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Interview with Jiv Parasram,
AD of Rumble Theatre

Conducted by AM Matte,
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Jivesh Parasram is a multidisciplinary artist and cultural worker of Indo-Caribbean descent (Trinidad & Tobago/Cairi). He is a founding member and Artistic Producer of the international award-winning (and unfortunately titled) collective, Pandemic Theatre. Jiv grew up in Mi'kma'ki (Nova Scotia), and spent over a decade as a freelance artist in Tk'aronto (Toronto) before moving to the unceded Coast Salish Territories to join the team at Rumble Theatre as Artistic Director. Recent projects include: *Take d Milk, Nah?* (Pandemic/Rumble); *And you'll never believe what happens next...* (Pressgang); *Daughter* (Quiptake/Theatre Centre/ Pandemic), and *The Sound of the Beast* (Theatre Passe Muraille).

AM Matte (AMM): How did the COVID-19 pandemic affect Rumble Theatre and the season that you had planned?

Jivesh Parasram (JP): Quite substantially, but more in workflows than major losses. We're a smaller organization, with regular operating funding, so in some ways we're in the best case scenario of the many bad scenarios.

We do share a building that we rent with several companies in East Vancouver, PL1422. It's primarily a creation space, but we'd started doing small "intimate" events or otherwise staying within city code to not need special permits for our zoning. The good side there is that we don't have regular staff associated with the running of the building; just one - who has been killing it. And actually the employment in the building (maybe not literally in the building right now) has gone up at least in terms of numbers. Or, that's what it feels like.

Also, practically, we don't rely on box office revenue in a substantial way. We did lose some touring and network development opportunities that would have been great, but were really a bonus to our general activities.

As for our general activities, daily office discussions, creative jam time, admin, grant writing sessions... that's certainly taken a different approach through Zoom. It's all still happening though. Production is actually largely the same, but with additions of video and streaming. And doing things open air. All within COVID protocols, but they're pretty easy to follow in the right conditions.

AMM: Now that we've covered such a large question, let's go back. Could you describe in a few sentences the mandate and focus of Rumble Theatre?

JP: A fine question! And one I can ramble about through more frameworks than Sliders dimensions. But let me preface my shortest answer possible by saying Rumble's been around for a while, and it morphs based on who's running it. The people that are there now though, we wrote this one on the fly recently and all liked it:

"Rumble Theatre creates, presents, and produces contemporary performance. Working in a decentralized model, Rumble projects and initiatives utilize art to expand collective imagination, activate collaboration, and build deeper understandings of relationality and community."

This has changed quite a bit from what the focus was just a few years ago, and even that text is a rendition. We talk about it a lot.

More practically, I think what it means is that we're interested in projects that like to play around a bit with realities.

But also we have a kind of vibe that's important. In the people we want to work with, somewhat, but more for the spaces we want to be making. Pretty chill, respectful, community- and social-minded, and a sense of humour. We're based in East Vancouver, which has its own kind of energy, and lots of it, from all over. I've got a whole thesis for myself about access and receptivity that I use to frame it through a spiritual lens sometimes. I tried it in a grant narrative once and had okay results.

AMM: How often does Rumble theatre premiere new Canadian plays?

JP: Originally, it was pretty common. In the sense that it was all new creations. And then, before I started, it was a bit less, but they'd laid the groundwork for an adaptation series. And that's done quite well so far. Still, it would be every other year or so.

As for now... I suppose it depends on what you mean by premiere. We're doing a lot more development, and small public showings, than we had. Those tend to be creation based. Or creation aspiring. Anyhow, rare that we're doing too much on public performance of new text forward projects yet. Sorry that's a bit rambly -- all to say: if you call works in progress showings a premiere, then [we do] a lot.

But more conventionally, we don't premiere that often unless it's a creation project, which are often collaborations. However, through the adaptation series, we have been working with Canadian playwrights by design.

In terms of second productions and the like though, which I'm honestly way more interested in for text-based scripts - I think that's more of what you could expect from us moving forward.

So far, since I joined, we premiered a new TYA/YTA piece, which was a first, and have upped the Canadian content a lot, particularly in development, as it's switched to a heavier creation focus. But our "main stage," by which I really mean an in-house full production, hasn't been Canadian yet. My intention was to shift the audience gradually since we'd been doing a lot of North Atlantic Triangle projects, and I wanted to get some Global South in there. That said, I can't

say we've necessarily kept our existing audience since the transition, and now, due to COVID, I think all bets are off in terms of having to do anything slowly in terms of artistic programming.

AMM: About that, what is the demographic of your audience? What plays have been popular with them in the past, and now with the changes, how does that affect putting on theatre?

JP: Great question. I can't speak with too much authority on what the audience used to be like. I have a general idea. A lot of our work was being presented by partners and so we don't have a ton of data that we were allowed to keep. But from what I can tell from past grants, Rumble's demographics recently were kind of your normalized audiences, generally white, middle-class. Some outreach work was done with Queer communities. I'm not sure how effective those efforts have been but a lot of Queer artists come our way now, so I imagine it must have been somewhat effective.

I would say [our audience was] pretty generic prior. It's still similar, because we do co-produce work, and that brings in their (our producing partner's) audience as well. But when we self-produce, then we see we're getting a mix, starting to skew a lot more towards younger, BIPOC, and queer audiences. Largely female-identifying, as I think is pretty much the case throughout much of Canada. And I think it's fair to say that we have a relatively high non-binary audience. Again, it might just be our neighbourhood. We've really put a lot of focus on doing local stuff, and I'm proud to say that our audiences tend to look like a more BIPOC-heavy version of our neighbourhood.

AMM: I didn't see a submission policy on your website, or anything that invited people to send scripts. How does a playwright get your attention with a new play?

JP: There's not really a submission policy right now. I do want to get something on there, to make it a bit clearer. Generally, I'm always open to when people want to send me a script, or tell me about it. It's difficult because our model's changed and we're certainly not doing scripts the way that we were. If someone were to say: "I've got this seven-hander script that I want to send you, it's exploring, really, any contemporary issue," we are very open to that, and there's no reason it wouldn't be a good fit with what Rumble does, and [submissions] should be viewed that way. But it's really not realistic for us to be able to go just by the scale. We can afford to do a seven-hander, but it's probably all we can afford to do that year, and we really need to try to do regular programming to keep building community. These are all things I'd love to get up on the website at some point. Along with a rationale and a cost explanation... I think if you've produced a show you have a good sense of what things cost, but understandably not everyone's done that. So, a seven-hander... it'd have to be a really, really, really good pitch. Or at least have partners attached.

But more practically and immediately -- for playwrights -- the best way is to set up a meeting, more than anything else. I'd say we're relationship-based as an organization. If they meet our values, or complement our values in an interesting way, and they're interested in questions that we're interested in, that's really what would lead the conversation. That could be a phone call too. Email is... okay, but hard to get a good sense of someone. Gchat though is a bit better. I'm pretty open to communicating in the way that works for people.

Otherwise though, people can send stuff to me, at jiv@rumble.org, and I would take a look at it as soon as I can. Which can take a while these days. But if it's something we should consider -- and

possibly afford to do in some way -- then I would send it to Kellee [Ngan]. We have a lateral way of working and Kellee's got more of a literary background as well, so she has a good eye on pieces. From there, we'd have a meeting with the playwright, if we had some interest. That's approaching us with a play, versus "here's my writing style," which is actually a stronger way to submit to us, to give us a better sense of them and what they're interested in.

AMM: So, if someone is interested in submitting something, you might prefer a synopsis first?

JP: A synopsis helps, it certainly is a much quicker way to get to an answer about whether it's something we might be interested in. One thing is that I'm one of very few POC ADs in town and also one of the younger ones, and with mentorship being a big part of what we do, I end up spending a lot of time, beyond the administration here, working with mentorship, working with younger artists to navigate systems. That means, in terms of time, to sit down and read a script, I have much less than I would hope for. So actually... a synopsis really helps: This is what the play is about, why you're interested in that, what it means to you as an artist; that's more interesting to me. That's what draws me more to working with an artist than anything else; their questions. Because we are focused on respecting the autonomy of each artist, lines of questioning are kind of our most fertile spaces to collaborate.

That said, if someone also came at it like "Hey! I have made a show where we explode a pineapple on stage." I'd be interested in hearing the plot, or whatever is in place of a plot. Ultimately, my taste in stuff is action based. So, what is the play trying to enact? I program based on what I think my community's heart needs.

AMM: What do you think your community's heart needs?

JP: Rumble has historically been dedicated to fighting social isolation, which is particularly strong in Vancouver - I suppose now it's strong everywhere. But if I think about it these days, it's humour. In the broadest sense of the word. But there's a chasm right now in our relationality that COVID has not helped with. It's not so much that it's a community divided -- far from it -- but people are tense. And I think what the heart needs right now is to surrender a bit. It's maybe too walled-up to the seriousness of our moment. But we do need humour to break that, because if it stays walled-up too long, it'll go mad from the sound of its own beat ricocheting off the walls. It's a dark humour for sure -- but not a mean one.

AMM: Following that, I realize that a lot of my questions are script-based, so I'm going to fire them at you and you can respond as they apply.

JP: Sure.

AMM: What is the process you go through when reading new scripts? How soon after a playwright submits a script do you want to get a follow-up call or email? Do you prefer an invitation to a staged reading, a production, or a workshop over reading a new script?

JP: I think my process of reading a script is from a producing lens; I have to look at what the capacity is, the amount of bodies required to do the piece. I'm looking at what the piece requires in terms of scope, what the technical capacity might be. I want to get a sense of the vision of the piece first. All quite negotiable with the playwright.

The next thing is establishing what the form is and what the playwright is doing with form.

The third part is: What about it is stimulating the imagination, or going into unknown territory? I'm looking for the spirit of the piece and getting a sense of how that might work in our questioning, and that kind of thing. Which, again, could be supported very directly by a playwright saying, or writing, here are my questions for this piece.

In terms of a staged reading or a workshop, if they want feedback on it, I'm happy to try and give feedback. If they get in touch, I would say, in a couple of weeks, just follow up and say, by the way, I sent you this, is there a chance to get feedback, or any thoughts; I can be transparent about my timeline for getting back to them, depending on what's going on.

Invitations to live readings or anything, those are great. I'm always keen to go to those. (And these days I think audio recordings of Zoom readings are swell.) I also recognize that it's not an expectation. A live reading workshop; not everyone has the resources to put that together, so that's not contingent or necessary. What it'll make me do is start to see it interpreted. With scripted material, it is primarily a written artform, so as it becomes interpreted, it opens up a possibility to see it one way, but I don't absolutely need to do that. If I can just have a conversation with the playwright, we can talk about what they have in mind.

AMM: Approximately how many new scripts come across your desk each year, and roughly how many of those are submitted by women playwrights?

JP: I would say the actual amount of scripts is about 10 to 12... probably about 3 to 5 of those would be from women. This is probably due in part to the lack of submission process on our website. Which I will own as not good. Most of the submissions though, seem like blanket submissions, but occasionally I get one from someone who's

checked out what we do. The people who do tend to read what we do are predominantly women and non-binary people. Most of (though not all of) the others will be from men, who really don't seem to know what we do. Nothing against their projects, and, again, we really need to update our website, but let's just say there's a lot of people still writing plays where the story is misogyny. And not in an interesting way.

AMM: What else makes you a little turned-off when someone wants to approach you with a script or an idea for a creation? What doesn't work for you?

JP: Generally, if people are sending me stuff that is just way beyond what is a reasonable scope of what we are able to do -- a full-fledged musical with a big cast type of thing, that would take our entire budget -- or the topic is generic, not really a fit.

I wouldn't fault someone for pitching something ambitious, but it's a turn-off in that we're trying to do more work, which means more playwrights being supported and exposing audiences to more playwrights' perspectives. A big-budget piece would become the only thing that can be done that year, and that means there's less platform for other people. Intrinsicly, there is some value of sharing space. If someone has that ambition, absolutely they should pursue it to find the right fit.

AMM: We've talked about new scripts, we've talked about workshops and new productions, let's turn to second productions, which you touched upon quickly earlier. Playwrights can often find it difficult to get their first production of a new play, but even harder to get a second production. What do you think about that, and how might a playwright go about getting a second production with your company?

JP: To be quite honest, in terms of scripted material, I'm far more interested in a second production. Second, third, whatever. And that's because we've had a culture in theatre production where everyone loves a premiere, but they don't really go a whole lot further than that.

To me, I think it's way more interesting if someone has already had their work done in whatever form it needed to be, and now they're interested in the script really being interpreted as a script. Mainly because what that allows me to do is to treat it as a document that can be reinterpreted, obviously with conversations as to the limitations of that approach with the playwright. But it allows whoever the director is to approach a piece as a director, which is, I think, when you work on a first production... you don't really get to do that as a director. You can facilitate, which is great, but to really come at it as interpretation, it feels a lot more fair in a second production. A first production, you really have to do justice to the playwright; that is the most important part, because that is where the work is coming from. But a second production invites the possibility for aesthetic exploration and expanding imaginaries. So, yeah, if the playwrights are open to a small-scale style that we apply to it (that's how we're working right now), then people should send me their scripts that have already been staged.

AMM: A final question, a personal one. What keeps you working in theatre?

JP: (Pause.) Hmmm. Good question. I guess, on the one hand, I don't know what else I'm qualified to do, so there's that!

What keeps me doing it is that I'm pretty devoted to the role of some form of performance, some form of cultural storytelling, as a necessary part of

society, and as the part of society that really does help bring people together, to think together. Lately, I've been thinking about trying to apply this more Dharmic principle of gathering good people, truthful people, a gathering of people... anyway, inspired by "satsang," but Sanskrit doesn't really translate very well. But really, it's just performance being the heart of community gatherings, that's probably the drive. And that for me, personally, stems from family duty. I come from a line of pundits and I kind of adapt that role into what I do, in terms of community service.

In that world, the caste system is part of that -- so my caste would be Brahmin -- and that comes with a lot of privilege. So, to do that work

properly, I have to work with the communities around me to make space for storytelling and challenging thoughts, and creating a state of contradiction for people to expose different truths. That's what theatre does very well: it shows contradictory truths.

Generally speaking, I want to serve the community I'm in, and since my current gig is as an artistic director, I want to make sure we are offering a platform to people who have interesting ways to imagine. Also, we started cooking for people at our events. Nothing major, just beans and rice mainly. But I like that. If we can provide space where you can come, get some healthy food, hear a cool story, and hang out a bit... I'm pretty sold on that.



The work of award-winning author and playwright A.M. Matte is supported by the Canada Council for the Arts, the Ontario Arts Council, and the Toronto Arts Council. Notable theatrical productions include Slipping Mind in Ottawa and North Bay, as well as Les murs ont des yeux in Toronto, Barrie, and Penetanguishene. Publications include short stories in the literary magazines Virages, Ancrages, and Luna Station Quarterly, and in the collections Where Pigeons Roost and Ce que l'on divulgue.