



## **India Gate at Questors Theatre July 2021** **Anne Gilmour interviews Howard Shepherdson** **about the project which led to *India Gate***

**Background** - This is the full interview of Anne Gilmour's interview with Howard Shepherdson, an extract of which is in the August 21 edition of the LTG Newsletter.

**Anne:** How did the *India Gate* project begin?

**Howard:** I was appointed Chair of The Questors External Relations Sub-Committee. One of my ideas was talking to theatre groups that never hired our theatre and at the same time bring a little more diversity to The Questors. I used some of the contacts I made when working for the London Borough of Ealing who in turn gave me contact details of the Punjabi Theatre Academy.

We emailed, had a chat and a zoom then, within Covid restrictions, we met with Tejinder Pal Singh, Executive Director and Artistic Director of the Punjabi TA, and The Questors Artistic Director, Alex Marker and hatched a plan. We aimed to do bigger things in future, but at the time we wanted just to run a workshop production and find out each other's eccentricities and how we could rub along. It proved to be a worthwhile exercise.

**Anne:** What is your ambition for the piece?

**Howard:** For the future – several choices. Hire our theatre to Punjabi TA, bringing more cultural diversity. They tend to hire professional theatres but would love to come and hire The Questors. They would seek support from The Questors office staff, also from Members of The Questor offering wardrobe, box office, lights etc so more of a hybrid. Longer term another co-production which could be co-directed. That's the most exciting possibility.

**Anne:** When did you first approach them?

**Howard:** March/April. We had conversations for a few weeks. I talked it over with Alex and it became clear we needed an idea. Ideally a play with six actors (Covid restrictions), three from The Questors and three from the Punjabi Academy. Then meld into a play. I had the idea of looking into the work of Sir Edward Lutyens who was a successful architect and designed New Delhi. He had interaction with the Indians but was mainly working for the British. But I discovered his wife was a very interesting character: daughter of an ex-vice-roy and secret supporter of Indian home rule. When her husband was away, she was entertaining groups of home-rule supporters in her home in Kensington. She was also a follower of the guru and philosopher Jiddu Krishnamurti and was almost besotted by him. Correspondence with her husband shows life dedicated to Indian affairs and not to her marriage. It had the makings of a workshop script and Tejinder said, "How about we top and tail this story with Sikh martyr Udham Singh's story?" He came to London in 1919 to pursue Sir Michael O'Dwyer who had been Governor of the Punjab when the massacre at Amritsar took place. Singh vowed vengeance, tracked down O'Dwyer and shot him. He was tried and hung, but spoke out in court on home rule and became bit of a folk hero. That topped & tailed our play which featured the different views on home rule. We got our multi-racial cast working well together.

**Anne:** I think Lutyens designed the British Embassy in Washington.

**Howard:** Yes, Lutyens is known for his war memorials, the Cenotaph, and India Gate. He's noted for his view on remembrance, how you react to remembering injustice. A fascinating man.

**Anne:** Did you do a first draft script and show it to the Punjabi TA?



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**Howard:** Yes, I wrote the bulk of it in four days. I wrote each scene and sent to Tejinder. He suggested where we might put in some lines in Punjabi language, and also the Udham Singh element.

**Anne:** So, it was a real combined effort within your framework. So how did rehearsals go – on zoom?

**Howard:** No – I thought it important to actually meet and to do some bonding as we come from different traditions; us from European drama and the Punjabi TA with their own Punjabi traditions, but also a strong film tradition. Their company make information films and have made some for their community on behalf of the NHS. The academy mainly puts on performances in the UK, but also makes films that are shown in India and do live broadcasts about once a fortnight that take place in India or the other way round. One of our rehearsals was live-streamed in India and we chatted about the play. That was really nice.

The Punjabi TA is not a one-man-band but Tejinder is the energising force. He has soaked himself in Punjabi culture and studied theatre in the Punjab. He loves to use Punjabi in theatre: folk tales, myths, plays about historical Punjabi heroes and political events.

**Anne:** My experience of Indian drama is that it is usually younger groups and three quarters of their theatre features song and dance, although they are gradually moving towards more storytelling.

**Howard:** That's fascinating as that happened to us in the penultimate scene where Udham Singh is sentenced to death. "We need a song here", said Tejinder. "Really?", I said. "Yes", explained Tejinder. "We use the music for him to reflect on his thoughts and his destiny – and I have musicians and I will get a song written." So that happened; we had our Bollywood moment and I thought it did in fact work well. So, I learned something.

**Anne:** What do you think worked best out of the whole venture?

**Howard:** The Indian actors were very complimentary about our approach and our scripts and our discipline. They maybe thought we had too many rehearsals and were a little bit regimented to start with, but then they realised that it in fact allows greater creativity.

Their way is less structured and from that they start to get creative things out of it, which we appreciated when actors spoke Punjabi and played characters they recognised. One actor said to me, "Sandeep Brar – he's a peasant isn't he?" I said, "Yes, but he had the gumption to go to London and lobby". The actor said, "I know this type; I've seen them in Southall". And I was so impressed he used live characters and built on them – it worked brilliantly.

**Anne:** Did you have any big difficulties?

**Howard:** We would have liked more than six actors. It turned out at 50 minutes and pretty epic; we had to have doubling and people found that a bit hard. It was a hard slog to get to that point. From my point of view, I would have loved to have been able to start with a longer rehearsal period, more workshops with more actors, as we would have got more out of it. But we got a particular time slot in The Questors schedule and had to run with it.

**Anne:** how long a rehearsal period did you have?

**Howard:** Three and a half weeks, with four/five rehearsals each week. The other learning point for The Questors was the Punjabi TA marketing. They are well integrated into their



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community and have a large following of well-connected people. When there's an event, they are very meticulous in inviting a whole list of VIPs. We had five MPs from West London attend (The Questors has never achieved that!), four Councillors, Greater London Councillors plus other Indian VIPs. They hired a film crew which interviewed the audience, actors, Tejinder – it was fascinating to see them working at their publicity to keep their name up there.

**Anne:** Would you say some of the amateur theatres in Manchester or Birmingham or elsewhere could do something similar to build local bonds?

**Howard:** Yes, absolutely. First, as we did, find an Indian arts group you can come together with. Then, if you can dig deeper and find an actual theatre group, even better. Find material you can hold out to the Indian community. Find through your local council, put the feelers out and see what exists and ask, "Who should I make contact with?" Then, when you have material, hold open auditions. Someone in our audience said they would like to do a Bangra panto!

**Anne:** a gentleman at box office coming to see *India Gate* asked me if anyone could buy tickets at The Questors. I said yes and he seemed both surprised and pleased.

**Howard:** Yes, 60% of our audience for *India Gate* were new to The Questors.

**Anne:** Hopefully we can build on the momentum.

**Howard:** Yes, one of the Punjabi TA worked backstage and wants to join. Another one worked with our Sound Designer and wants to come back and do more sound. Another saw the scenic workshop and wants to come and build play sets. We don't want to pinch their members; we want more of an exchange. I said to Tejinder, if you are doing a play and need a European actor, do please come to us.

**Anne:** Do they have premises?

**Howard:** No, they hire.

**Anne:** What are the next steps?

**Howard:** We meet again soon to look at the next steps forward. We will come up with a reasonable hire price and ask what assistance they would need if putting on their own show at The Questors. Also look at a production we could do together. I've seen a potential children's show, based on folk stories, something for our studio. Then, longer term, a bigger joint production, find a script or jointly write one. Could be based around Indian independence anniversary. When you think about our enormous shared cultural history experience, it needs exploring in a theatrical context, something both of us would find enriching.

If another LTG company thinks of doing a project like this, don't be daunted. It's a roller coaster, but fantastic and hard work. With all the different types of diversity in different geographical areas, through the medium of theatre we can find common ground.

Anne Gilmour & Jo Matthews  
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