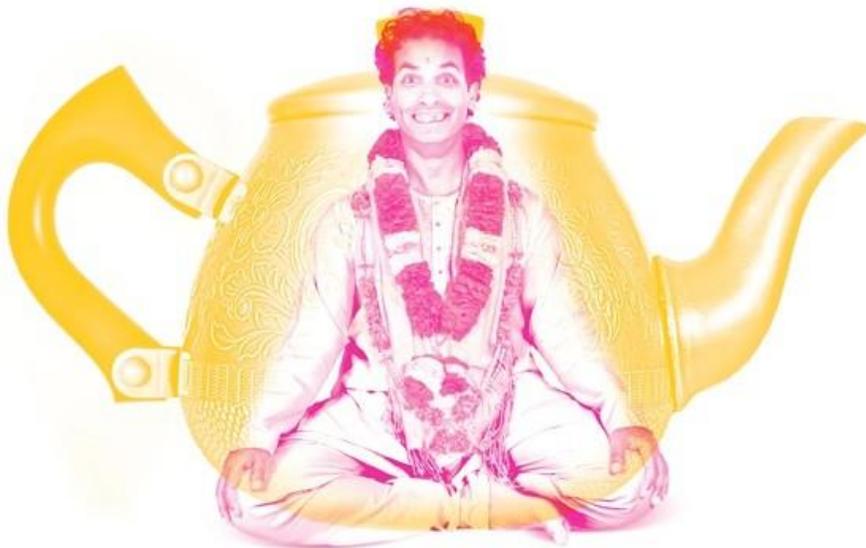


ADELAIDE FESTIVAL CENTRE'S

OzAsia Festival

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# GURU OF CHAI

**Contents**

- Before You Visit ..... 3
  - An intro to Guru of Chai..... 3
  - Synopsis ..... 3
  - Creative Team and Cast..... 4
  - Origins of the Story..... 4
    - Pre Show In-Class Discussion Questions: ..... 4
  - Director's Notes ..... 5
  - Actor's Notes ..... 6
  - Composer's Notes ..... 7
  - Themes..... 8
  - Literary/Theatrical Devices ..... 9
  - Glossary of Terms ..... 9
- Post Visit Activities ..... 10
  - Creating a World (Scenic & Technical Elements) ..... 10
    - Set Design..... 10
    - Sound Design ..... 10
    - Lighting ..... 11
    - Costume ..... 11
    - Props ..... 12
  - Folk tales as stimulus..... 12
  - Theatre Review ..... 12
    - Review ..... 13
    - Stagecraft Scaffold ..... 14
  - Understanding Characterisation..... 15
  - Discussion Points/Questions ..... 16
- Indian Ink ..... 17
  - Company History..... 17
  - What We Do..... 18
  - Who We Are..... 19
    - Current Office Team ..... 19

## Before You Visit

### An intro to Guru of Chai

The contradictions of modern India with its iPhones and ancient gods come alive in this outrageously funny and heartbreakingly beautiful romantic thriller. A poor chai-wallah (tea-seller) has his life changed forever when a young girl is abandoned at a busy railway station and brings the place to a standstill with the beauty of her singing.

Our Guru (Jacob Rajan) is a buck-toothed chameleon, channelling 17 characters and leaping to multiple locations, delivering a serpentine romantic thriller while dispensing dubious spiritual wisdom. He is by turns charming, loathsome and absurdly profound. Laughter, heartbreak and enlightenment abound – not to mention the killer live soundtrack provided by his mute side-kick, Dave! (Adam Ogle).

Extremely talented and award-winning multi-instrumentalist Ogle plays the banjo, drum machine, whistles and even a humble plastic bag deftly weaving a vibrant musical score with an atmospheric soundscape. This is Ogle's second show with Indian Ink after his stunning debut in their acclaimed production *The Elephant Thief*.

Scooping Best Play, Best Actor and Best Composer on debut, *Guru of Chai* has gone on to sell out tours around the world ultimately being picked up by a top U.S agent. Coast to coast tours across The States have bought audiences to their feet pronouncing it “the best show”.

<https://indianink.co.nz/production/guru-of-chai/>

### Synopsis

*Guru of Chai* is a monologue delivered by a single actor (Jacob Rajan) who first appears as a narrator (Kutisar) a poor tea-seller with a stall in the Indian city of Bangalore. Kutisar tells the audience how he comes to be a surrogate uncle to seven orphaned sisters, each who sings to earn enough money to survive. He explains that the sisters are offered police protection from a good-hearted policeman (Punchkin) after they are threatened by a local man. One by one each sister is married, until only the youngest (Balna) is left, who policeman Punchkin has fallen in love with. Balna rejects Punchkin's offer of marriage, instead choosing to wed a young poet. But later in life, she requires Punchkin's help when her husband becomes mixed up in the dirty underworld of India's mean streets.

## Creative Team and Cast

Writers – Justin Lewis & Jacob Rajan

Director – Justin Lewis

Composer – David Ward

Dramaturge – Murray Edmond

Set Designer – John Verryt

Lighting Design – Jeremy Fern

Actor – Jacob Rajan

Musician – Adam Ogle

Technical & Tour Manager, Lighting re-design & operator – Cathy Knowsley

## Origins of the Story

*Guru of Chai* is an adaptation of the well-known Indian fairy tale *Punchkin*. Prior to seeing the production, we recommend that you read the fairy tale to extend your understanding of the importance of this unique tale. Please follow this link: [fairytales.com/punchkin/](http://fairytales.com/punchkin/)

Alternatively, listen to story here: [youtube.com/watch?v=PA3YIPRFVC4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PA3YIPRFVC4)

### **Pre Show In-Class Discussion Questions:**

Can you identify any similarities between *Punchkin* and any other fairytales that you know?

Does *Punchkin* include the same character stereotypes (eg villain, hero etc) that you may find in fairytales that you are familiar with? If so, which characters fit these stereotypes and how?

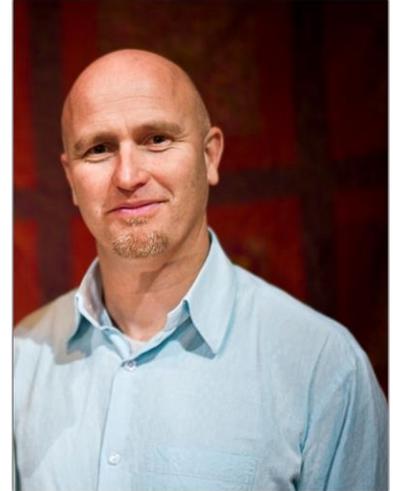
What do you think are some of the most important themes of *Punchkin*?

## Director's Notes

Justin Lewis

The genesis of *Guru of Chai* began with the idea of doing a one-man version of Shakespeare's *Tempest* to be performed on people's living rooms. The idea of doing Shakespeare was soon abandoned but the idea of a one-man epic remained.

The other element that remained was the idea of performing in people's living rooms. This had a profound effect on the way the show was developed and the kind of show that resulted. The relationship with the audience in the very intimate setting of somebody's living room resulted in a different kind of writing and a different kind of performance which was very open, direct and engaged with the audience.



The concept of the Guru as the storyteller came from a chance meeting I had whilst in Singapore with a young man claiming to be able to read the future. He was clearly a charlatan, but a delightful charlatan. Once we had our unreliable narrator we combined him with a traditional Indian folk story, *Punchkin*, that was reframed to a contemporary Indian setting.

The set design is informed by the need to be performed on people's living rooms. It's also informed by the character of the guru himself, someone of limited means who although worldly has a charming naivete. The other influence in the set design is the commedia dell'arte. The traditional commedia stage is a raised platform with the curtain. You can see this influence in our design.

I think any good storytelling piece says more about the storyteller than anything else. I think this is true of *Guru of Chai*. Our guru makes claims to take away the audiences' problems and promptly embarks on a shaggy dog story that reveals what is really eating the Guru. The guru's story is more about his own part in the drama and the guilt he feels than about his promise to provide the audience with enlightenment. But through the magic of theatre and storytelling he does take away the audiences' problems for a short period of time.

The nature of the intimate performance in the living room meant that we had to rethink the relationship between performer and audience. Our storyteller addresses the audience directly and comments on his story. The stage and the staging is highly compressed and as a result the energy of the drama is heightened.

The set had to be highly portable to allow us to move from place to place quickly and as a result has a certain makeshift feel that reflects the Guru/tea seller and his impoverished background. The set is not unlike a chai stand in India.

It is hard now to separate out what most informed the decisions about design, script and playing style. Was it the concept of performing in people's living rooms and making a show that was highly portable? Was it the concept of the guru who was also a chai wallah. At the end of the day I think these things came together to create something fresh and unlike anything we had done before.

Having made the production for people's living rooms we then had to figure out how to present it in theatres. This proved to be easier than we had feared. Our time in living rooms had given us different understanding of the audience / performer relationship which we then translated to the theatre. The frame of the guru justifies the poverty of the set and places asked within the tradition of 'poor theatre.' The biggest area of development and coming to theatres was on the lighting with the technology of the theatre enables us to create more beauty and theatrical magic.

## Actor's Notes

Jacob Rajan

I met Nyoman Suketra in Bali. He is a master mask dancer and shadow puppeteer. A squat little man who can move with astonishing grace and fluidity; always smiling, always laughing, a weakness for beer and cockfighting, steeped in the traditions and nuances of shadow puppetry and mask dance yet desperate to have a Facebook page.

Gently worried about his growing paunch, his ambitions towards wealth and status are at odds with his desire to go fishing at every opportunity. Indulges his children, exasperates his long-suffering wife – the man literally danced into our lives, and onto the pages of this play as a fully formed character. I changed his name and his ethnicity, and his teeth, but his essence is our Guru. You can't write someone like this, you have to meet him.

I think that's been the big lesson for me in creating this work. These days we seem so obsessed with being connected through our computers and cell phones, bombarded with news and entertainment 24 hours a day, proud of our ability to shop, bank and "socialise" without ever leaving our homes.

But I had to leave home to meet Nyoman. I had to fly to Bali. I had to get on a scooter and negotiate traffic in a city of 4 million people and no discernible road code. I had to find his house, meet his family, learn to dance in 30-degree heat, share a meal, drink tea, struggle to understand and be understood. I read that back and it looks like I'm trying to convince you that this was some kind of hardship. My wife will never buy that and nor should you. I loved every minute of it.

What I am struggling to say is that the play you are about to see was born out of a real-life connection.

When I think about it they do have a road code: always go forward, never look back and give way to things bigger than yourself.

I now hold that as a guiding principle in life!



## Composer's Notes

David Ward

I have had the pleasure of being involved with Indian Ink since 2004, operating guitar, banjo, cash registers, hairdryers, ropes and pulleys, crying like a baby on cue and getting to 'shoot' Jacob night after night in Krishnan's Diary.

I have lost count of the shows that I have performed in NZ, Australia, Germany, Singapore and U.S.A, each show inexorably morphing into one deja vu experience. I can now rattle off Jacob's lines verbatim, and I am convinced that at least a few scenes will flash before my eyes in my final moments! In 2007 I was thrilled to be handed the role of composer and musical director for their 4th play *The Dentist's Chair*, and to work my music into the fabric of a brand-new show.

Since then I would occasionally hear rumours of a 5th play, but Justin and Jacob kept it close to their chests until late 2009, when Justin asked me to write music for the *Guru Of Chai*.

As with all their shows, the challenge was how to create the magic of a large, vivid world from the minimal and the simple. This time, the brief was: contemporary India, upbeat and layered ... with one actor, one musician. I originally wrote music to English translations of Indian folk songs, but it soon became clear that we needed to sing in Indian, specifically Malayalam. We brought in Ravi Muthu a wonderful Malayalam singer, to coach us on pronunciation and make sure our singing was as authentic as possible. When Ravi improvised around my compositions he naturally added melodic and rhythmic nuances that were just out of the reach of our western ears. At one point I had to embrace a sense of humility and scrap a beat that I had painstakingly built up over 2 weeks, but the final songs were definitely the richer for it.

In the absence of other musicians, I employed a device traditionally used by hip hop artists to sample and sequence instruments that can be triggered live – an M.P.C. A lot of my time was occupied trying to figure out how to make the technology work for me and how it would sit within the show. Slowly, then more and more quickly the layers were built up, the sequences took shape and the 'electronic' side to the music started to breathe and to feel at home in the world we were creating. I find it a joy to be performing with Jacob every night, and to continue to refine and polish what is steadily becoming one of my favourite Indian Ink shows. I think that *Guru* has some of the funniest as well as the most poignant moments that they have yet produced.



## Themes

- Relationships  
A variety of relationships are explored throughout the play including the relationships between the 7 sisters, Balna and her son's relationships, Kutisar's relationship with the 7 sisters, and their relationship with the law, represented by Officer Punchkin.
- Power / Abuse of Power  
As an Australian audience, we generally view the presence of the police as a reassurance and believe that they are there to do what is best for us. In the play, Officer Punchkin is originally presented to the audience in a similar light; he is there to protect Kutisar while he is selling his chai, and the 7 sisters as they sing together. As the play progresses, we realise that Punchkin is not the character he is originally portrayed as, as uses his position in the community for his own selfish purpose.
- Sacrifice  
Balna is forced to make the ultimate sacrifice and has to give up her own newborn son in order to save him from being killed by the goonda due to a debt incurred by her husband. Her sacrifice exemplifies the love she has for her son and her desire to protect him from evil.
- Poverty  
The contemporary setting of the piece, outside of a train station in Bangalore, also represents the desperate poverty that Kutisar faces, if he is unable to sell his chai. This is further reinforced throughout the production by the number of beggars (fakirs) the characters encounter. The set design also reinforces this theme of poverty.
- Westernization  
Through Kutisar's eyes, we see that even though the story does not rely on the contemporary context in which it has been placed, there are a range of elements that are familiar to a 'western' audience that are a result of the westernization of India. Kutisar frequently references a nearby Starbucks impacting his own chai trade, as well as other contemporary devices including iPhones that demonstrate the impact and spread of western culture throughout the world.

## Literary/Theatrical Devices

- Puppetry
- Music
- Poor Theatre
- Commedia dell'arte
- Breaking of the fourth wall
- Dialogue

## Glossary of Terms

- Hinduism
  - An Indian religion and *dharma*, or a way of life, widely practised in the Indian subcontinent. Hinduism has been called the oldest religion in the world, and some practitioners and scholars refer to it as *Sanātana Dharma*, "the eternal tradition", or the "eternal way", beyond human history

[wikipedia.org/wiki/Hinduism](http://wikipedia.org/wiki/Hinduism)
- Ganesh
  - The Hindu god of prophecy, represented as having an elephant's head

[dictionary.com/browse/ganesh](http://dictionary.com/browse/ganesh)
- Goonda
  - Goonda" is a term in Indian English, Pakistani English, and Bangladeshi English for a hired thug. It is both a colloquial term and defined and used in laws, generally referred to as Goonda Acts

[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Goonda](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Goonda)
- Chai
  - Chai is the word for Tea in many countries around the world. In India, Chai specifically refers to sweet milky brewed filled with delicious spices and black tea. The Indian version of Chai is also called Masala Chai, Spiced Tea or Spiced Chai.

[realchai.com.au/blogs/chai-blog/what-is-chai-tea](http://realchai.com.au/blogs/chai-blog/what-is-chai-tea)
- Fakir
  - A fakir is a Muslim Sufi holy man or woman who lives on only what he or she gets by begging.

[vocabulary.com/dictionary/fakir](http://vocabulary.com/dictionary/fakir)
- Chai-Wallah
  - In Hindi, a *wallah* is someone makes or sells a certain good. *Chai* means tea. A *chai wallah* is person who makes or sells tea—or both!

[chaiwallahsofindia.com/about/](http://chaiwallahsofindia.com/about/)
- Biryani
  - A South Asian mixed rice dish with its origins among the Muslims of the Indian subcontinent. It is popular throughout the Indian subcontinent and among the diaspora from the region. It is made with spices, rice and meat (chicken, mutton, beef, prawn, or fish) or vegetables. Sometimes egg is also added.

[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biryani](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biryani)

## Post Visit Activities

### Creating a World (Scenic & Technical Elements)

In his director's notes, Justin Lewis explains that the key to this performance is the storytelling itself. However, it is through the scenic and technical elements that the audience is taken on a trip to Bangalore.

#### Set Design

The Set Design is meant to be representative of a chai-wallah's stand in India while also drawing on the tradition of Commedia dell'arte; a raised platform in a market place the audience could gather round to watch a performance.

How effective is the set design in enabling the audience to be taken to the many locations included in the story?

What aspects of the set design can you identify that link directly to Indian culture?

If the production has been designed for larger stages, rather than living rooms, the set design would probably be vastly different. Sketch a set design inspired by the production that you think could work for large venues such as the Dunstan Playhouse.

#### Sound Design

David Ward, the composer, and live musician who is on-stage for the duration of the show, aimed to create a world that was '...contemporary India, upbeat and layered.' He worked to achieve this through the use of a Music Production Controller (often employed by hip hop artists) and the live soundtrack he played too.

How effective was the sound design in developing tension and mood in the piece while also being distinctly Indian?

Can you recall a particular moment from the production where the atmosphere of the Bangalore market/train station was created by David Ward? If so, how was this achieved?

Using a programme such as Audacity or GarageBand, try to create a 1-2 minute soundscape that captures a busy location that you know. Think about the sounds you hear when you go there and layer a number to create the soundscape.

## Lighting

Given that the show was designed to be performed in a living room, the lighting of *Guru of Chai* is very simple, yet very effective. The use of a warm wash for much of the performance helps to convey the outdoor nature of the Kutisar's chai stand, but there are many clever uses of lighting such as the desk lamp and a torch that help to convey suspense, mood and atmosphere.

How has the lighting designer conveyed to the audience the changes between night and day? As the play progresses, the lighting states seems to become darker. Why do you think this is?

Rajan cleverly uses a simple desk lamp to great effect to show the passing of many days and nights. Work in a pair, and with a torch, light each other from different angles and discuss how lighting can create mood and atmosphere. Note: You will need to work in a dark space!

## Costume

Rajan wears a traditional Indian Kurta during his performance which immediately helps the audience understand the context/location of the production, but also enables him freedom of movement on the stage. Even though Rajan plays many characters, his base costume stays consistent and is sometimes enhanced by the use of scarves to aid him in conveying the different characters.

How does Rajan's costume help highlight the ideas and themes evident in the production? Do you think more costuming elements would have helped you understand the different characters?

Imagine that you are the costume designer for a contemporary one-person production of an Australian play. Design a costume that would allow an audience to recognize the unique 'Australian-ness' of the play. Note: Try not to go straight to stereotypes such as an Akubra hat!

## Props

The use of props in the production is minimal and ties in with the concept of 'Poor Theatre' which you can read about here: [thedramateacher.com/poor-theatre-conventions/](http://thedramateacher.com/poor-theatre-conventions/)

What props are used throughout the production and what impact do they have?

Do you think that having less props means that the included props are more important/memorable?

Often, the simplest items can be transformed through performance into the most objects. Find an object and see how many different objects you can transform the object into through mime/performance. For example, if you found a cardboard tube, on a stage, what range of objects could this become?

## Folk tales as stimulus

Many theatre productions are inspired/influenced by existing stories. Indian Ink used the traditional Indian folk tale of *Punchkin* as stimulus to help them devise *Guru of Chau*. Use the following tale as a piece of stimulus to devise your own piece of theatre.

Remember, you don't have to keep the animals as animals – instead, they could form human characters that have the characteristics of the animals in this story. Think about how you could include some of the same devices that were used in *Guru of Chau*.

[culturalindia.net/indian-folktales/hitopadesha-tales/beware-of-mean-friends.html](http://culturalindia.net/indian-folktales/hitopadesha-tales/beware-of-mean-friends.html)

## Theatre Review

Read the following review of *Guru of Chau*. Do you feel that the review accurately reflects what you thought of the show? What did you think were the most successful/least successful elements? Write your own review of the show.

Use the following review writing guide produced by State Theatre Company of South Australia and the 'Stagecraft Scaffold' on the next page to aid you in breaking down how the stagecraft were used to convey a message/impact the audience.

[statetheatrecompany.com.au/content/uploads/2017/02/How-To-Write-a-Theatre-Review.pdf](http://statetheatrecompany.com.au/content/uploads/2017/02/How-To-Write-a-Theatre-Review.pdf)

## Review

### NZ LISTENER

Indian Ink's magic formula is triumphantly back on display. It's now more than a decade since Indian Ink, the company behind the *Guru of Chai*, burst onto our theatrical scene with *Krishnan's Dairy*, a one-man play that not only toured the country to sell-out houses but went on to gather a daisy-chain of awards, including the coveted Fringe First at the Edinburgh Festival.

In the intervening years, the two founders of the company – Jacob Rajan and Justin Lewis – have not been idle, with two further award winners, *The Candlestickmaker* (2000) and *The Pickle King* (2002), as well as the disappointing *The Dentist's Chair* (2007).

Given this history, and the impact the plays have had nationwide, there can be no doubt the audience for the opening night of the *Guru of Chai* came charged with anticipation. Would Rajan, star of the show, pull off the amazing feats of ventriloquism demonstrated in *Krishnan's Dairy*? Would the “Serious Laugh” – described by Rajan and Lewis as “using laughter to open people up to serious themes” – cast its subtle spell? Would the work be what the writers hoped – “beautiful, funny, sad and true”?

The answer to all these questions is a resounding yes. I lost count of the number of characters Rajan played as he told the story of the Guru's lifelong involvement with Balna, a young girl abandoned with her sisters on the Bangalore Central Railway Station, but it ranged from Kutisar, the Guru – a poor street seller who has set up his chai-selling stall at the station – to Balna, forced to sing on the same station platform for her living. As the story unfolds, Rajan metamorphoses into, among others, a stern policeman, a Muslim poet, his doomed son, members of the local crime gang, and the Moon! The magic formula, which guaranteed the success of *Krishnan's Dairy*, is triumphantly back on display.

The *Guru of Chai* works on so many levels there are times when the audience doesn't know whether to laugh or cry. Even the actor's incursions into the auditorium – so often a recipe for disaster – succeed in both involving the spectator and advancing the story. Clever theatrical touches -illuminate the action at every turn.

But it is the sheer brilliance of Rajan's performance, and the humanity he brings to every character he creates, that holds this whirlwind of dramatic storytelling together. Rajan's interaction not just with the audience but with his on-stage musician, David Ward, whose music and personality are an integral part of the evening's enchantment, is a joy to behold.



## Stagecraft Scaffold

A theatre show requires many different aspects to transport the audience into the world of the play. Using the table below, describe an aspect from each of the stagecraft listed and what you think the intended impact on the audience was.

Stagecraft	Description	Intended Audience Impact
Set Design		
Sound Design		
Lighting		
Costume		
Props		

## Understanding Characterisation

- Characterisation is an important part of *Guru of Chai* as Rajan plays 17 different characters. How does Rajan differentiate his performance to convey different characters? Use the following table to help break down how he uses voice, movement, facial expression and gesture to portray the different character.

Character Name	Voice	Movement	Facial Expression	Gesture
Kutisar				
Balna				
Punchkin				

## Discussion Points/Questions

- Discuss the importance of setting in the *Guru of Chai* in enabling the narrative to be communicated to an audience.
- Does the story need to be set in contemporary India in order for it to connect and have relevance for an audience?
- Do you think this production is well-suited to a main stage or do you think it would be more effective presented in your living room? Explain.
- Choose 2 themes from the play and explore how they are represented in a variety of ways on stage. For example, how is power represented through the design choices (eg sound, lighting, costume)?
- Discuss the significance of the relationships between the characters in *The Guru of Chai*.
- How do you think the writers Jacob Rajan and Justin Lewis feel about the westernization of Bangalore (and India)? How do you know this?
- As an audience, how are we made aware of the poverty that *Kutisar* is surrounded by?
- Compare *Guru of Chai* and the film *Slumdog Millionaire*. How is India presented to the audience in both these texts and what are some similarities between the characters we encounter?

# Indian Ink

## Company History

Indian Ink has become one of New Zealand's most successful touring theatre companies performing in every major New Zealand theatre and city since 1997; from intimate black boxes to 800+ Lyric theatres. The company has broken box office records on the way to a total audience of more than 280,000 people. Indian Ink has toured internationally to great acclaim and has won two Fringe First Awards from its two trips to Edinburgh.

Founded in 1997 by Jacob Rajan and Justin Lewis, the company has a team of long term collaborators who combine to make work that is beautiful, funny, sad and true. The 'serious laugh' (using laughter to open mouths and slip something serious in) is central to the company's approach, along with a love of mask and of story. The company blends western theatrical traditions with eastern flavours and has been critically acclaimed for its use of live music, heightened theatricality, humour, pathos and great storytelling.

The Company's first three plays (*Krishnan's Dairy*, *The Candlestickmaker*, *The Pickle King*) have been collected in "The Trilogy book" published by Victoria University Press, and the works are taught in secondary school and university drama departments. The company has also been acclaimed for its business practices being frequently cited as a benchmark for excellence, innovation, flexibility and sustainability.

## What We Do

### LAYER FOR THE INTELLECT

Our shows challenge traditional thinking and ask our audiences to consider things from a different point of view. We write beautiful, funny, sad and true stories, taking you into the minds of characters, allowing you to walk in their shoes – so you can make your own interpretations.

### TRANSENDING CULTURAL BARRIERS

Our shows are for Indians and non-Indians. That's because while different cultures may appear poles apart at first glance, we always find that there is much more that we have in common.

### NOURISHING ENTERTAINMENT

We are entertainers at heart and we're here to take you on a journey that's rich in culture, full of humour and brimming with emotion – so you leave the theatre feeling nourished and content.

### ORIGINAL STORYTELLERS

At Indian Ink, we have developed a unique style of theatrical story telling which draws on tradition and culture utilizing different theatrical crafts from around the world. All this comes together to create narratives that will capture the audiences' imagination and keep them enthralled.

### ARTFUL CLEVERNESS

Having been writing, producing and performing since 1996, we have developed diverse, compelling stories. To tell our tales, we tap into different story-telling styles that present intriguing ideas in unexpected ways.

### SARIS AND FRIES

Saris and Fries is the collision that occurs when our Indian heritage culture meets the western world and ideals that we live with every day. It's the lens through which we tell our stories – a hint of Bollywood with a serious twist.

### THE SERIOUS LAUGH

We like having a laugh, it's part of what makes us human. We'll open your mouth and mind through laughter and slip in something serious at the same time. Because when you start to think about the lighter side of life, you start seeing things in a different light.

### RESOURCEFUL NARRATORS

In our performances we paint vivid pictures using strong characters, rather than through casts of thousands or elaborate sets. We prefer you to use your imagination to fill in some of those details – to get right into the experience intellectually and emotionally.

### ENLIGHTENING EXPERIENCES

At Indian Ink we transport you to vibrant worlds by weaving compelling stories through delightful characters that will leave your heart uplifted and your mind inspired, and your soul nourished.

## Who We Are

### Current Office Team

Producer / General Manager – Jude Froude

Producer: Marketing and Sales – Sue Nelson

Marketing Intern – Sehej Khurana

Office Manager – Anya Griffin

Content Producer – Ankita Singh

Video Collateral – Bala Murali Shingade



This Learning Resource has been developed by Drama Educator Anthony Kelly with the support of Adelaide Festival Centre's centrED Education Officer Renee Fort and Indian Ink. We value your expertise as teachers. Please feel free to use and adapt these resources to suit your educational context.

Adelaide Festival Centre's centrED Schools Program is supported by The Department for Education.

**Duration** 80 minutes. No interval.