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NEWSLETTER

Interview with Ravi Jain,  
Co-Artistic Director of Why Not  
Theatre, Toronto, ON

"We Want to Get to Know your  
Work and Who You Are"

Conducted by Melissa Yuan-Innes  
January 2022



**RAVI JAIN:** Toronto-based stage director Ravi Jain is a multi-award-winning artist known for politically bold and accessible theatrical experiences in both small indie settings and large theatres. As the founding AD of Why Not Theatre, Ravi has established himself as an artistic leader with inventive productions, international producing collaborations, and innovative producing models that support emerging artists so they make money from their art. As a director, Ravi's work has been critically acclaimed for its innovation and accessibility. Select credits include: *A Brimful of Asha*; Nicolas Billon's *Fault Lines* (2013 Governor General's Award for Drama); *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*; *The 39 Steps*; *Animal Farm*; Alanna Mitchell's *Sea Sick* (co-directed with Franco Boni, Theatre Centre); Lisa Codrington's *The Adventures of a Black Girl in Search of God*; and Sarena Parmar's *The Orchard (After Chekhov)* (Shaw Festival); *We are Proud to Present...* (Theatre Centre); *Salt-Water Moon* (Factory Theatre); *Prince Hamlet* (Why Not Theatre); *Like Mother Like Daughter* (Complicite/Why Not Theatre). Currently, Ravi is directing a new adaptation of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* called *R + J* for the Stratford Festival, he is co- adapting *The Mahabharata* with Why Not Theatre and the Shaw Festival, and he is awaiting the release of a film version of a new play, *What You Won't Do For Love*, created with acclaimed environmentalists, David Suzuki and Tara Cullis. Ravi was shortlisted for the 2016 and 2019 Siminovitch Prize, and he won the 2012 Pauline McGibbon Award for Emerging Director and the 2016 Canada Council John Hirsch Prize for direction. He is a graduate of the two-year program at École Jacques Lecoq in Paris, France.

*The following interview was conducted over the phone while Ravi Jain tended to his child.  
This discussion has been edited and condensed for greater clarity.*



**Melissa Yuan-Innes (MYI):** Hi Ravi. How did you fall in love with theatre, and with your theatre in particular?

**Ravi Jain (RJ):** I fell in love with cartoons in grade school. I love characters, I love stories, mimicking them and making other people laugh. I grew up in an Indian home, where storytelling and lip-synching to Bollywood songs is a big part of the culture.

I joined Why Not Theatre out of a love of wanting to tell stories and changing the narrative of stories and who gets to tell them. I want stories to see the world differently. We don't have a space or theatre. We make content and then we sell that content to venues that have spaces.

**MYI:** How do you differentiate Why Not from other independent theatres?

**RJ:** We're all different. fu-GEN has an Asian focus. Cahoots Theatre is multicultural. Why Not is really international. We offer different intercultural stories, or we choose a different form in how they're told. It's not always a play. We explore international exchange. We either reach out to international artists or link Canadian artists to international artists.

**MYI:** Do you encourage playwrights, including female, trans, and non-binary playwrights, to reach out to you?

**RJ:** Yes, reach out, always. We have two co-artistic directors. Our emails are our names @whynot.theatre. Start there. For any playwright, working with a company is really about a relationship and time. We want to get to know your work and who you are.

**MYI:** You're interested in a conversation more than seeing a script?

**RJ:** It's always better to start more collaboratively. But a script is good. It's always a starting point. Let's have a conversation about where we go next. Ours is not so much a traditional Canadian theatre process. We're very honest and direct. The quality of collaboration depends on the relationships we develop.

**MYI:** You know, that's what I learned through PGC. It's about relationships over time. But how am I supposed to build relationships when I live in a rural area? Are you open to virtual coffee?

**RJ:** One hundred percent. That's the bonus of this time; it makes this kind of connection possible.

MYI: Do you also have formal programs to help open doors, including to female/ trans/NB playwrights?

RJ: Yes, our Riser project supports 300 to 400 artists. It's a collaborative producing model, kind of like a festival every year. A lot of emerging playwrights (in experience, not necessarily in age) get their work produced. In the eight years of our festival, 70 percent of the work has gone on to a second life through a tour, a show in other theatres, or bigger development.

Applications begin in May or over the summer. This year, we'll be in Edmonton, and in Saskatchewan in 2024.

MYI: Wow. Is it only in Edmonton this year? And is it in person or virtual?

RJ: We have supported artists across Ontario and out of province before. It was in person then. COVID has thrown a wrench into that. Last year was digital, so we'll see what happens this year.

MYI: Do you personally like to read a play in its early stages, or do you prefer to read farther along?

RJ: Text is important, but it's not the sole way of telling stories. I made a show with my mother, who's not a performer, called *A Brimful of Asha*. Similarly, we have a show with David Suzuki and his wife, Tara Cullis. Both

RJ Cont'd: involved transcribing conversations. We adapted *Hamlet* with a Deaf artist at its centre, speaking ASL. There was text, but it was also physical. It was the same for *Butcher* by Nicolas Billon, and for *Salt-Water Moon*. These plays were not done in a traditional way. Everything's a conversation. Everything depends. It's not straightforward with us.

MYI: That's cool. Do you know how many new scripts come across your desk each year?

RJ: I don't know. Not so many. Maybe twenty? None have been the right fit. Usually, they have a script for us to kind of do. That hasn't connected. It's more about conversation. What's your idea? What do you want to work on? Let's figure out a way to develop it.

MYI: So that's a turn off for you, when playwrights expect you to stick to the script?

RJ: It's the expectation that I'll do their play. What turns me off is the feeling that it's only that one idea and nothing else.

What turns me on: it's the relationship. It's getting to know each other as a whole. That idea might not be the idea, but it could be the next idea. The artist shouldn't feel that it's all or nothing on their idea. We'll have the connection; we'll get to know them better. Years later, I might reach out to you and say, "I was just in this meeting. You would be a really good fit." Relationships are long.

MELISSA YUAN-INNES is an emergency physician and novelist who is now exploring the world of playwriting. Her debut Fringe play, *I Am The Most Unfeeling Doctor In The World (And Other True Tales From the Emergency Room)*, won Best of Fest at the Ottawa Fringe and was a "Behind the Rideau" Award finalist in 2019, and it will head to the Stage One Festival at Lunchbox Theatre and the Winnipeg Fringe in 2022. *Terminally Ill*, a mystery penned under the name Melissa Yi, was selected for the TACTICS Workshop Series, won a production grant from the City of Ottawa, and has been chosen for the Undercurrents Festival in 2024. Melissa was a finalist for the Killer Nashville Silver Falchion Award for Best Thriller, the Crime Writers of Canada Award of Excellence (best crime story in Canada), and the Derringer Award (for best crime story in the English language).

