

Untold stories: Advocating diverse voices

Subhasini Naicker

Sonali Bhattacharyya, a dynamic South Asian playwright and screenwriter shaping the theatre landscape. With a passion for storytelling rooted in her cultural heritage, Sonali brings diverse narratives to life.

Her award-winning works include "Chasing Hares" (Young Vic), "Two Billion Beats" (Orange Tree Theatre), and "Megaball" (National Theatre Learning). Currently, Sonali is commissioned by Bristol Old Vic, Chichester Festival Theatre, Kali Theatre, and Fifth Word. She also has drama series in development with Dancing Ledge Productions and Anagram.

In an interview with Asian Voice, Sonali discussed the portrayal of diverse female characters in plays, audience reception to these characters, and the importance of investing in female voices in playwriting and screenwriting.

What is the objective behind your portrayal of diverse female characters in your play? And how do you intend to empower or advocate for women through your work?

When considering the portrayal of women and girls, especially those from minority backgrounds like myself, I often feel that mainstream depictions lack the depth and complexity of brown women experiences. As a brown woman, I've observed a dearth of narratives that reflect the diversity and intricacies of our lives. It's not merely about shedding light on our existence as if we're anthropological subjects; rather, it's about responsibly sharing our stories and histories with one another.

Being part of a minority group, particularly as a woman, necessitates a nuanced understanding of both our own culture and the majority culture in order to navigate society. This unique perspective inherently offers insights and perspectives that may not be readily apparent from the majority viewpoint. Therefore, I believe there's a responsibility to tell stories that capture this universality but from our distinct perspective.

For example, in my play "Two Billion Beats," I sought to explore a narrative rarely seen before. Coming from a British Asian, Bengali Hindu family, I experienced firsthand the divide within the South Asian diaspora following the events of 9/11.

Sonali Bhattacharyya



The distinction between Muslim and Hindu identities suddenly became significant, altering dynamics within our communities. This story, while deeply personal, also reflects broader societal shifts and divisions that continue to shape our interactions today.

Are there any trends or shifts in audience reception towards works created by female playwrights or screenwriters?

There's still a glaring lack of representation for marginalised groups in the arts, as consistently revealed by surveys. However, when it comes to work commissioned and produced by women writers, there's evidence of substantial audience engagement. It's crucial to recognise this and move beyond viewing marginalised creators solely as demographics.

For minority women, including those who are black, brown, or disabled, the emphasis should be on their merit as writers rather than reducing them to their identity. This shift is essential, especially when their work is unfairly labelled as risky solely based on their demographic. By acknowledging the audience appeal of their work, we can challenge such misconceptions and encourage broader representation in the arts.

In theatre, diversifying voices is paramount to building a more inclusive audience base. This means actively seeking out and supporting works from a variety of perspectives to resonate with a wider segment of the population. Similarly, in screenwriting, recent breakthroughs by British women writers highlight the significance of supporting diverse voices in film and TV.

Why do you think it is crucial to invest in female playwrights and screenwriters? And how can the industry effectively support and foster this investment to create more inclusive and diverse narratives?

Several key obstacles hinder the entry and sustainability of playwrights, particularly

those from working-class backgrounds. The lack of adequate financial compensation within the industry poses a significant barrier, stemming from broader issues surrounding funding and support for the arts. It's crucial to recognise that art and culture are not mere add-ons but integral components that enrich society and enhance quality of life.

Even after breaking into the industry, women face challenges, particularly with career interruptions for caregiving responsibilities. These breaks often lead to significant hiatuses, with limited support for re-entry as freelancers.

I've faced a significant career hiatus due to bereavement and caregiving responsibilities, revealing the lack of support for individuals in similar situations. There's a need for industry-wide initiatives to create a safety net for those stepping away temporarily. Organisations like the Writers Guild are starting to address this issue, ensuring individuals, especially women and marginalised groups, don't face permanent exclusion due to life events.

What advice would you give to aspiring writers and writers who are just starting out of their careers?

The key aspect of being a writer, which took me some time to grasp, is the importance of one's unique worldview and perspective. No one else can replicate your take on the world, and this is what sets your writing apart. While everything else about writing may be challenging, your individual perspective is something that cannot be taken away from you.

While it's natural to seek validation and feedback on your work, it's essential not to compromise your unique perspective in the process. Strive to maintain the authenticity of your voice while also being open to constructive criticism and opportunities for growth. Ultimately, it's about honouring the initial spark of inspiration that ignited your journey as a writer and staying true to yourself amidst the challenges and pressures of the industry.

Embracing femininity: Sushmita Pati discusses gender dynamics and cultural narratives

Odisi dance, a symbol of cultural richness, traces its roots back to the mystical land of Odisha. It has survived through generations, showcasing graceful movements and intricate footwork that narrate stories of devotion and spirituality.

In a recent interview with Asian Voice, we spoke with Sushmita Pati, the Artistic Director and CEO of Kala The Arts, about Odissi's portrayal of

those of traditional careers, the invaluable contributions made by individuals pursuing their passions are increasingly recognised and valued within our communities.

Are there any specific themes or narratives in Odissi dance that you feel resonate particularly well, with a woman's experience or perspective? If so, could you provide any examples?

Odissi, a classical

participation in the arts, striving to create inclusive spaces where men feel comfortable expressing themselves through dance. As a result, we've welcomed numerous LGBTQ professional dance artists into our fold, offering support and opportunities.

While it's true that there may be societal pressures and prejudices surrounding male dancers even now, I have not witnessed such incidents firsthand. However, I understand that some families may hold reservations about sending boys to pursue dance. Recently, we encountered a situation where a parent expressed concerns about their son's dance movements being perceived as too feminine during a Bollywood dance class. In response, I emphasised the importance of allowing artists to express themselves creatively and facilitated a constructive conversation to address the parent's apprehensions.

Through open dialogue, engagement with artists, visiting creative places and education, we were able to challenge and dispel misconceptions, ultimately fostering a more inclusive and understanding environment.

Why is it crucial to invest in women in the dance industry? And what steps can organisations or societies take to offer better support and empowerment for women to excel in this field?

It's crucial for both male and female artists to be represented in the industry, as each brings unique perspectives, attributions, and dimensions to their craft. Empowering women in particular not only creates job opportunities but also fosters leadership within the community. By providing women with opportunities for growth and momentum, they can serve as role models for the younger generation, inspiring them to pursue their passions, develop skills, and aspirations and increase opportunities. As a mother and a creative artist myself, I've seen the importance of empowering my daughter to explore her own interests, such as Odissi dance. While it wasn't initially my intention to teach her, my mother's persistence in ensuring she learned the art form highlights the significance of artistic expression and its value in her life. Through any arts, individuals can find a means to express themselves creatively and authentically, regardless of their chosen career paths.



Sushmita Pati (Centre)

femininity, challenges faced by men in classical dance, and the significance of supporting women in the field.

How did your upbringing shape your perspective on success and unconventional career paths, particularly within the context of South Asian culture?

I consider myself fortunate to have grown up in an environment fostered by my open-minded parents. Their attitude towards success was refreshingly different; there was never pressure to pursue traditional professions like medicine or engineering. Instead, they instilled in me the importance of excelling in whatever field I chose. As artists themselves, they embodied openness and acceptance, traits that permeated our family dynamic. They were supportive of our aspirations, embracing our individual paths without reservation.

However, I'm aware that within South Asian culture, there exists a stigma around unconventional careers and the perception of success solely tied to financial gain. This became evident to me during an encounter with the Odisha Doctor's Association, where my profession as a dancer was met with skepticism, highlighting the prevailing mindset that equates success with high-paying professions.

Despite these challenges, I believe attitudes are evolving as more individuals challenge societal norms and redefine success. While the financial rewards may not match

temple dance form, has historically been dominated by female south Asian performers. However, it has also attracted European dancers and enthusiasts who have embraced it as a profession. The essence of Odissi often celebrates femininity, exemplified by its sculptural movements like Tribhanga, which celebrate women in their entirety. The dance repertoire includes ancient classics narratives such as tales of Krishna, Draupadi, Sita, Radha, and Lord Jagannath, reflecting its roots in Orissa's rich cultural heritage. In addition to classical themes, contemporary topics are also explored through Odissi, such as I am working on creating a piece using Odissi dance language on Mental Health, a taboo within the South Asian community and its awareness. Another example is our exploration of environmental themes, highlighting our responsibility to nurture and protect the earth. Through Odissi, we endeavor to convey meaningful narratives that resonate with diverse audiences and address pertinent societal issues.

From a female perspective, how do you observe the historical trend of men being ridiculed or more for participating in classical dance forms? And what shifts have you noticed in recent times that challenge this gender stereotype?

In my experience, I've had the opportunity to dance alongside male performers in Odisha, many of whom have chosen dance as their profession. I've been particularly passionate about promoting male