

IMMORTAL NIRBHAYA – FROM VICTIM TO VICTOR AROUND THE GLOBE

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Abstract: Yael Farber takes a real episode of brutal domination and power, hatred and violence, horror and bloodshed, shame and anguish, and creates a stage worthy award winning production that is touring the world. Responding to the infamous gang rape and murder of a young woman on a bus in Delhi in 2012, which engendered protests throughout India and a national reassessment of the place and perception of women in Indian society as well as the prevalence of sexual violence, this production, has stirred the hearts of audiences. This article aims to understand the power and strength of Nirbhaya and the show's relationship to the real events and their impact nationally, and, on the other hand, assesses the intercultural nature of the project, with its international cast, its South African director, its UK premiere and tour, and its subsequent New York performance. Born from a collaboration of committed performers and guided by Farber's artistic vision, Nirbhaya is a unique theatrical response to the explosive events of December 2012 within the Indian theatrical community, in its simultaneous incorporation of confessional material, its use of ritual and poetic elements within a strong theatrical structure and its approaches for reaching audiences.

Keywords: Nirbhaya, rape, young women, Indian society, violence against women, sexual violence, Delhi gang rape, rape laws, women's subordination, patriarchal control

On the 16th of December 2012, a young woman and her male friend, Avindra Pratap Pandey were returning home after watching the movie *Life of Pi*. When they were unable to find auto rickshaws that would take them where they wanted to go, they accepted an offer to ride on a chartered bus. The now infamous events that took place on that bus changed both their lives forever. Six male riders, including the driver, beat Avindra and then proceeded brutally to attack and gang rape his friend. When they were done, the men threw their victims off the bus, leaving them by the side of the road. It was hours later that

the Delhi Police took the two for emergency medical care. The Indian Government moved the woman to Singapore for further treatment but she succumbed to her injuries on the 29th of December, 2012. 'Nirbhaya', 'The Fearless'¹ was the name the Government used to identify the woman to safeguard her privacy.

The story, now infamous, became headline news in media across the globe and provoked strong reactions in India. Public street protests denouncing the event took place across the country, starting in New Delhi, and continued in virtual form on Facebook, Twitter, Whatsapp and other social media sites. Celebrities and others criticised the poor state of law enforcement and called on the Government for fast judicial action against the rapists, resulting in five adults and a seventeen year old being charged for the crime.²

Given the enormous drama of the events themselves and the social outcry they elicited in India's streets, courts, media, and political institutions, what could theatre have to offer as a further response to the situation? How might enacted artistic expression frame a story like Nirbhaya's and offer something more, or in a different mode of expression, than what the population itself, the newspapers, or *India's Daughter* (the important BBC documentary on the subject),³ all expressed?

Writer-director Yael Farber's stunning production *Nirbhaya* provides a provocative answer to these questions. *Nirbhaya* is a devised work, created in collaboration with a team of six women and one man in which not only is Nirbhaya's story told but each of the actresses in turn, recounts and enacts her own true, personal tale of being the victim of abuse. It reveals Nirbhaya's brutal death as a catalyst for new, widespread social and personal confrontation with the misogyny and sexual violence rampant in Indian society. The play's combination of ritual structure, confessional storytelling and poetic stage imagery lift Nirbhaya's harrowing tale beyond the raw, barbarous facts of the events to a plane of theatrical metaphor that allows spectators simultaneously to confront the subject of sexual violence, reflect on it and see their own situations expressed onstage. It is not drama therapy but a theatrically rich production that puts accomplished artistic expression at the service of social introspection. Moreover, while Nirbhaya's case might suggest that such abusive behavior emerges primarily within lower class environments (given the poor economic backgrounds of her assailants), this show clearly and even importantly addresses the situation as it exists within more affluent urban circles and to audiences of that class. Within a political climate committed to economic development, this production shatters any illusions that economic means or high social standing alone keeps gender discrimination and violence at bay. A cultural environment that habitually undervalues

women puts all women at risk. Publicly unveiling the extent of the situation and the damage it inflicts on society in a way that allows people to listen, can open doors for social transformation and personal and collective healing.

Theatrical responses to the Delhi Gang Rape

As the December 2012 events made clear, rape is not a rare occurrence in India. What was unique about Nirbhaya's case, however, was the enormous response it elicited. Israeli filmmaker Leslee Udwin, who produced the film, *India's Daughter*, states,

It was an Arab spring for gender equality. What impelled me to leave my husband and two children for two years while I made the film in India was not so much the horror of the rape as the inspiring and extraordinary eruption on the streets. A cry of 'enough is enough'. Unprecedented numbers of ordinary men and women, day after day, faced a ferocious government crackdown that included tear gas, baton charges and water cannon. They were protesting for my rights and the rights of all women. That gives me optimism. I can't recall another country having done that in my lifetime (Udwin, 2015).

Millions of Indians, both men and women, marched in New Delhi, Bangalore, Kolkata and other urban centers fighting for justice for Nirbhaya and raising awareness against this kind of brutality. Photos, media reports and social media thoroughly documented the public's response to the savage torture of the young woman. It is a well-known fact that the police in India harass rape victims when they lodge complaints and resolutely ignore their cases. The Indian Government and the police marred by corruption, with no accountability for their actions, rarely protect women in these circumstances. However, the brutality in Nirbhaya's case engendering mass protest and global media coverage, shook the Government into action. Nonetheless, when the population reacted with volcanic emotions on the streets, the police resisted them by closing roads, subways, and buses (Popli n. d.).

The theatre community within and outside India joined in responding to these events. Tony award recipient and internationally acclaimed playwright and women's rights activist Eve Ensler was particularly outspoken. Ensler's internationally produced and renowned, Obie award-winning play *The Vagina Monologues*, has offered a theatrical model for speaking out on women's sexual abuse since 1996. Ensler created a genre defining model of theatre based on her interviews with girls and women from diverse backgrounds about their sexuality, their relationships to their bodies, and other intimate issues. Ensler threads the women's words into a beautiful, humorous, and eye opening play. In conjunction with the

play, she founded v-Day, a non-profit organisation that raises funds to help end violence against women. Originally performed by Ensler herself, today students, actors, and activists around the world perform *The Vagina Monologues*, re-enacting the testimonials of Ensler's interviewees on stage. The aim of the play and its proliferating productions, especially on valentine's Day, is to raise awareness about the prevalence of sexual abuse and, through education, to eradicate it. Speaking of the Delhi gang rape, Ensler stated,

I think that the gang raping and the murder of Jyoti was a really horrific incident but a huge turning point in India and the world. And I actually was there for three weeks in the middle of all of it. And I have to say, in my lifetime, having worked every day of my life for the last fifteen years on sexual violence, I have never seen anything like that, where sexual violence broke through the consciousness and was on the front page, nine articles in every paper every day, in the center of every discourse, in the center of the college students' discussions, in the center of any restaurant you went in. And I think what's happened in India, India is really leading the way for the world. It's really broken through (Ensler, 2013).⁴

Street theatre in India has a long history of dramatising political issues in public spaces, and has addressed women's issues decades before the Nirbhaya case. Theatre Union (formerly known as *Stree Sangharsh*), a women's theatre company formed in 1981 dealt with social aberrations like dowry deaths publicly accepted as common kitchen accidents (van Erven, 1992, 117).⁵ In the 1980s, Safdar Hashmi's long running theatre group Jana Natya Manch (also referred to as Janam), performed *Aurat* (Woman), dealing with women's daily lives, throughout India and even in Pakistan and *Yeh Bhi Hinsa Hai* (This too is violence), a poetic street play highlighting violence against women in Hindu mythology (van Erven, 1992, 151 and 172).⁶ Buland Natya Manch staged their production of *Sati* in 1987 after an incident of actual widow burning in Rajasthan (Mitra, 2013, 230).

It is thus not surprising that Indian activists turned to street theatre in response to the 2012 events. Artist Shilpi Marwaha, with the Asmita Theatre Group asks the most important question about the incident in her street play: '*Isskazi medarkaun? Police, prasashan, sarkaryaah hum or aap?*' (Who is responsible for this? Police, the government or is it you and me?). Her performance follows the prevailing Indian style of street theatre: An ensemble of actors dressed in black with colorful belts or scarves tied around them gather people outside a college, marketplace, slum or factory, and start a show. These events bridge different modes of expression — polemic, political protest, communal gathering and theatrical enactment. In the tradition of guerrilla theatre, the production elements are

minimal, the sketches and dialogues are short, and the shows capture the audience with a quick burst of expression to raise consciousness about a burning issue before spectators disperse and return to their daily activities. In Marwaha's piece, a young woman is seen being lured by a man on the pretext of presenting her with a new phone. Slowly a large group of male actors engulfs her from all directions. The audience watches this helpless woman as she is consumed by this all male group until they lose sight of her. Marwaha then breaks up this devouring mass and bids her company members to chant 'yeh ab manzoornahi' (This will not be tolerated anymore) until the audience joins in to commit to this motto (*Fire-brand street theatre artist Shilpi Marwaha protests Delhi gang rape*, 2012).

The Nirbhaya event inspired Sangeet NatakAkademi Award- winning actress Maya Krishna Rao to create her solo show *Walk* which argues that women should reclaim the streets and be able to walk alone, night and day. Though not in the tradition of street theatre as described above, Rao takes her short, monologue-based show to diverse audiences. She has performed this thirty-five minute piece in Mumbai, Delhi, Jaipur, Thrissur and several other Indian cities, in unconventional spaces like cafes, colleges, and multinational banks. Her performance bids the audience to claim each citizen's basic right to safety in public space. She implores spectators to eschew criticising how women dress in public, a type of criticism which often balloons into justification, especially by older patriarchs, to rationalise acts of sexual violence, placing blame on the victim rather than the perpetrator. Rao has made slight changes to the play for each different city in order to connect her work and her message to disparate audiences. *Walk* is less about rape itself *per se*, and more about the need to change cultural consciousness around the dialogue of women's safety, which contributes to the greater climate that allows rape to occur and remain unquestioned (Rao, 2013).

Rasika Agashe, another theatre artist, through a workshop process with her theatre group, Being Association, created the Hindi play *Museum of Species in Danger* (2013). It presents stories based on women from history, literature, and the contemporary world, strung together by satirical monologues and accompanied by folk singers and musicians (Bumper Clap Presents *Museum of Species in Danger* - (A Satirical Hindi Play), 2013). In a larger offering in 2013, to mark the first anniversary of Nirbhaya's plight, The People's Theatre Association of Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi and theatre groups Swaang and Majma hosted *Jurrat*: a week-long event of Indian plays, skits, musical performances, and speeches commemorating the incident and reflecting on the safety of women in India one year on from the events (Malik, 2013).

Even beyond theatre spaces, the response to this incident has been deep and far reaching. Vibha Bakshi's 2014 film *Daughters of Mother India*, the winner of the 2015 National Award for the Best Film on Social Issues, captures its aftermath in many circles, notably in legislation and law enforcement. The film depicts a variety of victims of sexual abuse, even several minors, shows how the Delhi police is now handling a far bigger volume of female victims' phone complaints, how gender violence laws have changed, and how the police force in metro cities is educating, sensitising, and reaching out to the public to regain trust and ensure safety for women.

***Nirbhaya*, The Production**

Award winning actress, Poorna Jagannathan, the original producer of *Nirbhaya*,⁷ and a central performer in the show, was also inspired to use theatre to respond to the public outcry over the Delhi rape and to express the anguish she and so many other women were feeling about the case (Jagannathan, 2015).⁸ In 2013, she reached out to the noted South African director yael Farber to collaborate on a theatre project. Farber was similarly moved by the swelling outburst on the streets and in an interview with Soutik Biswas for the BBC, stated,

It's hard to say what it was precisely about this case that broke through the defence systems of numbness and indifference towards the staggering figures and brutal nature of sexual violence around the world. Who knows why this woman's fate touched so many lives? What matters is that it broke the barrier of indifference and an appropriate level of righteous rage suddenly manifested on the streets of her nation and caught the attention of the world (Farber, 2013).

Jagannathan was first drawn to Farber's capacity for creating moving theatrical work on traumatic social issues when she saw *Amajuba: Like Doves We Rise* in New York (2006) a show built from the cast's harrowing true experiences under South Africa's Apartheid system (Isherwood, 2006). Farber's full body of theatrical work as a writer and director, through both testimonial plays and reinterpretations of classics, engages head on with experiences and the aftermath of trauma, notably in addressing the scars left by South Africa's colonial history and Apartheid. With actress Thembi Mtshali-Jones, Farber created *A Woman in Waiting*, which premiered in Grahamstown, South Africa in 1999, based on Mtshali-Jones' memories of a lifetime of racial oppression. *A Woman in Waiting* delves into the pain of separation between black mothers and their children in the common, recurring scenario of black women leaving their townships to take domestic work in white

only areas, caring for other people's children, and coming home, sometimes only once a year, to see their own. The play reveals how this situation shaped Mtshali-Jones' childhood and her relationship with her own daughter. In *He Left Quietly*, another of Farber's testimonial plays, first performed in Berlin in 2003, Duma Kumalo shares the true events of his being sentenced to death for alleged participation in the death of a town councillor in Sharpeville, South Africa. Kumalo was given a stay of execution just fifteen hours before his death, in response to international outrage, but remained in prison until 1991, never exonerated of this crime (Farber, 2008; The Forgiveness Project, 2010). In breaking open political and social injustice, Farber's work emphasises the toll these circumstances take on individuals. In the opening of *He Left Quietly* Kumalo states,

In 1985, I was condemned to death of a crime I did not commit. I spent three years on Death Row, and a further four years of a Life Sentence. I have been measured for the length of my coffin; the size of the rope for my neck; I took my last sacrament; I said - to my broken father - a final goodbye. (*Smiling gently.*) And with each of these movements, my soul left my body behind. The dead leave the living with a burden. When going to their deaths- they would shout to us: Those who survive - tell the world! (Farber, 2008, 188-189)

Mies Julie, debuting in Edinburgh in 2012, is Farber's reworking of August Strindberg's 1888 classic *Miss Julie*. Here she refracts the class and gender conflicts in the original through the lens of a post-apartheid South Africa where the issues play out on a desert farm between a white mistress and her black labourer. In *Molara*(2003), a version of *The Oresteia*, Farber places Aeschylus' ancient family feud within South Africa's racial divide. Farber's Clytemnestra, a white actress, defends the murder of her husband to her daughter Electra, played by a black actress, before a chorus made up of Xhosa women from the Ngqoko Cultural Group of traditional singers who stand as witnesses and judges of the events. While addressing formidable social and political struggles, past and present, Farber's works are theatrically compelling and poetic.

On a more practical level, Farber's participation in the project, because of her international connections and renown as a director, along with her theatrical vision and vast experience with this delicate testimonial work, guaranteed that the piece would reach an international audience, connecting the situation in India to shared global concerns.

Born from a collaboration of committed performers and guided by Farber's artistic vision, *Nirbhaya* is a unique theatrical response to the explosive events of December 2012. Within the Indian theatrical community the production is distinct in its simultaneous incorporation

of confessional material, its use of ritual and poetic elements within a strong theatrical structure, and its approaches for reaching audiences.

Confessional Themes

The creation of the play was a team effort from the beginning. The process of assembling the participants came about through a combination of careful sifting of applicants and serendipitous encounters. Early workshops took place in Mumbai with several women. They explored their personal experiences with sexual violence to develop various episodes. Pieces that fit the play stayed and the company eliminated those that didn't serve the storytelling. Although all the actresses shared their own experiences, some, like Priyanka Bose, had never spoken about them before and didn't realise she had a story worth exploring. According to Jagannathan, some of the women had no practice narrating their own tales or frameworks for expressing them, artistically or otherwise. Farber patiently listened to the facts the actresses shared with her and then wove them into lyrical, stage-worthy episodes. As Farber describes her process of working on testimonial plays, Despite being based on true events -- testimony does not come with a natural dramatic arc. This must be worked and paced. The audience must be transported from indifference to empathy, from their own limited perspective to deep inside the interior landscape of another person's world (Farber, 2008, p. 20).

As the workshops progressed, the team realised the need for the production to address a wider range of circumstances of sexual violence and gender oppression in order to make a larger statement about the maltreatment of women in India. Jagannathan and Bose had both suffered sexual violence during their childhood years. The team reached out on social media to include victims of sexual crimes in adulthood and women who had endured other forms of gender related abuse. Distinguished Bollywood actress Rukhsar Kabir got involved, sharing her experience of violence and harassment within the walls of her first marriage. Sneha Jawale, already well known in activist circles for fighting against dowry torture, came forward with her personal tale of being burned and abandoned as a dowry bride. Her face, still bearing the indelible scars from these brutal events, offers its own powerful and irrefutable statement on the play's subject, amplified in the space of performance and within the structured theatrical framework.⁹

In the process of filtering through prospective performers, the company had to find not only women who had endured such experiences- the number of interested participants answering the company's call was both impressive and unsettling - but, of equal

importance, those who would be comfortable telling their harrowing tales on stage in front of an audience, night after night. It was essential that reliving their experiences on stage should not exacerbate the women's painful relationship to the events or trigger further personal trauma. The Combination of looking for confessional tales and seeking performers with the strength to tell them in performance led to including non- professional actors in the cast. Jawale and Sapna Bhavnani initially had no theatre training. Through acting workshops, voice lessons, and the company's creative process and rehearsals, they became flawless ensemble members acting alongside Bollywood veterans.

Sensitive staging choices also serve to make these novice actors comfortable on stage. In the current production, Jawale tells her story in her mother-tongue, Hindi, while Ankur Vikal translates it into English, allowing her to narrate the disturbing incidents she endured in the language that makes her most relaxed and expressive in performance. The collaboration between trained and untrained actors gives strength to the show overall as the trained performers support the work of untrained actors. Seeing film celebrities, who can seem larger than life on the big screen, sharing similar experiences to lesser known individuals, underscores the ubiquity of gendered violence.

While Ensler's *Vagina Monologues* also employs confessions, she and other professional actors embody the women she interviewed and recount the interviewee's experiences. Likewise, in Maya Rao's *Walk*, also drawn from interviews, actress/author Rao uses her own voice to present a creative statement drawn from the lives of her subjects. In *Nirbhaya*, by contrast, the victims themselves perform their confessional tales, sometimes in trembling voices, allowing the audience a more direct confrontation with the events. Reviewer Laura Barnett notes, 'This is not an easy show to watch – and neither should it be' (Barnett, 2013). *Nirbhaya* enables the women in the show to express their experiences even though Nirbhaya herself can no longer tell her own. Ben Brantley, in *The New York Times*, writes that 'In 'Nirbhaya,' it would seem, they [the actresses] are restoring themselves — and the woman of the play's title — into visibility' (Brantley, 2015). In erasing the distance between performer and character, the show makes its subject more present and difficult to dismiss. Maggie Inchley, in "Theatre as Advocacy: Asking for It and the Audibility of Women in *Nirbhaya: the Fearless One*," reminds us that, Caruth, in discussing Freud's use of the story of Tasso to illustrate the psychic revisiting of catastrophic events upon their victims, notes the power of 'the moving and sorrowful voice that cries out, a voice that is paradoxically released *through the wound*.' (Inchley, 2015, p. 276)

In the current version of the piece, (the show has undergone several transformations), Nirbhaya's own story ends the drama, with the most violent moments taking place early on, followed later by enactments of the protests and finally by a ritual laying to rest of the woman and her anguish. After the initial introduction of the gang rape, six other testimonials weave the theme of violence against women from one episode to the next and build in momentum as they take us through to the concluding ritual sequence.

Jagannathan's tale centers on a trusted family friend, a person she called 'uncle', who becomes a poisonous presence in her life after her family moves to Islamabad. Farber leads Jagannathan's story into Kabir's, set in her conservative Muslim neighborhood in Lucknow. Kabir recounts a childhood, seemingly protected under a hijab, and yet not shielded from her domineering father's wrath. Married to an abusive husband, marriage and motherhood turn out to be far from the ideal escape she expected. Circumstances finally force her to make a difficult choice about her own and her children's future. She leaves her marriage and her oppressive in-laws behind and, wrenchingly, also her young son, whom they claim as their own. Taking her daughter with her to ensure the young girl's safety, she sets out to make a new life for the two of them.

Jawale's story is probably the most poignant. In spite of the very real scars on her face, the heart-breaking narrations that Ankur Vikal, playing her son, helps her present through his translation, still surprises and shocks. In clear Hindi, she chronicles the journey of dowry torture meted out to her, from early suggestions about further dowry payments at her in-laws' house to the physical abuse, lies, pain and torture inflicted on her later as their demands increase. Her scarred face, a palpable reminder of the culmination of her struggles, when her husband attempted to burn her, is directly in front of the audience throughout. She closes her testimonial by expressing her yearning one day to see the son, now grown, that her husband's family took from her when they threw her out of their lives, disappearing into obscurity while she recovered from her burns in the hospital. The very real facts of her physical appearance and her endless yearning stretch beyond the confines of the play's narrative.

For Bose, even powerful Hindu Goddesses have no power to alleviate the outwardly invisible, but equally present emotional scars she still carries from the abuse she suffered in childhood. Her story recounts how many boys and men serving as domestic help repeatedly assaulted her in her own home. Only her younger brother knew of her secret trauma, having witnessed his elder sister's victimisation. He is her only comrade and supporter at home, until he moves to boarding school. When he returns, he is emotionally

evasive, the result of his own sexual victimisation at the hands of teachers or fellow pupils, the show never specifies. While earlier Bose could talk to him about her own struggles, after his return, they are no longer able to communicate.

Pamela Sinha's experience of rape by a stranger who infiltrated her apartment in Canada is the final episode in the play, showing that rape and abuse happen everywhere, in developed Western nations as well as in poor, developing ones. These crimes are a global phenomenon demanding global attention. Sinha was tied up and tortured by a psychopathic stranger who cut and raped her repeatedly with no intervention from her neighbors, even though intense and unnatural sounds from the crowbar he used continued to escape from her apartment for several hours.¹⁰ In working on the show, Sinha was more practiced in telling her story than others in the cast, having been through therapy and having previously created and performed a one-woman show dealing with the horrific events that derailed her life. Her story forcefully brings home the questions reiterated in each of the episodes: How can people not only commit such brutal acts, but how can others — family, friends, co-workers, teachers, neighbors — turn a blind eye to them so easily, inadvertently allowing them to go unpunished so that such threats persist?

Initially, the play was carved out as a women's play, on women's issues, performed only by women. However, this changed when established actor Ankur Vikal expressed his interest in joining the team because of his personal devotion to the project. Farber and the workshop unit decided to include him before they knew exactly what his role would be within the process. In the end, Vikal, an established and passionate actor, with international stage and film credits, provides a much needed masculine presence in the show. His research into the issues from a male point of view and his performance of a variety of men in Indian society, ranging from supportive family members to aggressive rapists, offers an essential dimension to the storytelling. He plays both Kabir's authoritarian father and her weak yet willful husband. He is Jawale's innocent and loving son and the ferocious aggressor in Sinha's life. Vikal is alternately assailant and confidant, sometimes even victim. Having the same actor perform these many male positions offers male spectators a diversity of paths into the topic and different reflections of male experience within a play focusing on women's victimisation.

Through his interactions with the actresses onstage, Vikal also helps reveal the positive sides of the female figures: innocent young girl, hardworking, yet fun loving, student, obedient daughter, faithful wife, endearing mother, loving sister, passionate young actress. These somewhat idealised images counteract the criticisms often leveled against women in

India who have been the victims of sexual assault, labeled later as defiled, dirty, or lustful. At several junctures, his presence on stage demystifies the idea that sexual violence is always male against female, especially in Bose's story, with its suggestion that her brother was also raped at boarding school. Sexual violence against men and boys, an equally taboo subject in India and elsewhere, is barely touched on in this show. Through Vikal's presence, *Nirbhaya* cries out for a partner production, addressing the issue of sexual violence from this allied perspective. Moreover, Vikal's participation and his desire to be involved in the production remind spectators that the struggle to end this social malady depends on men and women working together. His presence, sometimes as a supportive friend or understanding brother, can help the audience see that women may have male comrades who support them when others turn a deaf ear and offers models of how men might act when confronted with these situations. He himself points out the biggest problem facing Indian society right now ' . . . we are constantly talking about how we are a developing nation and an evolving economy. I don't think we are going to manage to figure things till we address the issues that are so integral to our culture right now' (Vikal, cited by Werman, 2015). His presence echoes the powerful actions of all the men who were part of the protests across India, alongside women.

Ritual/Poetic and Theatrical Structure

Farber and the creative team paint a rich theatrical canvas, by interweaving various narrative threads. Yet the show never becomes unwieldy or clumsy. Audience members quickly grasp that they have landed in people's private lives, where things that never get mentioned in public, but occur regularly behind closed doors, are acted out. The team had to judge how graphically or metaphorically to depict these disturbing events. They made successful choices not only in how *to tell*, but also how *to stage* the testimonial stories so they are emotionally effective and theatrically compelling.

The production uses a minimum of design features on a mostly bare stage, and recasts the few props and other scenic elements in various roles so that visual motifs from props, lighting, costume, and music repeat and build continuity between the episodes. As the play starts, two rows of seats on stage, a used and beaten bucket, and a red and white striped *gamcha* (washcloth) place the action in the interior of an Indian bus. The bus is an iconic image for India in this play, not only as the location of *Nirbhaya*'s attack, but as a symbol of the hustle and bustle of India's growing cities, attracting the thousands of migrant workers and others who pack into overcrowded vehicles on their daily commutes. The

cast, as Ben Brantley put it, ‘a mere half-dozen performers evoke the explosive contingency of life in an overpopulated city’ (Brantley, 2015).

Indian buses are also famous spots for so-called ‘eve teasing’. Women (and sometimes men as well), are relentlessly subject to unwanted groping by strangers in the cramped, crowded spaces. Straphangers have trouble resisting or protesting these small, daily harassments but these minor actions help establish a cultural climate where uncontested violations escalate into larger criminal deeds. When the onstage bus empties out, it becomes the site of Nirbhaya’s gang rape as the play begins to tell her unique tale. However, the cast reassembles the same scenic elements that construct the space of the bus —chairs and poles —to stage the other stories, allowing the presence of Nirbhaya and her fate to echo physically throughout. The *gamcha*, as another example, appears over and over again—sometimes evoking the lower class status of the rapists, at others swaddling for a young baby.

Costumes also allow for easy transition from one episode to the next and visually connect the different stories. The performers wear a basic black outfit of pants, with a shirt or tunic, or a draped sari-like outfit that allow them to transform easily from one character to another. The use of the *bindion* some female actors is reminiscent of women in India but also of the social media profile pictures of black bindis in use after Nirbhaya’s incident indicating collective shame at her gang rape.

Since Farber constructed the play from the women’s narrations of their own experiences, drawing sometimes from long buried memories, the presence or description of sensual elements, sounds and fragrances, helps to revive the subtle nuances of distant moments. The play gets some of its ritual and poetic style from these evocations of fragmentary memories. In an interview with Amanda Stuart Fisher, Farber describes her process on earlier productions, stating

Memory is seldom effortlessly accessible, linear, comprehensive or even necessarily compelling when told. In my experience, an individual’s story will first emerge in a very two-dimensional narrative, driven by dates and dry accounts of watershed moments.

My first step is to let the subject expel the narrative in this way in order to map out the exploration ahead -- like the markings an archaeologist makes in the dust before beginning the dig. I then proceed by asking specific questions: ‘A Christmas Day from childhood -- what was the color of your dress? What did your shoes look like?’ The real story will inevitably emerge in the delicate human details (Farber, 2008, p. 19).

In her monologue, Jagannathan recalls the fragrant scent of *raatki rani* - (white tube roses) when she stepped into her uncle's home as an innocent child. Bose remembers the chants of her God-fearing grandmother beckoning all powerful Goddesses Durga and Kali in her young years. Kabir's memory of the love song *chalte chalte koi mil gaya tha*,¹¹ beautifully rendered by Japjit Kaur, evokes a fondness for a lyrical past. As Nirbhaya is no longer alive to share her own memories, the play revives spectators' recollections of her assault and death and the energy that surrounded that moment by including snippets of the media reports that were ever present at the time. Deeper emotions, bonds of love, Nirbhaya's hopes and dreams, come alive again as Nirbhaya, played by Kaur, strolls on stage throughout the play, clad in pure white, humming soft tones of Urdu *shayari* and bygone Bollywood tunes, reminiscent of a better world. In her modest white long-sleeved salwar kameez, she stands in contrast to the others dressed in severe black. The women's performances bring back the sights, smells, and sounds from the vulnerable moments of their lives which remain alive in their memories even as they have felt the need to whitewash the past. Accessing the past within a framework of memory helps distance the actors from their brutal experiences. Yet the evocative references to particular flowers or tunes allow the audience, looking at the events from their own remove, to connect to the stories on a deeper emotional level.

The theme of loss recurs throughout. While the physical loss of Nirbhaya in her death is well known, the play highlights a further loss—the loss of her dreams, those of a living, breathing individual full of life. The other stories also depict loss: Jagannathan loses her innocence as a child when raped by her uncle. Kabir loses the faith she held in marriage and motherhood. Jawale not only loses her very physical identity in her disfigurement from dowry burning but also her ties to her young son. Bose and Sinha both lose not only their honor but the personal connections they shared with their younger brothers. Their brothers were both unable to protect them and then struggled just as much as the victims themselves in trying to cope with the reality of their situation.

The physical and visual motif of raising one's hand also unites the disparate women and their stories. At the beginning of the play, in an image of Delhi, we see all the actors raising their hands in protest. This action become more forcefully symbolic as each time a performer starts to narrate her story, standing amongst the actors clustered in a group, she raises her hand and then steps out of the crowd to begin. The gesture signifies each woman taking a stand, electing herself as representative and witness to the acts of sexual abuse that have scarred the nation. At the end of the play, acting as the silent masses from earlier, the

cast raise their hands in unison, once again in respect for Nirbhaya and her bravery, and express the collective realisation that it is time to break the barriers created by resignation and indifference. One member of the cast says ‘The whole world now knows what I could not speak of before.’

Farber, as a director, frequently uses the natural elements of earth and water in her directing to connect her theatrical imagery to primal sensibilities. In this play, with its Indian setting, these natural elements, judiciously woven into ritual or ritual-like stage actions, have a strong resonance. During the workshops, the Indian performers enacted rituals like *Karva Chauth* (a fast observed by some Hindu women on the fourth day after full moon in the month of Kartik, for the long lives for their husbands) and *Shraddh*(death) ceremonies, and Farber interspersed them throughout the play. For example, at the end of the play, when Nirbhaya is back on stage, her white salwar and kameez having been stripped off by the rapists, she lies marred in dirt as a fragile, bare and helpless woman. The other performers clean the dirt from her, the earth representing her defilement. The silent witnesses in India who had no power to prevent her suffering make a collective effort to clean her as a ritual act. In the play, as in the reality of India at large, Nirbhaya is no longer a defiled victim but instead, like a deity, she is cared for, praised, and honored. Onstage, as in life, amidst the intense glare of the media, the attention of doctors, and the public outcry on the streets, she slowly breathes her last. The performers gently cleanse and prepare her for her *Shraddh*, final rites. They carry her to her cremation in a procession and the staging evokes crowds uniting to lay her to rest and pay their final respects. The slow cleansing and mummification is read as an attempt to commemorate her forever. In a beautiful allegorical image, sand, another form of earth, trickles from a clay pot, first hanging over and then carried around the stage. The trickling of the grains signifies her passing from one life to another, one realm to another, not only from the here to the hereafter but metaphorically from victim to victor.

Although not from India, Farber captures the centrality of rituals in Indian life in her staging. In using Hindu ritual imagery Farber makes a calculated choice. Incheley in her article about *Nirbhaya* writes ‘Though overtly feminist, Nirbhaya’s testimonies are framed by traditional Christian and Hindu religious tropes that have not historically wholly suggested the liberation and equality of women in public spaces and spheres’ (Inchley, 2015, 284). *Nirbhaya*, by contrast, connects ritual actions with honoring women’s cultural empowerment. In seeking liberation from oppressive social views and circumstances, many Indian women search for a path that allows them to embrace cultural heritage and religious perspectives or practices while still transforming constraining circumstances.

Reaching Audiences

The configuration of the theatrical space, performance venues, talk-backs after the show and partnerships with allied organisations all play a part in shaping the audience's engagement with the production. Thoughtful consideration of how to place the audience in relation to the action, given the sensitive nature of the material, is essential to Farber's direction. Because she is protective of the audience's sensibilities while encouraging people to empathise with the characters, she insists on placing the show on a thrust stage, where the audience embraces the action from three sides. Gathering around the drama, as in a public assembly, imparts a feeling of community among spectators and performers. The use of a thrust space enables the testimonial presenters to get fairly close to the spectators, creating a further feeling of intimacy and immersion in the story. Removing the audience's feeling of separation from the action casts them as witnesses and participants in the narrative. Only Kaur, playing Nirbhaya, never approaches the audience, in a theatrical attempt to eulogise her image and as a reminder that her experience cannot be changed or erased.

Farber also insists on a raked seating area, which puts spectators in the position of looking down on the acts of violence. Although physically in a superior position, they are unable to help those tortured. Even as the events may make spectators cringe, their perspective implicates them in the action and imparts a sense of guilt and responsibility.

In spite of its apparently simple scenic design, the play has significant production demands. Along with the specified audience set-up, use of elaborate lighting, fog, and natural elements like dirt, sand, and water require theatres with adequate infrastructures capable of handling these needs. It is therefore not surprising that the play has been performed only in big cities in India and elsewhere (Mumbai, Bangalore, Delhi, Edinburgh, New York), where well-equipped theatres are available to host it.

While it was not necessarily the original intention or the ultimate aim of the production, the show's primary audiences have, therefore, been Indian middle class and foreign Western spectators.¹² The fact that the play is performed predominantly in English, also addresses it to this constituency. Maggie Inchley warns of the 'ethical objections' that can arise 'by presenting the issue of violence against women as universal, grouping its witness within a totalising 'we', and skating over the local and specific contexts in which incidents take place' (Inchley, 2015, 273).

While one might be critical of offering this production primarily to this privileged demographic, in the end it strengthens one of the show's main messages: Even city-bred, educated women, who are otherwise empowered, are nonetheless, unable to ward off predators. Sexual violence is unmistakably a daily reality for Indian women. It ranges from 'accidental' grabbing of female bottoms to deliberate caressing of breasts in very public forums – a bus or a temple, for instance. Female bodies, in Indian patriarchal set ups are 'public properties' to be fondled with at the hands of men. Silence on the subject by men and women of relatively well-to-do means contributes to a culture that remains officially blind to sexual crimes, and in so doing, silently condones them.

Reaching young people in India is another goal of the play. A tie in with media conglomerate *The Times of India* solidified the power of the play to reach urban youth in cities like New Delhi, Mumbai and Bangalore. The production team aims to continue reaching such groups across India, the US, and the UK in future performances. Ticket prices at Rupees 300 keep it affordable for young Indian college attendees.

This strategy is directed towards the bulk of those who joined the mass protests. Moreover, as India currently has the world's largest youth population (*The Hindu*, 2014), it is essential to bring this conversation to young people to effect change for the future. Fortunately, young Indians already have a markedly different point of view from the older generations, who routinely avoided this dialogue. When performed in diaspora communities, young people of Indian heritage often bring their parents to see the show, exposing them to an issue and discussion that was invisible or avoided in their own communities. Interactive discussions between the cast and the audience after the show are a staple feature of the production. In Indian locations open mike sessions took place at which spectators offered their own testaments, some voicing their own experiences of abuse, bringing the play full circle. Maggie Inchley cautions that problems arise with universalising experiences of violence or trauma. She wonders if Nirbhaya's testimony 'so far displaced from the original context in which the events it referred to occurred -- was made audible by the same forces of global power and market economics that might exploit and exacerbate the suffering of women whose voices remain unheard' (Inchley, 2015, 279). Her concerns are valid, but they don't fully discount the useful cross-cultural dialogues that can occur in these circumstances. In May 2015, Hunter College students participated in a post-show panel with the cast in New York where the discussion reinforced the reality that such incidents don't just occur in India but everywhere. While foreign audiences may be unfamiliar with events in India, parallels appear in news headlines across the globe. For example, in US

news, accounts of the politically driven yet sexually aggressive terrorist group ISIS, mounting accusations of rape against formidable celebrity performer Bill Cosby, and the growing issue of so-called 'date rape' on US college campuses is visible as a testament to the crime. In all its performances the show reminds spectators not to be silent but to speak out to help stop future episodes of gender violence.

With every instance of audience engagement through student nights and invited youth audiences, the creative team discovers something new and in response, the play continues to change and evolve. Over the two years of performances, episodes have been added and deleted, tweaked or sharpened to make the storytelling even stronger. At the talk-back we attended in April 2015 in New York, Jagannathan mentioned that it was only since they'd been performing in New York that she and another cast member had found the courage to use the word 'rape' in performance to refer to their own experiences (Jagannathan, 2015).

A future possibility for *Nirbhaya* is to make it available as a film. This would help bring the play to a much larger audience, beyond the confines of theatre spaces in metropolitan cities. As Vikal in his interview with Marco Werman points out I think most of the cultures that need to see the play are the cultures that are not going to get to watch it. So we will probably go to a lot of developed nations. But we will not go to the Middle East or we won't go to Iran. Vikal, cited by Werman, 2015).

So the need and potential to reach far wider audiences remains with the production even now.

Conclusion

Since Indian society claims to value and respect women, it is difficult to come to terms with the negative predatory practices that exist in real life. Just as incidents of rape and torture of women have been regularly hushed and side-lined in the public eye, they are also absent from traditional Indian theatre. It avoids dark and bloody episodes since, according to classical aesthetics; they can't serve the purpose of direct enlightenment of the audience and may act as a negative influence.

Yet modern Indian Theatre, whether it is through earlier works by Theatre Union, Janam or recent productions by Asmita Theatre group, where they question and educate audiences on streets, provides other routes for staging the victim's story. The bloody gang rape in 2012 that became India's shame also elicited many performative responses from creative

individuals who felt the urge to speak up. *Nirbhaya* joins millions of Indians by offering its own model. Although the young woman herself could not be revived from her injuries, she lives on in this stage depiction, which continues to portray her and the unsafe atmosphere that led to her demise. *Nirbhaya*, shares her story, her strength, her suffering, her hopes and dreams over and over again.

Chilling first person testimonials reinforce the beautifully crafted mythic tale about her endurance and the re-enactment of the unified protests on the streets in her memory, all reminding the audience that such brutality hasn't ended. *Nirbhaya*'s experience continues to be that which many women face across the world. In spite of its poetry and elegance, *Nirbhaya*, the play, serves as agitprop theatre. It is inspiring to see celebrity performers like Poorna Jagannathan, Japjit Kaur, Rukhsar Kabir, Ankur Vikal and Priyanka Bose, with Bollywood and international credits under their belt, publicly talking about their traumatic pasts and in doing so, beseeching audiences to open up, ask questions and take a stand. They help lift the shame of public ownership of these experiences both from themselves and others through a dramaturgical style that is poetic, ritualistic, and metaphorical. Yet this dramatic rendering, with episodic narration from real victims, leaves a lingering impression that outlasts street theatre's momentary adrenaline driven response.

Nirbhaya helps break down barriers of silence and resignation. With its strong serving of cathartic storytelling, it leaves most audience members reeling with questions, thoughts, and responses and an immense urge to purge any of their own deeply buried experiences of sexual violence from long past. The international audience and Indian diaspora in New York, Dublin, or the UK who see the play can be moved and spurred into action, even if action simply means telling friends and family something they have long kept hidden.

Nirbhaya's suffering brought courage to hundreds of women across India to stand up and speak about their own experiences. Farber's rendering brings *Nirbhaya*'s story to many across the world and shows educated women in India that their silence empowers abusers. One unreported crime leads to another, one victim leads to another. *Nirbhaya* continues to engage people with its appeal to stand up and speak out, even now that the initial uproar and Government focus on the issue has died down. It continues to empower with the power of the collective and by recognising the on-going urgency of the problem so that the difficult process of confronting the truth and dealing with its effects on individuals and society at large can ensue.

NOTES

¹ Real names of rape victims cannot be publicly revealed in India (<http://www.legalindia.com/rape-laws-in-india/>, 2011). In keeping with this policy, we will use the name “Nirbhaya” in the paper to refer to the victim.

² In March 2013 one of the rapists appeared to have taken his life in prison. The five others were all convicted and sentenced by the Delhi High Court. As we write this article, the Supreme Court has yet to hand down a final verdict on the appeals against their death sentences.

³ The documentary was banned on Indian television when it was broadcast around the world on March 9, 2015. The filmmakers interviewed the defense lawyers and one of the rapists, who seemed on camera to provide justification for the assailants’ acts. These justifications had the potential to incite the public further and influence the judicial process.

⁴ Eve Ensler’s One Billion Rising campaign, launched on valentine’s Day 2012, is another attempt on her part at a global action to end violence against women. In 2013, 2014, and 2015, One Billion Rising partnered with victims of abuse as well as men and women across the globe in defiance of such abuse, to fight for justice and rise in revolution. This movement aims to inform the world that one in three women is abused in her lifetime leading to a dizzying figure of one million victims globally.

⁵ Many of their plays were devised with inexperienced actors and used to start conversations with female audiences from slums and villages. Another one of Stree Sangharsh’s plays, *Dafa 180*, dealt with prison rapes among female inmates and female field workers. As the play depicted, these women were rarely allowed a fair trial (van Erven 1992, p.119).

⁶ As Dia D Costa shows, *Yeh Bhi Hinsa Hai (This too Is Violence)* is ‘a poem captures the essence of this method as it decries the violence against women typically celebrated in Hindu mythology. The icon of Sita and her trial by fire, the reviled demon Surpanakha and the cutting of her nose, the turning of Ahalya into stone—each image and character valorised as emblems of strength, danger, and purity in myth, is revealed for the act of violence it really is. This play introduces women as objects in public and private space regardless of their age, caste, or occupation. The play suggests that physical violence against a woman becomes a logical outcome when she is routinely treated as an object (and hence less than human) in images and daily life’(Da Costa, 2013, p. 167). Speaking of

Janam, Da Costa says, 'In their plays, the challenges to women's empowerment are social conditions where women are barely safe from violence, hunger, and a consumerist society that increasingly legitimises dowry. Janam offers powerful representations of the conditions under which traditions like dowry are invented and proliferated' (Da Costa, 2013, p. 170).

⁷ Currently the production has multiple producers taking it to different venues across the globe.

⁸ Our insights into the conceptualisation and creation of *Nirbhaya* come primarily from three sources 1) Interview with Poorna Jagannathan on 15 July 2015 conducted via Skype by Deepshikha Chatterjee and Claudia Orenstein 2) The performance of *Nirbhaya* at Culture Project, New York on May 9, 2015 and 3) The post-show discussion with the cast and the audience after the May 9, 2015 performance.

⁹ Jawale was also involved in Eve Ensler's One Billion Rising event.

¹⁰ Some details of this event were shared by Sinha in the post-show discussion on May 9, 2015 with the Hunter College audience.

¹¹ Lata Mangeshkar sang this song written by Kaifi Azmi and composed by Gulam Muhammad in the film *Pakeezah* (1972) directed by Kamal Amrohi.

¹² The show ran its first previews in London in early 2013 and premiered in August 2013 at Edinburgh Fringe Festival. Even though it was a risk initially to take a play based on incidents in India, it found instant recognition. In Edinburgh it won the Amnesty International Freedom of Expression Award for raising awareness of human rights. It has been touring ever since. In 2014 it toured to Mumbai, Delhi and Bangalore in India following which it ran in Dublin, South Africa. In 2015 it has completed several shows in many cities in UK including the South Bank in London, the Pavilion in Dublin and the Culture Project in New York. They make an effort to reach out to venues that can support their message such as the Culture Project in New York. Current performances are running in Canada with future plans of possible performances on the west coast in the US, more cities in India, Switzerland and Australia among others. The play makes a concrete effort to reach South Asian audiences who typically do not participate in mainstream theatre but can serve as the primary catalyst for change. There is a possibility ahead of creating a documentary out of the play, but plans for that still have to be solidified.

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