson. Singh admitted to the act. To have the play staged in the same building where the case was tried more than 100 years ago is unique. "There are already organizations doing great work with music and dance, and Gurpreet and I knew we wanted to do theatre," he said. "But also theatre that was encouraging to emerging artists and not just presenting established artists. So we both spend the year logging in

what we see in our different networks that resonates and look for some kind of balance between local/not local, emerging/established, international/national and diversity/inclusivity and so forth in the South Asian community." It's a big mandate for Monsoon Festival of Performing Arts and Sian and Chokhani have been careful to keep the scope of the event reasonable to get the best results. Since launching the event, they have met so many new names and they are aware the gap they perceived is getting smaller.

Monsoon season and more for Rohit Chokhani

Rohit Chokhani, the winner of the Vancouver Now representation and inclusion award at this year's Jessie Awards, is preparing — with co-producer and co-creator Gurpreet Sian — to launch the third Monsoon Festival of Performing Arts.

STUART DERDEYN ([HTTPS://VANCOUVERSUN.COM/AUTHOR/SDERDEYN](https://vancouver.sun.com/author/sderdeyn)) Updated: August 9, 2018



Diwali Fest's artistic producer Rohit Chokhani [PNG Merlin Archive] Diwali Fest 2016, PNG *DIWALI FEST 2016*
/ PNG

2018 Monsoon Festival of Performing Arts

When: Aug. 9-19, various venues and times.

The victory of light over darkness: Producer Rohit Chokhani spreads unity message of Diwali



ERIKA THORKELSON

[More from Erika Thorkelson](http://vancouver.sun.com/author/erithor) ([HTTP://VANCOUVERSUN.COM/AUTHOR/ERITHOR](http://vancouver.sun.com/author/erithor))

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OCTOBER 5, 2016

WORLDS AWAY: DIWALI FEST PRODUCER ROHIT CHOKHANI ON FINDING HIS PATH

Kelsey Klassen — Westender



Piya Behrupiya, a musical adaptation of Shakespeare's Twelfth Night, will see 16 actors coming from India to perform - The Company Theatre photo

Rohit Chokhani has spent his entire career bridging different worlds.

First, despite a passion for the arts, Chokhani uprooted himself from the vibrant, sweltering embrace of Mumbai for the relatively staid climes of Boston to pursue his master's degree in computer science. Then, seeking a more creative outlet, he transitioned a relatively dry technical degree into the design and management of video games, which brought him into contact with companies like Fox, Pixar and Disney, and rocketed him into multicultural boot camp as a project manager for teams in the US, India and China. Then, in 2010, Chokhani decided to move from Boston to Vancouver on the encouragement of an uncle, where his

career path would change entirely again. Determined to find footing in the film industry or something similar, Chokhani saved up enough money before coming to Vancouver to wait for the right opportunity. In the meantime, he volunteered, wrote his own plays, and created an arts program at his local temple.

Eventually, and somewhat by chance, he networked his way into an unpaid production management position on the 2011 Fringe hit, *Siddhartha: the Journey Home*. “It was a very East Vancouver, kind of, hippie-collective environment. Nobody was getting paid, everybody was doing everything,” he recalls, with a laugh. “But what they had was very unique: a great script [...], some really good names attached, and they had the Sun Yat-Sen Garden as their venue.” It was at this point that his talents coalesced. The play had local audiences clamouring for tickets, and took home Talk of the Fringe that year. Meanwhile, for a boy who grew up organizing community events and watching Bollywood films on his neighbourhood’s lone television set, *Siddhartha* unlocked a world that kids his age in India were often told wasn’t a career at all.



Source: Diwali Festival artistic producer Rohit Chokhani - Dan Toulgoet photo

“I didn’t even know I would have an arts career,” Chokhani explains. “I was raised like the typical Indian kid. Things have changed since then, but [...] nobody really taught that you could have a career in the arts. [The arts were] always extra-curricular activities, and you were raised in a culture that said be a doctor, engineer or lawyer.”

Since then, Chokhani has joined the ranks of Vancouver’s in-demand artistic voices, having served as general manager for Urban Ink and Touchstone Theatre, producer-in-residence for the National Arts Centre in Ottawa, and, this year, as an apprentice director for Bard on the Beach’s production of *Merry Wives of Windsor* (<http://bardonthebeach.org/press/releases/201605/merry-wives-windsor-joins-27th-season-bard-beach>). Most significantly, though, Chokhani continues to bridge multicultural borders as the artistic producer of **Diwali Festival** (<http://diwalifest.ca/>) (Oct. 11-Nov. 30), one of the Lower Mainland’s largest celebrations of Diwali. A global, multi-faceted South Asian holiday, Diwali could be described as Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year’s rolled into one. Historically, the Vancouver festival has focused on showcasing music, dance and food from the Indian culture. In the four years under Chokhani and team, however, it has expanded in size (with events now in Surrey, Richmond and Coquitlam) and scope, adding fashion, yoga and theatre to the lineup – the latter in partnership with the Cultch. Chokhani says his goal was to present shows that “no one in Canada has ever seen”, and Diwali’s theatrical debut, Yaël Farber’s *Nirbhaya*, drew audiences from across the spectrum last year. The play depicted the horrific 2012 gang rape of 23-year-old Delhi student Jyoti Singh, alongside testimonials from rape survivors. It was a raw, emotionally challenging experience for its viewers, and a timely yet risky production. Building on its many successes, though, Chokhani has quadrupled Diwali’s theatre offerings this year.

“The theatre program at Diwali fest has completely exploded,” Chokhani says. “People in mainstream theatre saw what we created with the Cultch and saw the potential for South Asian content, not just for South Asians but for people at large.” This year, audiences can lose themselves in *The Elephant Wrestler* (Nov. 1-5 at the Cultch), which follows a poor chai-wallah, or tea seller, as he investigates the mysteries of life; Carousel Theatre for Young People’s *Sultans of the Street*, about street kids dreaming of a better life (Oct. 29-Nov. 13 at Waterfront Theatre); *Brothel #9*, about the cost of human trafficking (Nov. 17-27 at the Cultch); and then the big ticket, *Piya Behrupiya*, a mammoth adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* (Oct. 11-22 at the York), in Hindi with English surtitles. Commissioned by London’s Globe Theatre and created by The Company Theatre in Mumbai, *Piya Behrupiya* is as exciting as it is unlikely: a Bollywood-meets-Shakespeare musical adaptation. “It’s a big deal for me because no one has done a show of that magnitude in a language that is not French or English,” says Chokhani. “And to bring 16 actors from India and to do a show that is based on *Twelfth Night*, it’s really a remarkable landmark for me, and also Diwali Fest, to make theatre accessible in that way.”

Diwali Festival runs Oct. 11-Nov. 30 at various venues. Tickets at [DiwaliFest.ca](http://diwalifest.ca)

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Cultivating the Arts - Rohit Chokhani

By Renu Singh-Joseph, 23 Nov, 2016



Chokhani is an award-winning producer and cultural leader, who is forging the path for future generations of South Asian talent in the arts, in particular for the medium of theatre.

Speaking with Rohit Chokhani, you can hear the passion in his voice for the cultivation of the arts, in particular the medium of theatre, and forging a path for future generations of South Asian talent.

Chokhani has had a rich, diverse career from completing his masters in computer science and producing video games for popular TV shows and movies to transitioning to the arts world as an award-winning producer and cultural leader.

For the last four years, Chokhani has been the Producer for Diwali Fest, the largest Diwali-themed festival in the Lower Mainland with events spanning over six weeks. He is also the Artistic Producer for South Asian Arts Society, which strives to create performance and educational opportunities for amateur to professional artists. This past summer, Chokhani was the Apprentice Director for Bard on the Beach and assisted Director Johnna Wright for the production of 'Merry Wives of Windsor.'

Around the world and in Canada, there is a conversation taking place around inclusivity in regards to mainstream professional arts, says Chokhani, adding "How do we represent marginalized cultures on the main stages? There is nothing wrong with the Eurocentric practice of arts, but often times, projects that are funded or seen as high quality productions are coming from Eurocentric traditions of creating arts, and not so much as other traditions like the South Asian tradition.

For me, that whole balance needs to shift and equate. A lot of that is happening, the Canada Council for the Arts just made a groundbreaking announcement to completely change their funding model to make it more inclusive. This is a great stepping stone the council has taken,



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as it's very important to represent artists of colour, especially women of colour, on our stages."

As South Asian arts continue to evolve and emerge in Canada, Chokhani has often reflected upon South Asian artists in theatre and questions like "What about South Asian theatre artists? Why don't we have representation in theatre? Why don't we create that?" have arisen over the years.

As a result, Co-Producers Chokhani and Gurpreet Sian, along with the South Asian Arts Society, founded the Monsoon Festival of Performing Arts. In its inaugural year, the Monsoon Festival ran from August 11-21, 2016 in both Vancouver and Surrey highlighting South Asian theatre.

According to Chokhani, the festival focused on local and international artists and its goal was to showcase a variety of performing arts from critically-acclaimed international plays like 'Honour: Confessions of a Mumbai Courtesan (New York)' to comedy sketches like 'I Can't Believe It's Not Butter Chicken' and the full-length play 'Kehar Singh Di Maut (The Death of Kehar Singh).'

An initiative near and dear to Chokhani's heart is Project SAT (South Asian Theatre). Supported during its first year by the Canada Council for the Arts, BC Arts Council and the National Arts Centre - English Theatre, Project SAT is an ambitious development initiative that has multiple phases and will take several years to complete with the end goal to "create a network for developing, touring, producing and presenting national and international South Asian-themed theatre projects in Canada."

"What I want to do is to create opportunities for South Asians, not just opportunities in the mainstream but to create a new mainstream for them," says Chokhani. "We don't have to come from Bollywood to be a successful South Asian artist, so how do we create an initiative where there is training, workshops and other things for artists in British Columbia, so they don't have to go to India to learn the roots of their culture."

Some phases of Project SAT are currently underway, and a great example is development programs such as workshops that provide an educational environment for artists to learn from professionals in the industry. "It's a massive vision, but I have plans of what needs to happen every year between now and 2020," says Chokhani, adding that there has been tremendous support from multiple arts organizations and societies and national/international partners that all want to assist Project SAT into becoming a reality.

As Artistic Producer of Diwali Fest, Chokhani strives to diversify the programming and one of his mandates has been expanding the theatre component. In 2015, Chokhani, in partnership with The Cultch (theatre), brought in the world-renowned play 'Nirbhaya' from India based on the Delhi gang rape. 'Nirbhaya,' winner of the Amnesty International Freedom of Expression Award, was a successful hit with festival attendees. As a result, Diwali Fest was approached by multiple theatre companies and the 2016 lineup of events featured plays from different regions of India - North, South, East - showcasing the diversity of the nation and its people.

Throughout his career, Chokhani has worked on a wide array of projects. From his earlier management days at Foundation 9 Entertainment, he worked with clients like Fox, Pixar, Disney and Nickelodeon to produce video game products such as 'Dora the Explorer,' 'SpongeBob Square Pants' and 'Alvin and the Chipmunks.' In the theatre world, some of his nominated and award-winning projects as a general manager for Touchstone Theatre include 'The Romeo Initiative' (4 Jessie nominations), 'The Concessions' (3 Jessie nominations), 'Mrs. Singh & Me' (2015 Pick of the Fringe Award - South Asian Arts) and 'Siddhartha: The Journey Home' (2011 Talk of the Fringe Award - Akasha Arts).

As our conversation comes to an end, Chokhani has advice for parents with artistically ambitious children. "Your concerns are genuine. As an artist that has struggled, money is not the only motivation for what we do, hopefully the work that I do and the artists that will be represented at our festivals is proof enough that you can make a living out of being an artist. I am now honoured and privileged to survive completely out of my work in the arts, so it is possible."

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