

# UC San Diego

## UC San Diego Electronic Theses and Dissertations

### Title

Making Space for Bilingual Storytelling

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2gg1c2s0>

### Author

Raturi, Ankita

### Publication Date

2023

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO

Making Space for Bilingual Storytelling

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements  
for the degree Master of Fine Arts

in

Theatre and Dance (Playwriting)

by

Ankita Raturi

Committee in charge:

Professor Naomi Iizuka, Chair  
Professor Kazim Ali  
Professor Lora Powell  
Professor Deborah Stein

2023

Copyright

Ankita Raturi, 2023

All rights reserve

The Thesis of Ankita Raturi is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically.

University of California San Diego

2023

## DEDICATION

I dedicated my second-year production of *Fifty Boxes of Earth* to my Dadi, Uma Raturi. And to every grandmother who has provided stability in times of transition. I dedicated my third-year thesis production of *तेल & Neel* to my Nani, Kusum Joshi. And to every grandmother who works hard to stay close from a distance.

I dedicate my MFA work as a whole to my Mama and Baba, Vyeni and Rahul Raturi. And to any parent who bravely walks along a path they don't necessarily understand, leading the way by following their children.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

THESIS APPROVAL PAGE .....	iii
DEDICATION .....	iv
TABLE OF CONTENTS .....	v
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	vi
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS.....	vii

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to my professors, Naomi Iizuka and Deborah Stein, for their mentorship and for always pushing me to my growing edge. Thank you also to Kazim Ali, Kartik Seshadri, and Rishika Mehrishi, whose classes technically fell outside my MFA work, but were integral to my artistic development at UCSD.

Thank you to my cohort over the past three years: Vivian Barnes, Keiko Green, Preston Choi, Agyeiwaa Asante, Milo Cramer, Beth Hyland, Mylan Gray, and Phanésia Pharel. It has been such a gift to have this small community of writers who know my voice and my mission as well as they do to buoy my work over the course of my MFA.

Thank you to my creative collaborators, the builders of my blueprints, on *Backwaters*, *Fifty Boxes of Earth*, and *तेह & Neel* – particularly my directors Juliana Kleist-Méndez, Cambria Herrera, and Rosie Glen-Lambert; and my scenic designer for two years running, Raphael Mishler.

A special thank you to the South Asian members of the cast and creative team on my thesis production: actors Swarupa Ellamaraju, Sashank Kanchustambam, and Seth Gunawardena; assistant stage managers Juhi Sabharwal and Shaila Sarathy; assistant director Diya Rao; assistant sound designer Deepta Bharadwaj; and dramaturg Rishika Mehrishi.

Finally, thank you to my family – my parents, Vyeni and Rahul Raturi; my sisters, Aditi and Anusha; and my brother-in-law, Nick – for believing in my potential and supporting me in every step I take towards it. And to my partner, Kaustabh Basu, for dreaming my dream with me.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Making Space for Bilingual Storytelling

by

Ankita Raturi

Master of Fine Arts in Theatre and Dance (Playwriting)

University of California San Diego, 2023

Professor Naomi Iizuka, Chair

This year I made a character and relationship driven play, with a distinct touch of theatricality, and saw it brought to life in rooms filled with joy, laughter, and collaborators who brought their fully authentic selves to every part of the process. And the play is bilingual, with characters who live as I live, in two languages. *तेई & Neel* is the culmination of three years of MFA work focused on the craft of playwriting, and ten years of personal work fighting to make space for bilingual storytelling that speaks to diasporic audiences.



The first play I ever wrote was bilingual. It had two titles – *Another Passage to India* or *दिल्ली आज तक* – and featured entire scenes in Hindi amidst the English. I got the opportunity to workshop it at my college in 2013, but I had to do all the legwork to make it happen on my own. I had to fight for a bilingual director, someone who understood the experience of living in two languages. I had to do the outreach to find Hindi or Urdu speaking actors outside my department because there simply weren't enough within it. I had to be my own dramaturg and my own cultural consultant in the rehearsal room, the latter a role that didn't have a name those days. It was, by all accounts, a successful workshop with an incredible team that made an impact on the audience that saw the staged reading. But I never workshopped that play again. It was too exhausting to be producer, casting director, dramaturg, and spokesperson for my culture, instead of simply and fully: playwright. I felt too alone inside a process that I otherwise love for feeling the opposite: collaborative and community building.

Since then I've written a full-length play that is entirely about the challenges and impossibilities of language, but sticks primarily to English (*The Elephant is Very Like*); an audio play where honeymooners in India struggle to communicate with a guide for whom English is a second language (*Backwaters*); a play where a migrant has to find words to fit them in a language and a place that doesn't, but again English (*Fifty Boxes of Earth*); a lightly bilingual play, but in English and Bahasa Indonesia, a language I am intimately familiar with but which is not my own mother tongue and so my use and command of it is limited (*No One Plays Badminton in America*); and one truly bilingual English and Hindi/Urdu play, but only a ten-minute one (*Sahi Vaqt Pe* or *The One with the Biological Clock*). It took me until now, all those plays and years later, in my final year of graduate school, to finally write another full-length play that tells a South Asian story, written the way we authentically sound in diaspora. Working up to

writing and finally making this production of *नेहा & Neel* was an exercise in rebuilding trust with the profession I love as a place where I can tell my stories, asking for what I need from my colleagues and collaborators, and feeling the full support of my theatre community even as I chart a new path.

*नेहा & Neel* is first and foremost about a mother, Neha, who feels ill-equipped to pass on to her son what she so easily inherited – her roots. And it is about a son, Neel, who doesn't think he can live up to his mother's cultural expectations. The conflict between these two characters, first and second generation in America respectively, returns throughout the play to the loss of language fluency. Along their journey, they meet many-varied diasporic desis, some of whom speak Hindi, some another language from the subcontinent, some simply English. The tension in the play lives in Neha's ability to easily connect with strangers in Hindi while Neel is rendered silent, in Neel's refusal to speak Hindi to his grandmother for fear of sounding stupid. I could not tell this story simply in English; the play has to be bilingual in order to work.

When I teach playwriting, I define stage directions as an invitation to the collaborators that will inevitably work with you to fully realize the play. The collaborative process is why I write plays, why I gravitate most strongly towards dramatic writing amongst literary forms; because I want to build in community. But whether my collaborators understand the experience of living in diaspora or not, there are not many blueprints in the American theatre for how to lead or engender a collaboration on a bilingual text. In telling stories that live between cultures, I have had to find novel ways of reaching out to my collaborators and inviting them into building my worlds with me.

I found some freedom in focusing so singularly on the relationship between the two main characters of Neha and Neel, crafting the moment to moment between them, and bringing a third

actor strategically in and out of their journey to play upon their arc. In getting this specific in my writing, I let the play do the work of justifying the need for bilingual actors and diasporic collaborators. We don't have any other South Asian graduate students in our department, but every MFA student assigned to collaborate on my project made an effort to find a South Asian undergraduate student to work with them, which means that in addition to all three actors, I had South Asian collaborators in the areas of directing, stage management, and design. The director and I also decided to work with a South Asian post-doctoral scholar as dramaturg, to take some of the burden of cultural competency off my shoulders, freeing me up to focus on writing a good play, on doing my part of the team effort that led to our production.

When I say I felt alone doing all the legwork for that first play, I don't mean I didn't want to do any of that work at all, but rather that I wanted partners in it. I was significantly involved in every stage of the production process for *ਠੇਠ & Neel*, and I think I always will be for my plays; in fact, I love it. But I didn't do any part of it alone, I had partners that believed in this play at every step. I found ways to articulate what I needed, what the play needed, and worked with my collaborators to reach out beyond the traditional frameworks for casting, rehearsing, and producing. I still speak for my culture in the room, I always will to some extent, but I don't have to be the sole authority on a diaspora numbering well over a billion members. When I'm free to focus on the craft of writing, I can be rigorous about telling a story that demands the kind of collaboration that bilingual stories deserve.