BALLOON DOG

WOULD YOU OPEN YOUR DOOR TO A STRANGER?

Education Pack

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This education pack is designed to support deeper engagement with the production by offering insight into its themes, creative processes, and theatrical techniques. It encourages students to think critically about how performance communicates meaning, and to consider the choices artists make when shaping story, character, design, and staging.

Through a combination of contextual information and interviews, the resource aims to build confidence in analysing live performance while inspiring curiosity, creativity, and informed responses to theatre.

Who are we?

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

The company is the result of the extraordinary partnership of Justin Lewis and Jacob Rajan. Since 1997, well over half a million people have had their lives enriched by Indian Ink's original plays. Alongside a team of multi-talented collaborators, they have mined the collision of East and West, creating spirited, fresh and vibrant theatre that combines artful storytelling, mischievous wit and theatrical magic to unearth the simple truths of life.

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.

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.

Transcending 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. We tell stories that celebrate cultural differences but connect us through our shared humanity, building empathy and understanding across cultures.

Original Storytellers

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

How we do it:

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.

Saris and Fries

Saris and Fries is the collision that occurs when our Indian heritage and 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.

Artful Cleverness

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

Cast & Creatives:

Jacob Rajan
Performer & Co-Writer

Justin Lewis
Director & Co-Writer

Alisha Jacob
Performer

John Verryt
Set Designer

Jehangir Homavazir
Performer

Elizabeth Whiting
Costume Designer

David Ward
Composer & Musician

Te Huamanuka Luiten-Apirana
Assistant Director

Sam Mence
Production Manager &
Lighting Designer

Talia Pua
Assistant Designer

Murray Edmond
Dramaturge

Jon Coddington
Puppet Design & Build

General Manager – Jude Froude
Producer – Pene Lister
Administration & Project Manager – Naomi Campion
Next Gen Programme Leader – Te Huamanuka Luiten-Apirana

Jude Froude
Choreographer

About the Play

Balloon Dog is a contemporary theatrical re-imagining of Kabuliwala, exploring migration, belonging, fatherhood, and the fragile boundaries between strangers and family. Told through direct address, storytelling, shadow puppetry, music, and physical performance, the play centres on an unexpected friendship between a migrant worker and a young girl in suburban Aotearoa.

Setting

A renovated wooden villa in an upper middle class suburb. The villa has an attractive garden with an artist's studio in it. The property is surrounded by a low stone wall. Outside the wall is a footpath and road lined with trees and other equally attractive homes.

Locations

Ravi's Art Studio
The Garden
Living and Dining Area
The Street
Entranceway to the House

Charaters

RAVI - A 57 year old New Zealand Indian man. Owner of the villa.

SARA - A 26 year old New Zealand Indian woman. Ravi's only daughter and the mother of MINI.

MINI - a 5 year old New Zealand Indian girl. The only daughter of Sara.

KABIR - a 26 year old migrant worker from Gujarat in India.

The character of Mini is represented through shadow puppetry, dance, physicality from the actors and, at the end, by a physical puppet.

Synopsis

A shadowy figure creeps through a garden, clumsy and uncertain. He hits his shin, knocks over a recycling bin, and sets off a neighbour's dog. Reaching a window, he taps on the glass and whispers, "Open up."

Three performers break the fourth wall, addressing the audience directly: "Would you open your door to a stranger?"

The Family
We meet Ravi, a 57-year-old grandfather and retired architect reinventing himself as an artist. His daughter, Sara, is a 26-year-old solo mother working in retail and raising her energetic five-year-old daughter, Mini. They live a comfortable, middle-class life in a "nice house" on a "nice street" in a "very nice suburb."

The Stranger
One day, while playing outside, Mini calls out to a stranger passing by. When he responds in a foreign language, she flees, leaving Ravi to deal with him. The stranger is Kabir, a 26-year-old migrant worker from Gujarat—friendly, eager, and persistent. Ravi manages to extricate himself, hoping never to see Kabir again.

A few days later, Ravi looks out his studio window and is surprised to see Mini perched on the low stone wall, chatting happily with Kabir.

A Fragile Friendship
Kabir entertains Mini with animal impressions. She is enchanted, learning Gujarati words and laughing freely. Ravi's attitude softens—Kabir's presence keeps Mini occupied, allowing Ravi to paint.

One evening, Sara discovers a bag of sweets and assumes Ravi has been spoiling Mini despite his diabetes. Ravi insists they're not his. When Sara recounts Mini's chatter, he realizes the sweets came from Kabir. Sara is alarmed: a stranger has been giving her daughter gifts. She questions Ravi's supervision and threatens daycare.

Old tensions surface. Ravi's artistic insecurity flares when Sara urges him to respond to a gallery interested in his work. He deflects, criticizing Sara's absent ex-partner, Steve, who lives in London and has no contact with Mini. Ravi is dismissive of Sara's retail job and implores her to finish the law degree she abandoned when Mini was born. Sara resists, asserting her independence, and the argument escalates.

Later that night, Sara vents her frustration on a punching bag before collapsing into bed, exhausted.

The next morning, running late, Sara encounters Kabir talking to Mini outside. When Kabir offers Mini a balloon dog, Sara refuses it, telling him firmly, "In this country, we don't take sweets from strangers." Kabir leaves, hurt and confused.

In the following days, Mini waits hopefully by the wall, but Kabir no longer appears.

The Portrait

Ravi, wrestling with creative block, sees Kabir hurrying past the house and calls him over. He invites Kabir to sit for a portrait, excited by the idea of painting a "real" Indian farmer. He dismisses Kabir's concerns about Sara's disapproval, assuring him, "Sara need never know." Reluctantly, Kabir agrees.

The next day, Kabir arrives in his best suit. Ravi, disappointed, strips him of his jacket and shirt to make him look more "authentic." The sight of Kabir sitting awkwardly in his undergarments reduces Ravi to tears as he rails at his own impotence as an artist.

The session is interrupted when Mini arrives home early. Despite Ravi's panic, Kabir stays and plays with her, creating a joyful, spontaneous moment. Ravi captures this on canvas—finally creating something "worth painting." But when he offers Kabir money, the mood is ruined. Kabir leaves, embarrassed.

The Ultimatum

The following morning, Sara discovers Ravi painting exuberantly. She's happy he's regained his creative energy—until she realizes the paintings are of Mini and Kabir. Furious, Sara extracts a promise that Ravi will tell Kabir to stay away.

That afternoon, Kabir, grateful for Ravi's friendship, brings him homemade biryani. Ravi reluctantly invites him in, struggling to find the right moment to deliver Sara's ultimatum. When Mini arrives home and ignores her grandfather to play with Kabir, Ravi snaps. He bellows at Mini to go to her room, then blurts out to Kabir: "You can't come here any more!" The façade of friendship shatters. Kabir leaves, stunned and dismayed.

The Accusation
The next morning, a hungover Sara recounts her night out with her university friend Katie, who revealed that Steve is now married with a baby.

Sara hurries to get Mini ready for school—but Mini is nowhere to be found. Panic sets in. Sara discovers Kabir's biryani bowl and jumps to the worst conclusion: Kabir has taken Mini. She races into the street, spots Kabir walking past with headphones on, and chases him down, filming him with her phone and threatening to call the police. Kabir is terrified and confused.

Ravi arrives and reveals he's found Mini—she was hiding under Sara's bed. Mortified, Sara apologizes, but the damage is done. To make amends, Ravi invites Kabir to dinner on Sunday evening. Sara reluctantly agrees.

The Dinner
Kabir arrives in his suit, carrying a balloon dog for Mini. This time, Sara accepts the gift. The dinner is warm and joyful. Kabir shares something of himself: his long hours at a service station, his longing for home. Later, alone with Sara, he asks to borrow her phone to call his family.

Sara is outraged to discover that Kabir's boss has confiscated his phone and passport. She urges him to stand up for his rights, to appeal to his union. Kabir refuses, fearing deportation and the loss of his bond money. Ravi enters and takes Kabir's side, urging caution. Sara accuses Ravi of being passive and self-absorbed. The argument escalates into a brutal confrontation. In the painful silence that follows, they discover Kabir has slipped away unnoticed.

The Night Visitor
That night, the opening sequence repeats: a shadowy figure creeps through the garden, knocking over the recycling bin. He taps on the window, whispering, "Open up."

Sara and Ravi are woken by the tapping. They debate calling the police. Suddenly, there is pounding on the door. Sara recognizes Kabir's voice. Despite Ravi's protests, she opens the door. Kabir stumbles in, fearful and covered in blood. He's incoherent, mumbling in Gujarati. Concern turns to horror when they see he's clutching a bloodstained knife.

The blood is not his. Kabir relives the confrontation with his boss—a desperate appeal for his phone that turned violent. Ravi insists on calling an ambulance, but Kabir's trauma surfaces and he brandishes the knife. The tense silence is broken by Ravi's phone ringing. It's the police.

Kabir, cornered and desperate, is deaf to their pleas for calm. Then Mini's voice cuts through—sleepy, confused, calling his name. She asks him to come say goodnight, to tell her a story. Kabir's aggression dissolves. He puts down the knife, looks to Sara for permission, and she gently gives it. Kabir follows Mini upstairs.

The Aftermath

Ravi and Sara recount what follows: Kabir's quiet surrender to the police. The knife taken as evidence. The uncovering of Kabir's exploitation by his employer. His sentencing to seven years for manslaughter. Their decision not to tell Mini what happened—only that Kabir had "gone away."

Six years pass. Sara completes her law degree. Ravi's painting career takes off. Mini grows up, becoming a typical pre-teen—absorbed in school, friends, and her phone.

The Return

Sara accepts a job in Sydney. On the morning of their departure, Ravi is shocked when Kabir appears at the house. He has been granted early release and has come straight from prison. He asks to see Mini. He has a gift: a pencil drawing he made in prison—a tender, skillful portrait of Mini as a five-year-old.

Sara is moved. Kabir reveals he has a daughter back home, Mini's age. Ravi brings Mini out to meet him. She looks at Kabir blankly—she has no memory of him. She's rude and dismissive. Ravi gently guides her back to her room.

Sara is left alone with the crestfallen Kabir. He fears returning to India to a daughter who no longer knows him. Sara shares that Steve is now in contact with Mini and plans to visit her in Sydney. They sit together, lost in their separate thoughts of the future.

Epilogue

A puppet of a young girl explores the room. She discovers a suitcase. When she opens it, a balloon dog on a string floats out. The girl grasps the string and stands for a moment, enjoying the bobbing balloon. Finally, she releases the string and watches the balloon dog gently float away into the sky.

Theatrical Treatment

The use of mask in performance

Adaptation of a short story to theatre

The use of chorus in performance

The use of storytelling and direct audience address in drama

Dance and movement in theatre

Puppetry and shadow play

Live music

Themes

Migration and displacement

The 'othering' of people

Fear of strangers

Exploitation of migrant workers

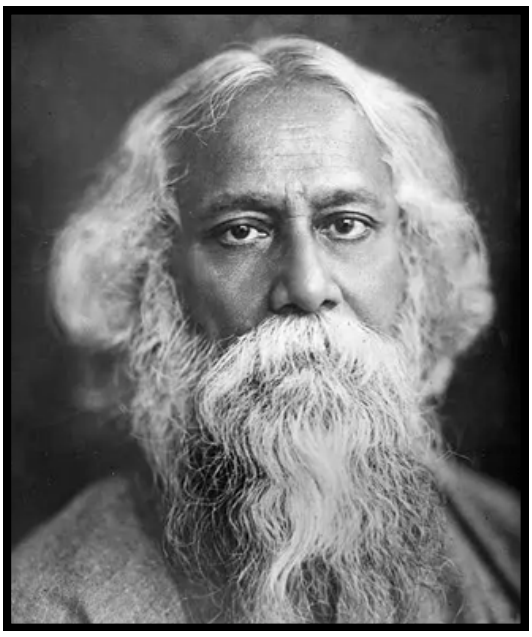
Building empathy and understanding

Class and inequality

Differences within the same cultural group

Being a parent and family relationships

Rabindranath Tagore

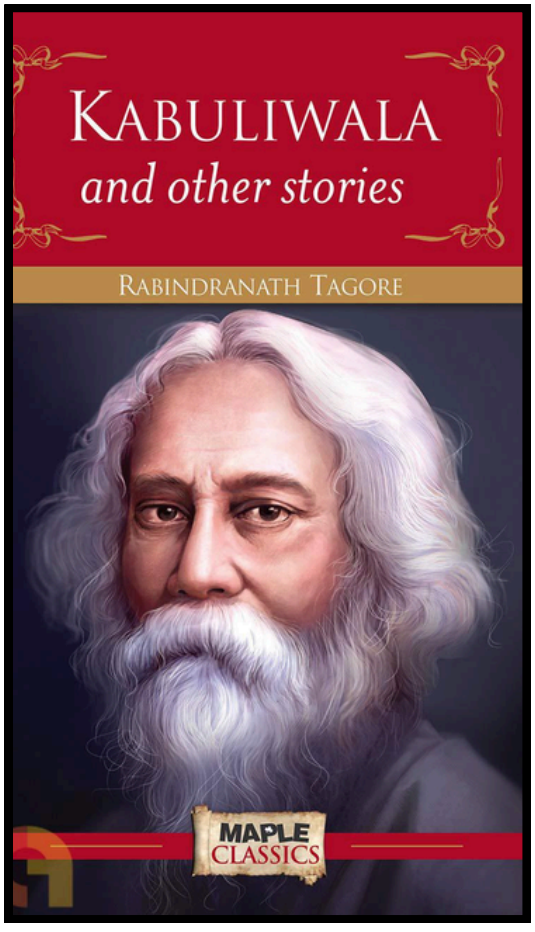


Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) was an Indian writer, poet, philosopher, composer, and educator who is widely regarded as one of the most important literary figures in modern history.

He became the first non-European to win the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913 for his collection of poems, Gitanjali.

Tagore wrote stories, novels, plays, songs, and essays that explored themes such as human relationships, nature, freedom, and cultural understanding.

He wrote Jana Gana Mana, which later became the national anthem of India. His works continue to be studied around the world because they encourage readers to think about compassion, identity, and the shared experiences that connect people across different cultures.



Kabuliwala is considered one of Rabindranath Tagore's most famous short stories because its themes of friendship, family, love, and separation are universal and easy for readers of all ages to relate to. The story's emotional ending, in which Rahmat realizes how much Mini has changed while he was in prison, highlights the passage of time and the deep bond between parents and their children. Its simple yet powerful message about human connection across different cultures has made Kabuliwala one of Tagore's most widely read and celebrated works around the world.

Kabuliwala

Kabuliwala tells the story of a friendship between a young girl named Mini and a fruit seller from Afghanistan called Rahmat, who is known as the Kabuliwala (translated to 'The man from Kabul').

Mini is very talkative and curious, and she quickly becomes friends with Rahmat despite their differences in age, culture, and background. Their conversations and playful interactions show a warm bond between them.

One day, Rahmat gets into a fight with a customer who refuses to pay him and, in anger, he stabs the man. As a result, Rahmat is sent to prison for several years. During this time, Mini grows up and moves on with her life. When Rahmat is finally released, he returns hoping to see the little girl he once knew, carrying memories of their friendship.

When Rahmat meets Mini again on her wedding day, he realizes that she is no longer the child he remembers. He feels sad but also understands how much time has passed. Mini's father is moved by Rahmat's love for his own daughter back in Afghanistan and gives him money to return home. The story highlights themes of friendship, love, parenthood, and the passage of time, showing that human emotions can connect people across cultures and distances.

Kabuliwala: Myth and Reality

In some parts of India, the word "Kabuliwala" was historically used by adults to frighten children, similar to the idea of a boogeyman.

Kabuliwalas were traders, often from Afghanistan, who traveled through Indian towns selling goods such as dry fruits and textiles. Because they were unfamiliar outsiders to many communities, stories and rumors sometimes grew around them, leading some parents to use the name as a warning to children.

This image of the Kabuliwala as a frightening figure was based more on stereotypes and misunderstandings than on reality. Most Kabuliwalas were ordinary merchants trying to earn a living. Over time, these exaggerated stories became part of local folklore, where the Kabuliwala was sometimes portrayed as someone who might take away misbehaving children. Such portrayals reflected social fears and prejudices rather than the true lives of these traders.

A different and more humanized view appears in the famous short story Kabuliwala by Rabindranath Tagore. The story presents a Kabuliwala as a caring father who forms a friendship with a young girl in Kolkata. Tagore's work challenged negative stereotypes and encouraged readers to see the Kabuliwala as a real person with emotions, family ties, and dignity rather than as a frightening mythical figure.

Migration in NZ

Migration refers to people moving to New Zealand from other countries, as well as people leaving NZ to live elsewhere. Migration has played an important role in shaping the country's population, culture, and economy.

The earliest Indians arrived in 1769 on French explorer Jean-François de Surville's ship. Over the next century, lascars (Indian seamen) and sepoys (soldiers) on British East India Company ships occasionally jumped ship and stayed. Some of these early pioneers even fought in the New Zealand Wars or assisted with the gold rush.

Today, NZ attracts migrants from regions such as Asia, the Pacific Islands, Europe, and Africa. Many move to NZ for employment, education, family reunification, or improved living conditions. Migrants contribute valuable skills, knowledge, languages, and cultural traditions that enrich communities and support economic growth. They work in important industries such as healthcare, construction, agriculture, education, and technology.

However, migrants can face several challenges when settling in NZ. Some experience language barriers, making it difficult to find work, access services, or build social connections. Others may struggle with the high cost of housing and living expenses, especially in major cities like Auckland. Migrants may also find it difficult to have overseas qualifications recognised or to gain employment that matches their skills and experience. Adjusting to a new culture, making friends, and dealing with discrimination or feelings of isolation can also be challenging. Despite these difficulties, many migrants successfully build new lives in NZ and continue to make important contributions to the country's society and economy.

Exploitation of migrant workers

Migrant worker exploitation happens when employers take advantage of people who have moved to New Zealand for work, often by breaking employment laws or using power imbalances. This can include underpaying workers, making them work excessive hours, withholding passports, charging illegal recruitment fees, or threatening them with deportation. Migrant workers can be especially vulnerable because they may not fully understand their rights, may face language barriers, or depend on their employer for visa sponsorship.

In New Zealand, most employers follow fair work rules set out by employment law, but exploitation still occurs in some industries such as agriculture, hospitality, construction, and care work. Temporary migrant visas can sometimes increase vulnerability because workers may feel pressure to accept poor conditions to keep their job and stay in the country. Government agencies like the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE) investigate complaints and can take action against employers who exploit workers.

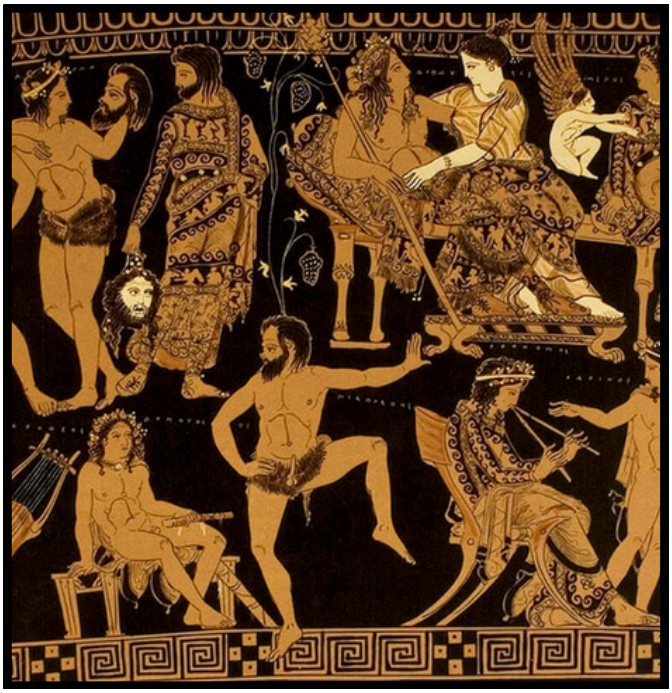
Exploitation is not just illegal—it harms people's wellbeing and damages trust in workplaces. Migrant workers in New Zealand have the same basic employment rights as everyone else, including minimum wage, safe working conditions, and fair treatment. Reporting systems, unions, and community support groups exist to help protect workers. Understanding these issues helps students recognise unfair treatment and the importance of standing up for workers' rights.

Chorus Storytelling

In theatre, a chorus is a group of performers who help tell the story. Instead of focusing on one character, the chorus speaks, sings, moves, or reacts together to provide information about events, characters, and themes. The chorus can act like a narrator, explaining what is happening, giving background information, or helping the audience understand important ideas in the play.

The use of a chorus began in ancient Greek theatre, where groups of citizens would comment on the action and express the feelings or opinions of society. Over time, theatre makers adapted the idea in different ways. Modern choruses may create atmosphere through movement and sound, represent a crowd, or switch between multiple roles. They often work together as a single unit, using coordinated voices and physical actions to create powerful stage images.

Chorus storytelling is effective because it allows a story to be told creatively and collaboratively. A chorus can quickly show different locations, characters, or emotions without needing complex sets or costumes. It also helps audiences engage with the themes of a performance by highlighting key moments and ideas. For high school theatre students, learning chorus techniques can improve teamwork, communication, and physical storytelling skills.



Teeth as Mask

Masks are a theatrical form often used in Indian Ink shows. A mask creates a necessary gap between the actor and the character they play. This gap opens a space for the performer and the audience to fill with their imagination.

In this show, we use teeth as mask. The three actors wear prosthetic teeth over their real ones. These mask teeth encourage the performers to transform their voices and bodies allowing for a heightened theatricality and style of playing.

Balloon Animals

Balloon animals began in the early 1900s after the invention of long, flexible latex balloons. While balloons had existed for centuries, they were usually round and not suitable for shaping. The development of twisting balloons allowed entertainers to create simple figures by bending and twisting the balloons into different forms. Balloon modeling became popular at fairs, circuses, birthday parties, and community events, where performers used creativity and skill to make animals, hats, flowers, and other fun shapes.

Over time, balloon art grew from a novelty into a recognized form of entertainment and artistic expression. Advances in balloon manufacturing made balloons stronger, more colorful, and easier to shape. Today, balloon artists around the world create highly detailed sculptures that can include multiple balloons and complex designs. Balloon animals remain popular because they are inexpensive, interactive, and enjoyable for people of all ages, making them a common feature at celebrations and public events.

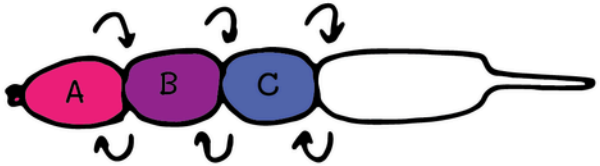
DIY BALLOON DOG

BY TALIA PUA

① BLOW UP THE BALLOON!!

~10 cm

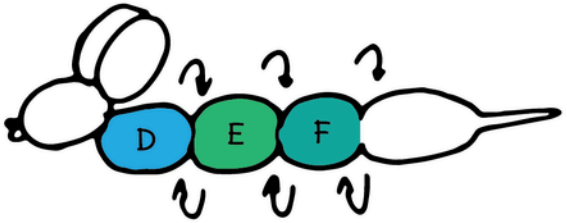
② HEAD & EARS



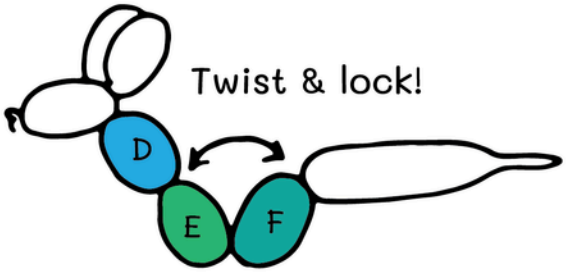
Twist a chain of 3 bubbles

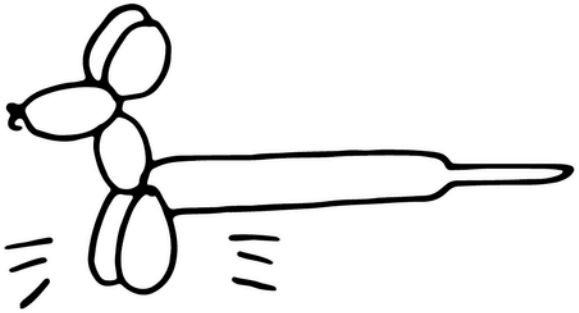
Twist & lock!

③ NECK & FRONT LEGS

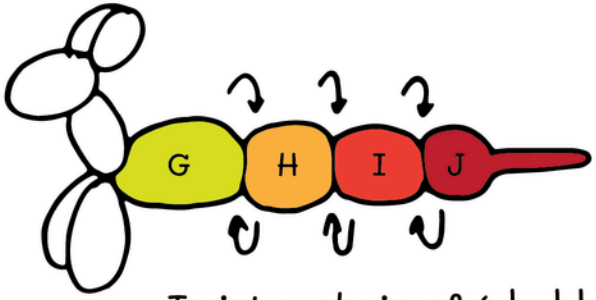


Twist a chain of 3 bubbles

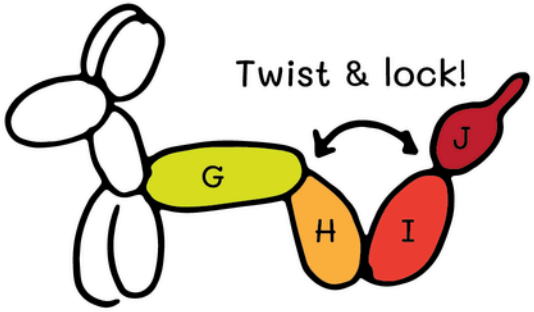


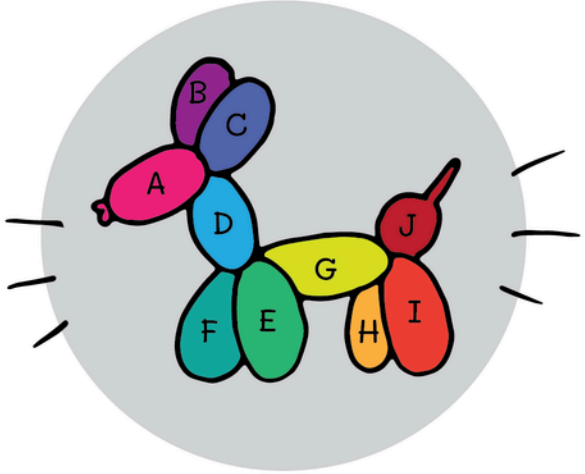


④ BODY, BACK LEGS & TAIL



Twist a chain of 4 bubbles





Puppetry

Puppetry is one of the oldest performance arts in the world, dating back thousands of years. Early evidence appears in ancient Egypt, Greece, China, and India, where puppets were used in storytelling, religious rituals, and entertainment. In China, shadow puppetry became especially popular, using flat figures behind a lit screen to tell dramatic stories.

In India and Southeast Asia, puppets often retold epic myths like the Ramayana, blending education, spirituality, and performance. These traditions weren't just entertainment—they were a way to pass down history and values before widespread literacy.

As puppetry spread across Europe and the rest of the world, it evolved into many distinct styles. In medieval Europe, puppets were used in street performances and church morality plays, often featuring comedic or moral lessons. Later, famous characters like Punch and Judy in England became staples of puppet comedy. In the 20th century, puppetry expanded into television and film, with shows like Sesame Street proving it could be both educational and wildly popular.

Today, puppetry continues to mix tradition with innovation, from handcrafted stage puppets to high-tech digital and animatronic creations—still proving that a piece of cloth and imagination can do a lot of heavy lifting.

Shadow Puppetry

Shadow puppetry is one of the world's oldest storytelling arts, with roots stretching back over two thousand years. Early forms are often linked to ancient China during the Han Dynasty, where legends say it began as a way to bring stories of lost loved ones back to life using silhouettes on screens. From there, it spread along trade routes into India, Indonesia, and the Middle East, evolving into distinct regional traditions. In Indonesia, it developed into wayang kulit, a highly refined form combining puppetry, music, and epic storytelling. In India, traditions like tholu bommalata used richly coloured leather puppets to retell myths and epics.

In the Ottoman Empire, shadow theatre became known as Karagöz, a popular comedic tradition that influenced performance styles across Turkey and beyond. By the 18th and 19th centuries, European travellers encountered these performances and brought the idea back home, where it became a fashionable entertainment before lantern shows and later cinema reduced its popularity.

Today, shadow puppetry survives as both a living tradition and a modern art form, with contemporary theatre companies adapting it for new audiences using projections, animation, and hybrid stage techniques. What was once ancient street and temple storytelling now sits comfortably in international festivals and experimental performance spaces.

Q&A with Director Justin Lewis

What excites you most about this production

I love the choric storytelling, the dance, music and sense of fun.

How do you work with actors to help them develop their characters and performances?

We build characters from the outside in – finding the mask that creates an imaginative gap between themselves and their characters. Lots of mucking around, playing with physicality, voice and the audience / performer relationship.

What challenges did you face directing this show, and how did you solve them?

One of the greatest challenges was figuring out how to bring a 5 year old to life on stage.I find adults playing children hard to watch, I didn't want to do a puppet so we settled on storytelling and a chorus to evoke the child.

How do you balance the visual, musical, and movement elements to create a cohesive story on stage?

Everything must work to build the world and advance the story. I'm always looking for the best way I can find to do this. We need drama and we need fun. It's about balance, rhythm and the musicality of the piece. In a way as Director I have to be an advocate for the audience – follow my own interest and trust that will also be interesting for the audience.

Q&A with Co-Writer Jacob Rajan

What inspired you to tell this story?

Years and years ago, I stumbled across a short story by Rabindranath Tagore called Kabuliwala. It was only a few pages long, but I laughed out loud in parts and I was in tears by the end. I thought it would make great material for a play.

How did you discover Kabuliwala? And why did you choose that story?

I was in an Indian author phase, throwing my "Indian Ink" net far and wide to see what I could catch. Rabindranath Tagore is a big fish - one of India's most famous and beloved writers. He wrote short stories, plays, novels, poems, and songs, including India's National Anthem. He was the first non-European to win the Nobel prize for Literature, yet he remains relatively unknown in the West. Beyond Kabuliwala being a story that really moved me, I also wanted to bring Tagore's work to a new audience.

How does this story connect with New Zealand culture or society?

Kabuliwala was written and set in 1800s Calcutta. We've transplanted the story to twenty-first-century Auckland. An Afghan street seller from the original has become a migrant worker from Gujarat in ours. The crazy thing is that Tagore's hundred-year-old story - which speaks to the exploitation of migrants, the othering of people, and the bond between parent and child - still utterly connects with what's going on in our society today.

How do you approach themes or issues in your work, and why are they important to explore on stage?

For me, exploring a central theme is better than exploring an issue. And a theme is best articulated as a question, like: "Would you open your door to a stranger?" A good question has good arguments on both sides. The energy of that argument is what fuels the drama. Although issues will come up in the play, they'll come up in the context of the argument. The danger of focusing on an issue is that the play turns into a lecture, which can cause the audience to sit back in their seats. We want them to lean forward.

How do you develop the characters and what do you hope audiences learn from them?

We come to the characters through research, both real and imaginative, and through the world that we build for them. Our setting is a "nice house" in a "nice street" in a "very nice suburb." We figure out occupations and relationships and - critically - character flaws. What are these people struggling with internally, and how does that play out externally? Since one of the characters is a migrant worker, I interviewed a number of people in that situation and had my eyes opened to their hopes and challenges. We channel all of that into the script, and then in workshops and the rehearsal room, we work to find how these people move and speak. Each one has a unique story that contributes to the whole. I hope audiences see reflections of themselves in these characters and gain some insight into - and empathy for - the migrant experience.

What challenges do you face when turning your ideas into a live performance, and how do you overcome them?

Simplicity is the biggest challenge and the hardest thing to achieve. It's easy to get lost in your own "cleverness." We spend two years coming up with the world and populating it with characters, structuring the drama, designing the set and costumes, composing the music, writing the dialogue. The only way to find your way back to simplicity is to see your work fresh through the eyes of an audience. Using discussions, workshops and development seasons, we test our ideas and continually look to remove what's not needed to get down to the holy grail of simplicity.

How did your writing change for this show, moving from your usual style of one actor playing multiple characters to having three actors, and what effect did you hope this would have on the audience?

Writing for a solo show is very different in terms of its rhythms. When you're playing multiple characters, it's easy to confuse and exhaust the audience if the switches from one character to another happen too quickly and too often. You have to write the script in a way that accommodates that. You don't really have that problem with more actors on stage. The audience welcomes the flow of dialogue, the interruptions, the potent silences. You can also play with chorus and the stage pictures you create. I hope the audience will feel charmed by the storytellers and also pulled in lots of different directions by having all these different points of view.

Q&A with Co-Writer Justin Lewis

What inspired you to tell this story?

Jacob brought the story to my attention and I immediately connected with it. I found the feeling at the end of Kabuliwala so moving and profound that I wanted to bring that to the stage.

How does this story connect with New Zealand culture or society?

Migrant exploitation is something NZ society has been wrestling with for a number of years now. This story explores that but from the perspective of the middle class who are caught up in their own obsessions and often unaware of what others are living through.

How do you develop the characters and what do you hope audiences learn from them?

My hope is always for the audience to experience something, to feel something as much as learn something. I want people to live in another person's shoes for a while, to experience other perspectives and ways of living.

How do you approach themes or issues in your work, and why are they important to explore on stage?

The key is to embody the themes in the characters' journeys. It's not about delivering a lecture on how things should be but rather playing out different aspects of an argument or situation. Often I will be surprised by where the story takes me. Having a good question is better than thinking I have the answer.

What challenges do you face when turning your ideas into a live performance, and how do you overcome them?

Drama can't be a lecture or a piece of journalism. We have to explore messy, grey areas and points of view that we may not agree with to uncover some deeper truth.

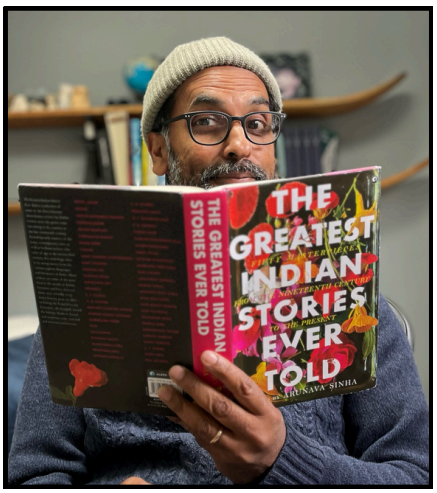
Q&A with Performer Jacob Rajan

How do you prepare for a role, and what's your process for getting into character?

Indian Ink was formed through a love of mask, and that physical approach to finding how your character moves and speaks is a big part preparing for a role and getting into character. In Balloon Dog, all the actors have prosthetic teeth that change the shape of our faces and naturally affect the way we talk. Costume and makeup also help the transformation.

What challenges did you face playing one character in this production vs your normal multiple characters, and how did you overcome them?

I often think of playing multiple characters as a form of juggling. When you're solo and all those balls are in the air, there's an element of you being in control. The challenge with having more performers on stage is that now you're juggling with other people. The entrances and exits, the pace of the dialogue, the relationship with the audience - there's a collective responsibility to keeping those balls flying. So part of the rehearsal is devoted to company work: building that trust between the performers so we know we've got each other's back in performance.



How do you stay in the moment on stage when things don't go as planned?

Those moments can often result in something unscripted and magical that will only happen on that night. So if you can reframe the accident you and the audience will be rewarded with what is actually a gift.

How do you work with the director and other actors to bring the story to life?

Collaboration is key! Justin, as director, gets final say, but we all discuss the script and feed in our ideas and interpretations. We support each other in exploring our characters and solving problems. There are always moments of magic and discovery in the rehearsal room – the trick is to work with Justin to create the framework to allow those moments to happen every night.

How do you use your voice, body, and movement to create a character that feels real?

Creating an authentic character usually requires that we inhabit a truly different body. We create that body in the rehearsal room by placing close attention to things we often take for granted. When standing, does your character have their weight on the balls of their feet or on their heels? Are their hips open or closed? Are their shoulders square or rounded. How do they move? What's the rhythm of their walk? Once you've constructed this body, you can experiment with the way it speaks - the tone of voice, maybe an accent. Ultimately, you reach a point where, when you look out through the eyes of this body, you see the world differently. And when you look at the world differently – you look different.

Which part of this role was the most fun or surprising for you, and why?

Of all our shows I think Balloon Dog has the most dance and movement in it. I absolutely love how it feels for my body to learn something in a way that my brain can't. Our choreographer, Jude Froude, is wonderful at taking moments from the script and turning them into movement. For me it's the joy and wonder of learning a new language.

Q&A with Set Designer John Verryt

How did you get into set designing?

When I left school I went into graphics, and it was at the time computers were coming in and I didn't really want to do graphics on the computer, so I left. Quit. Travelled for a while and sort of stumbled into some theatre, liked it, and came back and started working. Those were the days when you could do that.

What is it about set design that you fell in love with?

Making an environment that reflects ideas that writers have written and that accommodates performers. It's not like the statement, but the support for the statement. And the combination of sculpture and architecture… And control, I guess, is part of it too.

What does your process of designing a set look like?

Usually, the producer comes to me, with a script or an idea. I get the script on the table and do what I like with it. It's a combination of making models and the drawing board. I'm pretty old school, most people do it all on the computer now. But I find that less satisfying, for the same reason that I didn't want to do graphics on a computer, I don't want to do set design on a computer either.

I prefer the more physical workstyle of making things and standing at the drawing board. I can put a whole set design on the drawing board and look at it all at once.

At what point do you start thinking about set design? Is it as soon as the idea for the play has been formed and communicated to you, after the script is written, during the workshops, or when rehearsals start?

It varies, quite a lot actually. If there's a finished script to start with, which is probably half my work, that's easy. I start reading the script and start having ideas out of there. If it's a devised work, then the design often comes out of a process of workshopping, discussions and generally working with a cast.

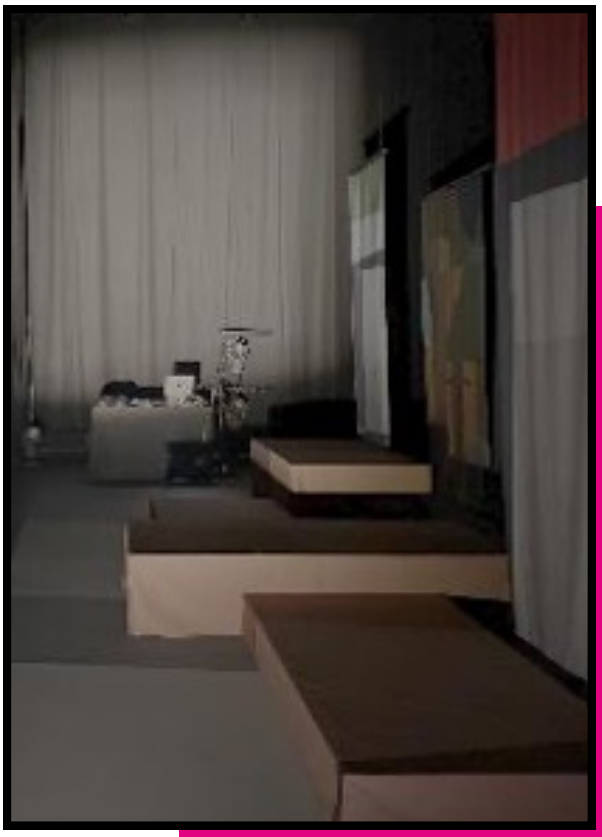
With Indian Ink, it's kind of in the middle, because often there is a script at the start, and there are various meetings and discussions before that script happens. Basically the design process just starts whenever the discussion starts, whatever form they are, whether it's just a talk, or a discussion with the cast or whether it's the finished script.

What do you think is the most important thing to consider when designing sets?

The first thing is trying to work out what it's about. What I really want to do is reflect the themes of the writing in the set design. That's kind of what I do in a nutshell, that's my job. After that it's mainly the practicalities of getting on and off the stage, like having smooth transitions and so on. Actually, transitions is a huge one and being able to do that effectively is extremely important. Moving from scene to scene requires a lot of logistical work, and is something we spend lots and lots of time on.

How much does changing venues affect your set design? For example, how different is it working at TAPAC compared to somewhere like Q Theatre? What about even bigger/smaller venues?

It doesn't really change the design much, I try to keep it quite consistent. I actually design for Q Theatre and have to squeeze into TAPAC, because it's a smaller venue. Often it's quite hard to do the design for a small space, so usually I would pick a 'middle-sized' venue and design the set for that. Then I would either squeeze it in or expand it out depending on where we go. We're looking ahead to theatres that hold 1000's of people so we really have to make it work for all kinds of venues.



Q&A with Cosutme Designer Elizabeth Whiting

What was your starting point when designing costumes for this production?

The starting point for designing this production was preliminary discussions with Justin, Jake and Murray about the inspiration for the piece. I rushed off and did research on Kabuliwala and Tagore, and the next time we met, there was a script that triggered completely different ideas.

What inspired you with your costume ideas?

The story is set in Auckland, NZ, now, so I visited petrol stations to observe the clothing of new Indian immigrants serving at the pumps, and looked at NZ Fashions for the other characters. I visited the malls to see what these characters might have purchased, and then started creating mood boards for each character.

How do costumes help tell the story or define characters?

Costumes are a way to help the audience recognise the characters. For example, we have an older, well-off Indian man, so his clothing is in good condition, lighter colours, and subtly reflects his heritage.

How did the themes of the play influence your costume choices?

By costuming the characters carefully, particularly showing their status in our community, I was able to reinforce the themes of the play.

How do you consider movement, comfort, and practicality for performers?

The major need for these costumes is longevity and washability, as the cast are already able to move in them easily. I have provided doubles of most costumes, which solves the practical problems posed by a two-show performance day.

How do colour, texture, and style communicate mood, period, or personality?

To answer this question, I will take one character - Sara. Sara is dressed in lighter colours, which reflect her ability to keep them clean. White is usually associated with innocence. As the play progresses, however, this may not be completely accurate! She is wearing slightly sporty trousers and a singlet top, reflecting her sporty nature and youth. Her jacket indicates she is a professional woman with style. Her clothing is contemporary and a little quirky, so we want to know more about her character.

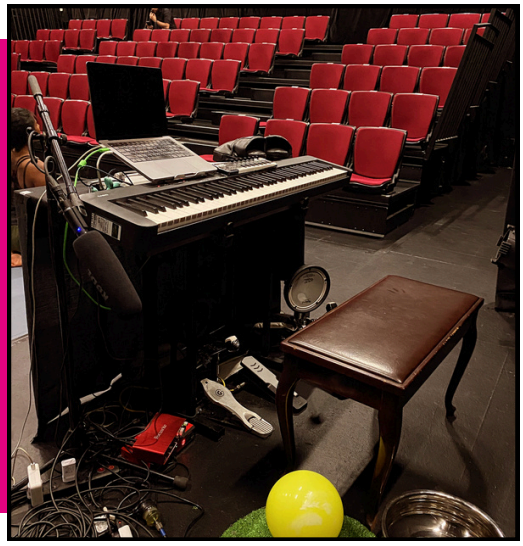
Q&A with Composer David Ward

What is your starting point when composing for this show?

The starting point was trying to imagine the world of the show as represented by the script and discussions with the director, and trying to improvise music that corresponds with the general atmosphere and feelings that seems to be present.

Did the script influence the music's style or genre?

Yes, though the original sketches, despite being musically successful, did not sit well with the world that emerged from early workshops, so they needed to be reassessed. I think that more than the script, the visual elements and the theatre form that becomes clear for each show are more important for the music.



How did the themes of the play shape your musical choices?

After the first workshop It became apparent that we needed two main themes, one light, one dark. One was connected to the feeling of innocence, it needed to be playful and contain a certain poignance for the bitter sweet sadness that comes from loss of childhood. It is played mainly on a glockenspiel. The other was connected to the idea of the stranger, a sense of mystery and possible danger. it is also on pitched percussion, but much lower in pitch and more strange and syncopated.

Did you create specific musical themes for characters or ideas?

The innocence theme represents Mini and her playful interaction with characters. It needed to be versatile enough to be expanded into the larger dance moments. The Mystery/Danger Theme is connected to Kabir and the mystery and doubt and danger he represents in the play.

How do you feel the live music works with the sound effects?

The sound effects are not as present in this show compared to the last, Paradise, which was an entire soundscape of hundreds of recorded sounds. In this play we use more traditional foley sfx that are seen: crashes, punching bags, bouncing balls. They are in a different mode than the technology of the music, but they work well.

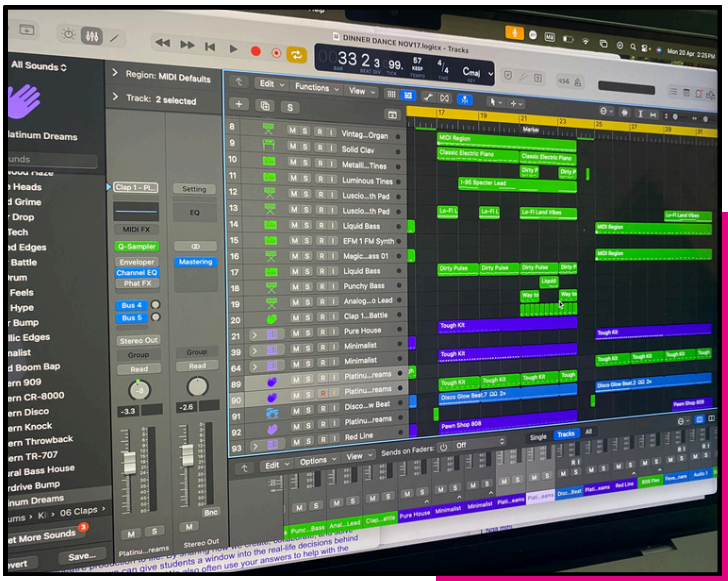
How do you keep it alive in the moment?

I try to be fully present with the actors and the feelings and movement happening live on stage, and try to fully embody them every night. Each show is different and important and it pays to not get blasé once the show is up and running. I have a sense of all the performers being responsible for the imaginative bubble we are creating with the audience, and it requires a relaxed but focussed attention that for me has developed over the years of doing music and theatre. When I watch my facial expressions during the show it is clear I am trying to empathically feel what is going on in front of me as though it is the first time.

What instruments, sounds, or technology do you use and why?

As mentioned, for the main themes I use pitched percussion. These are sampled in my computer on Logic for the recorded tracks and MainStage for tracks I play live. I use a keyboard to play multiple instruments live and electronic drums with my feet for some drum and percussion layers

I have pre-recorded multiple instrument tracks for the bigger dance sequences, such as synths and drums and vintage keyboards. I have carefully extracted melodies and instruments for live use in incidental moments or transitions, sometimes using a prerecorded layer if a bigger scale is needed.



Q&A with Puppet Designer Jon Coddington

What was your starting point when designing the puppet?

I started with a scrunched up paper doll made from newsprint and masking tape in order to see how big she needed to be, and what her movements would be. By doing this, I wasn't spending a lot of money on materials that I knew were just for testing and would eventually be changed. We did a lot of workshopping and playing to figure out how the performers would operate her as well, so I could design controls and handles, and work out where best to place them for the performers.

What materials did you choose and why?

I used a wooden 'skeleton' for Mini as I knew she needed to be strong enough to go on tour with and withstand being performed with for a long time. The rest is mainly cardboard and paper mache, as this is lightweight, easily sourced, and surprisingly robust. The paper mache gives an uneven texture which looks great, and picks up the light in interesting ways. Her eyes are doll eyes that I painted, and having a glassy finish to them means they sparkle and really give life to her, giving the audience a feeling of youth and curiosity.

How does the puppet's movement influence how the audience understands the character?

The performance of Mini needed to convey the way a small child would move in real life, but also tell the audience what she is thinking and feeling. When she skips across the stage we see her playfulness and innocence, when she sits and swings her legs, it might read as her being bored or restless, things we might recognise in ourselves and our own behaviours. When she looks at the audience, that is Mini communicating with us and wanting us to understand her.

What practical challenges did you face when building the puppet?

I learnt a lot about paper mache in this project, such as the right weight of paper to use, and the glue consistency. In order to make her face, I sculpted it out of clay first, then made a plaster mold of it. Then I could begin the paper mache process from inside to capture the details. I hadn't done paper mache in this way before and it was certainly messy.

How do performers learn to bring the puppet to life?

First the performers perform her movements as themselves and without the puppet. This gives them an idea for how the body moves with the quality of a 5 year old child, and makes sure they are all in agreement with what her performance needs to be. By doing this, they can examine the parts of the body they are operating and can use this knowledge in their puppetry. Then it is a lot of practice, and play. By just playing with her we found she could skip with only one puppeteer, and had a lovely freedom of movement by not having three people trying to move in unison.

What details help the audience connect emotionally with the puppet?

There are many details of Mini that help an audience connect with her. Her eyes twinkle and give us a feeling of wonder, and the way she looks at things will give us an idea of how she feels about something. The way she breathes (which is controlled by the chest puppeteer) gives us her emotional and energy values. Also, her pigtails are connected with springs so that they move and bounce around without the puppeteer having to move them. This is what we call "sympathetic movement", and gives her an added bit of life when staying still.



What considerations are important for designing shadow puppetry?

The source of light is very important, best to have something very bright from a single point, such as an LED, candle, or phone torch. This means there will be less blur around the shadow you're trying to cast. The closer you are to the light source, the larger the shadow, and further away, the smaller it is. In this way, you could think of the light as a camera, and the shadow performance is what the light is looking at. The angle at which the shadow is cast is also important, both in the performance and angle of the light. If the light source is directly towards the shadow screen or surface, the puppets will be displayed true to their dimensions, but if the angle is skewed it will stretch out the shadow cast. The same is true with the angle of the puppet held in front of the light. This isn't necessarily something to stay away from, but another tool in the shadow puppeteers toolbox.

How do light, shape, and detail affect what the audience sees in shadow puppet performance?

Light, shape and detail are the foundation of shadow puppetry. The light source might give us a mood for the shadow piece, such as a colour that might generate feelings with the audience, or the type of light, such as a candle, may give extra movement to the shadows cast. The shape and detail within a puppet can convey character, but also can express emotions and character traits, for example, a character with sharp edges may be villainous, softer shapes may feel more vulnerable. Also something to consider is if the performance is in front or behind the projection surface. Sometimes showing how the magic is made is really fun.

Q&A with Choreographer Jude Froude

What was your starting point when creating movement for this production?

A great conversation with Director, Justin Lewis about how we might evoke 5-year-old Mini in the play, then in early workshops working with Justin to test a movement vocab that was drawn from favourite children's activities like patta-cake and airplane rides. Some of that early material has made it into the final version and / or informed some of the "Mini" moves.

We also had to be very conscious that we were working with three non-dancers, so the movement needed to feel comfortable and organic in their bodies, while still carrying the story forward. We had a lot of fun playing early on, while testing some more challenging technical moves. Once we had the shape of things, we allowed plenty of time for things to settle in their bodies so the movement felt connected to their characters and the script.

How does the choreography help tell the story or communicate ideas?

How people move and interact with each other physically can tell you so much, without a single word needing to be spoken.

For example, movements echoed by another person positively, could mean they're "sympatico". Whereas, turning your back might have negative connotations. It's a fun exercise to do, and to watch, and see how it feels.

Bodies can express joy and heart ache in such simple ways. There is one moment in the play where the cast lift their arms, chest and face to the sky in unison, with such beautiful expressions on their faces, and it fills me with joy every time. There is also a section where the moves become repetitive and hard-edged and the cast are all doing similar things but at different times which (hopefully!) conveys their distress, confusion and perhaps a little fear ...

The intent is that the movement vocab is shared with the audience early in the play, then built on as the story moves through, with the longest and most connected piece of choreography happening when (sorry – spoiler alert!!) Kabir, our migrant, joins the family for dinner. So, ideally the choreography supports moving the story forward and elevating the bits it needs to elevate.

How did the themes of the play influence the movement style?

In the early stages of discussing/workshopping, key areas to consider were:

- showing Kabir's "other-ness" and how he develops through the play
- Sara and Ravi (and Mini!) as family, in spite of not always getting along
- the inclusion of Mini throughout, even though she isn't physically there

When those are incorporated into the earlier frameworks mentioned in question 1 (organic movement for non-dancers, children's games, Kabir's physicality as different but shifting as the play moves on), the style that has eventuated is perhaps an eclectic mix of contemporary movement with an everyday, human vibe that seems to work well for this particular combo of 3 actors.

How do you create movement that suits the characters?

The early workshops well in advance of the actual rehearsal period were crucial in the initial shaping of each character's feel. We played together to develop a movement vocabulary for each role, then learnt each other's physical "vocab", so each person knew the moves and how each character "felt".

This helped hugely once we started locking in the choreography. It's subtle, but you may notice when watching that each character has a "theme" but also when they're echoing each other's motif.

What challenges come from working with performers who are not trained dancers?

I've always believed that anyone can dance and that it's about working closely with people to find a way to move that feels good to them while looking good from the outside. So not feeling awkward and looking like it's something forced on their bodies (unless that's choreographically what's needed for the play!).

That's not easy and takes a lot longer than building a movement vocabulary with trained dancers. So, you need to allow a lot more time than you think.

You also need to allow time to build trust, not just between you and the actors, but also between each other. That can be achieved in a number of ways eg. through doing warm-ups together and ensuring you're in the studio more than just for the dance sessions. After 30 years or working with non-dancers I have some moves that are pretty much fail-safe, so it's great to have some of those up your sleeve, so non-dancer actors feel really great when they achieve them which again builds trust and makes it more likely they'll try something more challenging.

You also need to be incredibly patient and listen when they say something feels like rubbish (or great!) in their bodies. Really hear what they're saying, then watch them repeat the move multiple times and then decide if it will actually work if they keep working at it, or if the move is just too far out of their comfort zone and it's time to let it go and find alternatives.

Quotes, Reviews and Articles

What do audiences think?
Click here

Behind the Scenes
Click here

"The best theatre I've seen in years"

NZ Herald

"Ambitious and sophisticated" NZ Herald, Waikato

"Warm, funny and quietly devastating"

NZ Herald, Auckland

"A triumphant return from one of New Zealand's finest theatre companies" Theatreview, Tauranga

"The standing ovation on opening night was a recognition not only of Indian Ink's theatrical craft, but also of the compassion at the heart of the story."

NZ Herald, Auckland

Useful links

Balloon Dog Trailer
Click here

Kabuliwala Short Story
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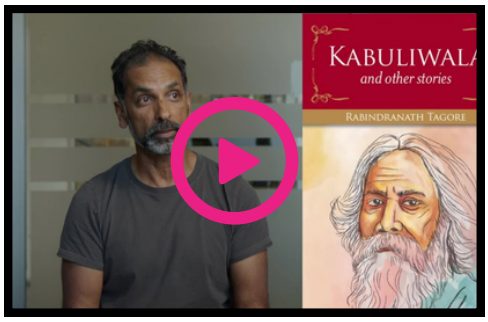
Teeth as Mask
Click here

Justin talks about the idea behind the play
Click here



Jacob talks about the story that inspired the play
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Jacob explains Balloon Dog
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Balloon Dog
Accessibility Guide
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The Cast talk Balloon Dog
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The Cast make balloon dogs
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Life's full of plot twists - don't miss ours! Join our mailing list or follow us online and you'll get sneak peeks at new shows, ticket deals, and stories that might just change the way you see the world.

Want to know more?
Reach out to Pene Lister (Producer) on pene@indianink.co.nz

Indian Ink Shows

DIRTY WORK (premiered in 2023):

The computers are down and the big boss in India wants the impossible. The hapless staff are making a mess of things. Which isn't good news for the cleaner.

PARADISE OR THE IMPERMANENCE OF ICE CREAM (premiered in 2021):

A man trying desperately to avoid death is flung between limbo and his past where a rebellious young woman holds the key that may guide him to paradise.

WELCOME TO THE MURDER HOUSE (premiered 2018):

The convicts of Auburn Prison have been set free for one night to perform a play of their own devising. Be entertained by this true tale of ambition, heroes and villains, set at the dawning of the new electric age.

MRS KRISHNAN'S PARTY (premiered 2018):

Mrs Krishnan's boarder, overzealous wannabe DJ James, has invited a few friends into the back room of the dairy as a special surprise to celebrate Onam and the return home of her son. But when around 100 strangers turn up and settle in, Mrs K has no choice but to throw the party of her life!

THE ELEPHANT THIEF (premiered 2015):

When Leela Devi leaves her tribal home to see the world, she doesn't expect her father's elephant to follow her. As she battles corrupt officials, hungry poachers, fanatical leaders and supreme beings, an unlikely love story unfolds and a quiet revolution ferments.

KISS THE FISH (premiered 2013):

The winds of change are sweeping the sleepy island of Karukam. A new resort promises a brighter future for all until fate puts the hopes of the community in the hands of Sidu - the village idiot!

GURU OF CHAI (premiered 2010):

The contradictions of modern India with its iPhones and ancient gods come alive in this outrageously funny and heartbreakingly beautiful production. A poor chai-wallah 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.

THE DENTIST'S CHAIR (premiered 2008):

A comedy with bite: a dentist is haunted by the ghost of the first man executed in the electric chair.

THE PICKLE KING (premiered 2002):

A comedy about what's worth preserving and finding the courage to love.

THE CANDLESTICKMAKER (premiered 2000):

Black Holes and the formula for happiness collide when a New Zealand Indian student visits his ancestral home for the first time.

KRISHNAN'S DIARY (premiered 1997):

A shopkeeper and his wife reveal a love as great as the Taj Mahal.

Theatre Etiquette

**We believe in the magic of theatre,
and that that magic is for everyone.**

**So we have put together some general tips
to share for your upcoming trip
to the theatre.**

Use the bathroom before the show.
(Nothing worse than having to run out half way through)

No phones, photos or recording.
(The actors like to have the spotlight)

No talking during the performance.
(Save those questions for the Q&A)

Be considerate of those around you.
(Hold the standing ovation until the end)

Feel free to applaud, yell and cheer at the end of the show.
(Everyone on and off stage loves to see your support)

Have a great time!
Theatre is a great experience that we love sharing with you.