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Seeing Australia anew

Keith Callasch: interview, David Malacari, Parramasala 2013

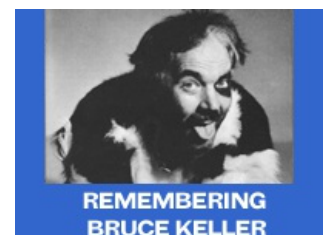
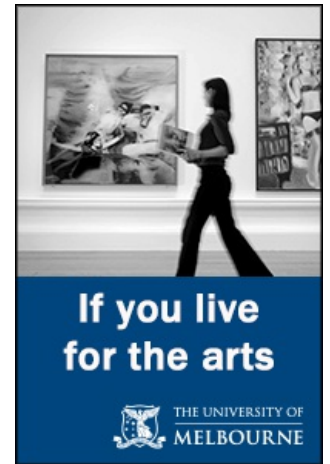


Aakash Rising
photo Chris Nash

One of Sydney's most enjoyable festivals is Parramasala, a celebration of the South Asian culture of Western Sydney, featuring local performers and international visiting artists. Most striking, in the crowds at outdoor concerts, the marketplace, food stalls and indoor performances is evidence of cultural diversity that extends far beyond South Asia to eager audiences of South-East Asian, Chinese, Korean, Filipino, Pacific and Anglo and European heritage. There's a palpable sense of curiosity and community.

Artistic director David Malacari (taking over from founding director Phillip Rolfe) tells me that he was attracted to Parramasala "because of the type of the festival it is. One of my hobbyhorses in New Zealand (Malacari was director of the Auckland Arts Festival, 2004-11) was for festivals to reflect the neighbourhood we're in, and in Western Sydney it's even more important. When you step onto the streets of Parramatta you encounter so many communities and cultures."

Malacari feels that "what goes on on our stages should reflect this, and the audiences too, which are still largely of European background. It's changing, with a few wonderful exceptions, but I'd like to see it change faster to reflect a new Australia. The festival introduces communities to each other, making the culture more than a sum of its parts—that attracted me to Parramasala."





The Chai Temple
photo Kevin Bull



Completing the continuum

In the 2012 festival it was noticeable that ticketed shows were not, for the most part, well attended, while large, enthusiastic crowds gathered day and night for the free outdoor events. Doubtless many young families cannot afford tickets and some people may not be familiar with theatre-going. Malacari has wisely brought the outdoor and indoor events spatially closer together, locating the former in Prince Alfred Park right next door to the Riverside Theatres, instead of at the Town Square (a successful site but a distance from the theatres).

He sees this as providing a continuum on several fronts. There'll be free events in the Riverside Theatres: in the sociable Chai Temple in the courtyard (chai, coffee, music from 5pm and a party on Saturday 5 October with famed musician Raghu Dixit), exhibited art and, in Rafferty's Studio at 5pm over three days, free screenings of significant documentaries (see below). Malacari hopes these will tempt the curious into the theatre complex and perhaps even seduce them into a buying a ticket for a show.

A striking aspect of the 2012 outdoor program was the mix of professional, pro-am and community performances, ranging from traditional to contemporary, and hybrids in between, and largely of a high standard. Malacari sees this as important—the community performers and the professional virtuosi in the ticketed shows “being part of a continuum, with one being the bedrock of the other.” He also likes the idea of visiting professional artists walking out of the theatre into a rich community ambience, with the feeling of “a greater sense of a single festival.”

Fearless Nadia

Malacari saw *Fearless Nadia*, a 1940 Indian film accompanied by a large band of Australian and Indian players led by Ben Walsh, at the 2012 OzAsia in Adelaide: “It was fun—too good to pass up, a great centrepiece for the festival.” Featuring the incredibly popular Perth-born Mary Evans as its heroine who demolishes villains with slapstick ease, the film is an action-filled romp, replete with singing and dancing in the Bollywood tradition. Walsh and his musicians will be joined by visiting composer and virtuoso improviser Aneesh Pradhan, who will perform the tabla passages in *Fearless Nadia*.

Aakash Odedra

The many fans of choreographer and dancer Akram Khan will not want to miss seeing his protégé, Aakash Odedra. In *Rising*, this young, critically lauded star of British and South Indian dance will perform works created for him by Khan, Russell Maliphant and Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui alongside one of his own. Fusing the classical Indian dance disciplines of Kathak and Bharatanatyam with contemporary dance modes, Odedra is renowned for fast and intricate hand and footwork. With only two performances, *Rising* will be presented in the intimate Lennox Theatre.

Zameen

Another dance feature, this time with a political dimension, is the multimedia Australian-Indian creation *Zameen*, *The Dam(n) Project*. Malacari tells me he had been following the Attakkalari Centre for Movement Art, based in Bangalore, for a number of years only to serendipitously discover that they were already working with an Australian creative team: Jehan Kanga, composer Leah Barclay and Curious Works' Artistic Director S Shakhthidharan (whose *The Other Journey* was a Parramasala hit in 2011). After seeing an early version of *Zameen* at the Sunshine Coast's Floating Land Festival, Malacari committed to presenting it at Parramasala.

Reputedly a work of great beauty enhanced by the dancing of two members of the Attakkalari dance company, Zameen evokes the struggle of a remote community to preserve their land in the face of the building of a massive dam, a battle which it lost in large part, if managing to claw back some land. Malacari says, “the loss of land and water rights is germane the world over, including in Australia.”

Manakottai In association with Information & Cultural Exchange (ICE), Malacari has programmed SydneyNadaka Priyar, a local Tamil group, to perform Manakottai, a work they’ve devised in their own language but to be staged with English surtitles. “It’s a first for Parramasala,” says Malacari, “and could be a model for the future. I’m keen to use more language in the festival.” Katrina Douglas is director and dramaturg for the production—Malacari wants the work to be given the best opportunity to be professionally realised. The play focuses, with some humour, on the meaning of home, addressing “the expectations and experiences of two Tamil couples on intersecting journeys—one couple migrating to Australia and the other couple returning to India”—at Singapore’s Changi airport (website).



KP Jayasankar and Anjali Monteiro

Film: Anjali Monteiro and KP Jayasankar

The ICE Documentary Program (partnered with UWS and UTS) at Riverside, will screen three films over three nights at 5pm, each with a focus on significant social issues, ethnic tensions and declining cultural assets in India.

The prominent Indian documentary filmmaker pair [Anjali Monteiro and KP Jayasankar](#), acclaimed around the world for their films about marginalised peoples, are guests of ICE and Parramasala, showing one of their best known films, *Naata* (2003), and a recent one, *Like Here Like There (So Heddan So Hoddan)* (2011). The latter “explores the worlds of three cousins, their families and the Fakirani Jat community to which they belong.” These people are devotees of Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai, a medieval Sufi poet, and inheritors of a rich tradition of poetry, song and instrumental playing that is fast dying out as the nomadism of these people is increasingly curtailed.

Naata (The Bond; 2003) is about Bhau Korde and Waqar Khan, “two activists and friends, who have been involved in conflict resolution, working with neighbourhood peace committees in Dharavi, Mumbai, reputedly, the largest ‘slum’ in Asia.” The two men use video, posters, audio-cassettes and above all a film they made, *Ekta Sandesh*, which they show with a portable screen and projector at their own expense. One writer says, “Their film is unabashed in its exploitation of Bollywood” and its use of celebrities and public officials arguing passionately for civic harmony. Anjali Monteiro and KP Jayasankar will participate in post-screening Q&As.

The third film in the ICE series also looks likely to be fascinating, Pritham K Chakravarthy’s *Our Family* (2007), a filmed solo performance about a family of three generations of trans-gendered female subjects and, says Malacari, “their tumultuous lives” in Tamilnadu.

Khovar Rewind and Semblance of Order

Another ICE contribution to Parramasala includes *Khovar Rewind* (at ICE, Parramatta, 30sept-31 Oct) an exhibition of mural works on paper, made in 1994 by tribal women artists from the Haziribagh region of Bihar in India “in response to the threat of physical and cultural displacement due to open cut coal mining. Created in the style of traditional Khovar (bridal) murals, each artwork is a delicate celebration of love, marriage and cultural unease” (website). The works, unseen for some 20 years, are from the Liverpool City Council Collection. Another idiosyncratic, paper-based exhibition *Semblance of Order*, presented with Parramatta Artist Studios, will

show etchings and silkscreen prints by five artists from Pakistan and Australia.



The Allakhamb Acrobats
courtesy Parramasala

Mallakhamb Acrobats

When you're in Prince Alfred Park look out for the Mallakhamb Acrobats from Mumbai with their astonishing gymnastics, balancing, for example, on their stomachs at the very top of the poles which are central to their work. As David Malacari says, this is something most people will never have seen.

My brief survey of the performances, films and exhibitions (let alone the music events you can read about on the festival's website) suggests that much of Parramasala 2013 is likely to expand our sense of the nature of our relationship with Asia.

Parramasala 2013, 4-7 Oct; Khovar Rewind, ICE, 30 Sept-31 Oct;
<http://www.parramasala.com>

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