



SNEHAL DESAI

MAKING A STATEMENT

INTERVIEW WITH MARGARET GRAY

SNEHAL DESAI may have been moving against the current when he left New York for Los Angeles to take a job in the theatre. But this rising director, playwright, and performer, who currently serves as both literary manager and Artistic Associate of East West Players, downtown L.A.'s venerable Asian American theatre company, has never let traditions hold him back. He prefers to create new ones.

As an undergraduate at Emory University, Desai majored in political science and planned to go to law school as his parents expected. But upon graduation, he enrolled instead in the MFA program in directing at the Yale School of Drama.

Desai has been a member of the prestigious Lincoln Center Directors Lab, held a directing internship at the Royal Shakespeare Company, and was the inaugural recipient of the Drama League's Classical Fellowship for Directors of Color at the Old Globe in San Diego. He used these opportunities to learn from a wide range of contemporary directors while exploring his own interest in site-specific, immersive theatre.

When he joined the staff of East West Players in 2013, Desai was ready to immerse himself in the inner workings of a regional theatre, with the long-term plan of running his own someday. He has taken on a variety of responsibilities—audience outreach, artistic development, creation and management of artistic partnerships, among them—while directing productions, including a spring 2015 production of *The Who's Tommy* that featured a diverse cast. He also continues to work around the country as a freelance director, with a fall 2015 residency at James Madison University and a production at Boom Arts in Portland, OR, next winter. On a warm spring afternoon, he spoke about his career with arts journalist Margaret Gray.

GRAY | What made you choose theatre as a career?

DESAI | When I went to Emory University, my parents told me, "You're going to go to law school," and I said, "Okay." I was a poli-sci major, and I kind of just plowed into it and finished very early, but I didn't want to leave college yet. So I started to stealthily take some theatre classes and move into the theatre studies department. I acted a little bit, I did stage management, design, directing. Initially I went in as an actor. I was in 1776.

GRAY | Who did you play?

DESAI | Josiah Bartlett of New Hampshire. As an actor, I was enjoying it, but I wasn't necessarily getting cast. I remember one audition where I went in and they said, "We would love to cast you as the kid, but then we'd have to find Indian parents." That was in the late '90s, before colorblind casting.

In my junior year, I took a directing class with Vincent Murphy, who also ran Theater Emory, and that's where things really clicked for me.

PHOTO Michael Palma



With every classic, I always want to explore why this piece has lasted for as long as it has. I want to investigate and hold on to that while creating a world where someone like me could also exist.

I still took the LSAT and applied to both law schools and theatre programs at the same time. I told my parents, "If I get into a directing program, I'm going, and if I don't, then I'll entertain these law school notions." But then I got into the Yale School of Drama (YSD).

GRAY | At Yale, while studying directing, you found time to create a solo show, *Finding Ways to Prove You're Not an al-Qaeda Terrorist When You're Brown*. How did that happen?

DESAI | I enjoyed my time at Yale but felt like I was studying a fixed canon that I already had been exposed to in undergrad. I wanted to experience a wider field, and we weren't quite getting that in the curriculum. There was definitely a void, and so I was encouraged to start writing.

One day I came to our directing practicum with a bunch of monologues and just sat down and started reading them. People really took to them, and I felt that they were the purest and cleanest expression of what I wanted to say. Richard Nelson was the playwriting chair at the time, and Lisa Kron was there, and I was encouraged to work with them and take some playwriting classes.

I hadn't envisioned myself performing the monologues, but we didn't have any other [Indian] actors. So I started to perform them.

GRAY | At Yale, you founded the Yale Southasian Theater Collective. What prompted you to create that company?

DESAI | After I wrote my first solo show, I wanted to continue to tell stories, and I didn't want to just be me. The writer me hates the actor me because the actor me does not remember the lines well and ad-libs. In film, you can act and direct, or even act, write, and direct. You can't do that in theatre. You can write and direct. But you really can't do all three.

I wanted to direct and write rather than act, so I formed a collective of students from all over the university who were interested in creating South Asian work. As South Asians, we all get grouped together. But, of course, Japan and Thailand and North Korea and Vietnam are all very different. North India is very different from South India and Pakistan. Even as a South Asian collective, none of us spoke the same language. Some were adopted, some were born and raised here,

some immigrated. I worked with people from the medical school, from undergrad, from the School of Forestry. So even our reference points weren't as close as people thought. It was really an opportunity for me to find community I wasn't necessarily finding at YSD.

GRAY | Did you have any mentors at Yale or in other places who strongly influenced your work or guided your career?

DESAI | I've been so lucky. Vinnie [Murphy] in Atlanta really pushed me to find my identity as a director. He just said very simply, "You're a director." Sometimes it's those little statements that are so empowering.

Liz Diamond was a huge influence while I was at Yale. She helped me understand that it was okay to take time to figure out who I was. Growing up, I was always the outsider because I was gay and Indian in a small white town. So much of my journey was about wanting to fit in. And then, at YSD, I'm watching all these people who *don't* want to fit in, who are struggling to make themselves unique artists. For a while, at the beginning, I would think, "Oh, I want to be like..." but then I realized,



TOP LEFT Desai in rehearsal for *The Who's Tommy*
PHOTO Michael Palma

MIDDLE LEFT + THIS PAGE *The Who's Tommy*
PHOTO Michael Lamont

"No, this is the place where I should be proud of my unique voice and own it."

And at this stage, **Tim [Dang]**, Artistic Director of East West Players] has been a huge champion and great mentor for me. I'm particularly interested in one day running a theatre, and he's been really wonderful with training me on those ropes. If you want to run a theatre, you should know about fundraising.

GRAY | You've assisted many distinguished directors. What are some of the creative or life lessons you've learned from working with them?

DESAI | Oftentimes it's just different ways of structuring the room. I've assisted two British directors, **Ron Daniels** and **Les Waters**, and what I learned from them is if you have an accent, you can get away with anything.

I assisted Les on *Eurydice* at Yale Rep. He overlaps scenes: as one scene is ending, another scene comes on and builds itself around it. It was something I'd never done as a director and never even seen that often. Scenes don't need to be neat. They can bleed over from one to another.



I didn't assist **Anne Bogart**, but I did an amazing workshop with her. In the middle of it, she started screaming, "Structure frees! Structure frees!" It sounded like Orwellian doublethink. And then I just thought, "Yes." As a director, the more you can set the rules of the world, the more freedom you actually are giving people. So that was a wonderful

moment that I've still held onto almost a decade later.

Liz [Diamond] used to talk about "blood on the floor" in terms of what is being expended during the course of a theatrical event. We traffic so much in vulnerability. So, as an artist, you need to make sure, at the end of the night, that you're leaving blood on the floor. Not

literally! But is a part of you being exposed and laid out there? Unless you do that, it's what I call "plastic theatre." You're, like, "Oh, that's nice," and you leave and you forget about it. For me, it's about creating that experience that will stick, that will impact change, that will reverberate in people's lives. If you put something out there, the audiences are going to put something out there, too. They're not going to trust it until you make that exchange.

GRAY | Was there a particular production you did that changed the course of your work or that you feel was particularly important or meaningful for you?

DESAI | There'd be two. In college, for my thesis, I did José Rivera's *Marisol*. I staged it in an abandoned mental hospital. It was owned by the state of Georgia and they just left it. The charts are still there. The straps are still on the tubs. The play is about a crumbling New York under attack, and so, for me, it was about all of us grappling with 9/11. Creating this landscape for people to go through was so cathartic. That was my first time doing something site specific and immersive.

Then I did *Peregrine* at the Old Globe in San Diego. The theatre is in Balboa Park, which has beautiful fountains everywhere. Everyone goes there for their prom and wedding pictures. I really wanted to see a woman in a big, heavy wedding dress run across the park and jump in a fountain, like, "I am done."

I commissioned playwright Lauren Yee and myself to write two pieces inspired by the park. I told Lauren and the dancers, "This is going to culminate with five of you in wedding dresses in a fountain. What happens before that, I don't really care." We recorded them as MP3 files and sent them to everyone's smart phone. Everyone met in the park at a certain point. I worked with 12 dancers and staged them throughout the park. People listened to either Lauren's track or mine as they wandered. I loved the slow blurring of the lines. You didn't know what was staged, what wasn't. Gradually the dancers and the actors wove in with the text that you were seeing, and both paths would coalesce at the fountain, and everyone jumped in.

I would talk to people, and they'd say, "No, I've never seen anything at the Old Globe," or "I can't afford it." And now here they are, seeing theatre, and they can also jump into the fountains with the performers and play. It changed the air of the park.

GRAY | Do you find having to work in a traditional theatre constraining at all?

DESAI | It goes back to the "structure frees" thing. I'm in this box, if you will. What can I do? How can I make this interactive or immersive or engaging in a different way? How can I create something where, if nothing else, the audience isn't sitting back passively? They're leaning forward, they feel free to shout out, to engage. I have to make sure that whatever we set up, we give performers and the audience that permission early and invite them in.

Audience interaction is always a delicate balance. I tell people all the time, "I love creating audience interaction, but sometimes I don't really love it when I'm in the audience." It's that fine line. Sometimes it's as simple as you just hand me something or you pick something up or you hit something back.

GRAY | Yet you have a lot of classical theatre in your professional experience. You were the inaugural recipient of the Drama League's Classical Fellowship for Directors of Color at the Old Globe in San Diego. What draws you to the classics?

DESAI | A friend once asked me, "Who's the most produced playwright in this country? Shakespeare." The thing about *Hamlet* is, we know it works. With every classic, I always want to explore why this piece has lasted for as long as it has. I want to investigate and hold on to that while creating a world where someone like me could also exist.

But I'm also interested in expanding our ideas of what a classic is, who determines that, and what other classics are out there that we've closed ourselves off from. We have a very defined canon, predominantly white male, predominantly Western, Eurocentric.

Shakespeare moves along with the trajectory of your life, who you are, your attachments to plays at various stages. That's the beauty of someone like him. But I want to explore other ideas and forms of storytelling that do that. East West has a partnership with A Noise Within, and I recently directed a reading of *Hayavadana* by Girish Karnad there. One of my dreams is to do a *Mahabharata* adaptation, a new one.

GRAY | Are you still writing?

DESAI | I am. So many of the people I admire, like **Robert O'Hara** and **George C. Wolfe**, have written and directed their own pieces. Three years ago at East West, I presented my second solo show, *Trials with Brownies*. In it, I excavate the history of Indians in this country, who have been here since colonial times.

I'm also writing my epic, a trilogy called *Sita/Sati*. It seeks, almost in the August Wilson vein, to tell the history of South Asians in America over the last 200 years. I feel like there's no particular South Asian theatre established here. Black theatre is identifiable. You have Suzan-Lori Parks, August Wilson. Latino theatre has a magical realism element and some iconic figures. East Asians have David Henry Hwang. But South Asians don't have our own iconic dramaturgy. Western theatre is text based, while a lot of Eastern theatre, particularly in India, is dance based and movement based. So in each play in my trilogy, I'm interested in exploding form, so that by the third play we've created our own form.

GRAY | How do you prepare for rehearsal when you're directing? Do you have a routine, or do you change it up every time?

DESAI | There are three things I do for every show as I head into rehearsals. One is compile three or four images that, when lined up, represent the journey of the play or musical. The images don't have to be real or literal—sometimes it's just a color—but they force me to focus on what the story is, whose perspective I am telling it from, and the overall dramatic arc. Often one of these images will stick with me enough that I will find a way to translate it on stage. For *The Who's Tommy*, I was taken by a sand sculpture of a dragon curling up around a ball, which inspired a little shadow play we have at the top of the show.

I also create a mixtape of songs or snippets of music that I believe capture the rhythm, tone, or mood of a scene. Sometimes I share it with my designers or actors, but most times I don't. It's music that I listen to before I go in to stage the scene to help me figure out the momentum and drive.

Finally, I create a detailed scene breakdown in which I list locations, scene numbers, and characters. I give each scene its own title to convey what I believe is the action of the scene and how I approach it. This helps me identify recurring motifs.

GRAY | Here at East West Players, you're the Artistic Associate and also literary manager. It sounds as though you wear a lot of hats. What are your responsibilities?

DESAI | On the literary manager side, I oversee our writers. We have the David Henry Hwang Writers Institute, and I've really tried to fashion it as a program where you can start as an emerging writer and build up to someone we would love to see on our stage. Giving artists, particularly minority artists, a new way of access.

I also oversee our biannual playwriting competition. This year's theme is "2042 See Change." The year 2042 is when we'll become a majority-minority nation, when there will be no one ethnic majority. We have Japanese or Korean or Indian plays. But we don't have a lot of plays where Indians talk to Koreans or Indians talk to Japanese. So that's what we're looking for: minorities on the stage talking to each other. And we've had a tremendous response.

I oversee the development of the plays we've commissioned or are looking at. On the Artistic Associate side, there's a big push for diversity. We have artistic partnerships with Pasadena Playhouse, Oregon Shakespeare Festival, and La Jolla Playhouse. I oversee those programs. I'm one of the co-organizers of the 2016 National Asian American Theater Conference. I produce our gala. And I also direct plays.

GRAY | How many hours do you work each day?!

DESAI | A lot! But I had been a freelance director for a long time, and the experience of working in a theatre day-to-day is what brought me out here. It's a different perspective. When you have to program a season, a show opens and you're on to the next one. You have a subscriber base that you have to engage with. Everyone wants to write serious pieces, which is great, but we can't program all trauma. It's just very, very different.

GRAY | How did your work with the South Asian Theater Collective lead to the work you're doing here at East West?

DESAI | For a long time, my identity as a South Asian didn't play a prominent role in my work, maybe because of what I was exposed to or where I was interest-wise. At Yale, when I saw a predominately white, Western canon again, I wondered, "Where is my place in this?" So it really made me really embrace all parts of myself, not only being gay but also being Indian. It made me not be afraid to acknowledge who I am.

GRAY | East West Players is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year. What's it like to be part of the company at this time in its history?

DESAI | It's an amazing time to be here. For a theatre of color, the question becomes, "What is our mission now for the next 30, 40, 50 years?" So much of the mission has been about visibility and giving opportunities to Asian American artists. But that's changing now. I think all theatres of color are dealing with that question as we become a more assimilated culture.

We're creating a documentary about East West's founders, and hearing those stories and getting that history has been so wonderful. So much of my own writing is about displacement and belonging. I'm a U.S. citizen, born and raised in this country, but I don't necessarily always feel welcome or at home. If I go to India, I'm a foreigner there. So many of us who are first or second generation are dealing with questions of home and identity. I found that the way to get by that is realizing you have deeper roots than you think.

There have been South Asians in this country for 200 years. It's just a matter of finding and connecting to their history. And as a theatre artist, it's feeling a part of a larger community and saying, "I'm committed to the work of East West's founders. I'm connected to that lineage as we move forward."

GRAY | Your production of *The Who's Tommy* is a first because it has a multicultural Asian cast. How has that impacted the story?

DESAI | On the first day of rehearsal, I was talking to the cast about what it means to do this musical here at East West. I'm not interested in making it message-heavy about race. But I'm also not interested in doing it race blind. I don't believe in colorblind casting in that way. Because that's another type of denial of who I am. By making me colorblind, you're saying that I don't exist. But there weren't a lot of Asian workers or minorities in general in the 1940s. So we've just pushed it up a little bit, time-wise, to a period when Asian Americans would have more visibility.

GRAY | L.A. County is one of the most diverse counties in the U.S. Do you feel that in your work, and do you see it reflected in the theatre work you see around L.A.?

DESAI | I definitely see it in my work! Do you know about Tim [Dang]'s 51% plan for diversity? He pitched it at the TCG conference, and it's become a national initiative. He's basically saying that for a theatre to call itself diverse, it should have either 51% of its staff or 51% of what's on its stage be people of color, women, or people under 35. If you don't have any of those, you have to stop saying you're diverse. Start matching the rhetoric with the numbers.

For me, if you do a show that's all white now, that's a conscious decision. People of color are coming out of the training programs; they have the experience. You can't use those traditional excuses. Now it's jarring to me when I do see a single-race cast. It's a choice. You're making a statement as a director.

GRAY | What are some of the joys and challenges of working in Los Angeles?

DESAI | L.A. has a very vibrant, robust, and large theatre scene, but theatre isn't necessarily top dog. There's a larger industry out here. So no one here just works in theatre primarily. When they do theatre here, it's usually not for the money but because they love it.

GRAY | Do you feel that your process is influenced by particular conditions or aspects of Los Angeles?

DESAI | L.A. is such a spread-out city that theatre has to be worth the drive and the parking and the hassle. We've had a lot of interesting audience development conversations. I had to learn who the East West audience is and how they get here. In New York, you walk. In L.A., there's so much more involved in the decision to go to theatre that you have to make it worth people's time.

GRAY | Where do you find a sense of artistic community in L.A.?

DESAI | East West has a wonderful artistic community, and they've been so welcoming. So I've definitely found it here.

I'm still very connected to the New York community because so many people are bicoastal. I just directed a workshop for one of Carla Ching's plays. She used to run [the Asian American theatre company] 2g in New York. She's out here writing for *Graceland*, so she and I were able to connect, and we've already collaborated on two things. I haven't had to leave any of my community behind. It's just grown. And I think that will continue to happen. **SDC**

Margaret Gray has an MFA in dramaturgy and dramatic criticism from the Yale School of Drama. She lives in Los Angeles, where she writes about the theatre and books for the Los Angeles Times.