



WHEN THE CROWS VISIT

by Anupama Chandrasekhar

WELCOME

Welcome to the resource pack for *When the Crows Visit*, written by Anupama Chandrasekhar and directed by Indhu Rubasingham. Our aim with this guide is to allow insight into the production for students, educators, artists and anyone else interested in how work gets from the script to the stage.

We would like to thank the *When the Crows Visit* team for giving their time and thoughts on their creative processes in bringing the production to Kiln Theatre.

How to read this pack

This resource pack has been designed to be interactive using Adobe Acrobat Reader and has a number of features built in to enhance your reading experience.

Navigation

You can navigate around the document in a number of ways

1. By clicking on the chapter menu bar at the foot of each page
2. By clicking any entry on the contents and chapter opening pages
3. By clicking the arrows at the bottom of each page
4. By turning on Page Thumbnails in Acrobat

Hyperlinks

For further information, there are a number of hyperlinks which take you to external resources and are indicated by blue and underlined text or youtube.

Please note: You will need an internet connection to use this facility

When to read this pack

This pack is designed to be read AFTER you have seen the show. It contains some SPOILERS that you may not want to know before seeing the production.

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**WHEN THE
CROWS VISIT**

INTRODUCTION

Ayesha Dharker



INTRO BY

INDHU RUBASINGHAM



Indhu Rubsingham

Anupama and I initially worked together on her play *Free Outgoing* in 2007 followed by *Disconnect* in 2010, both of which premiered at the Royal Court and came out of Elyse Dodgson's International Playwrights Programme. It was a no-brainer to commission her when I became Artistic Director. Now to have her thrilling play *When the Crows Visit* close our re-opening season is incredibly fitting, both to the work we do here at Kiln Theatre and to the themes and vision of Anu's play.

A political drama that transposes the themes of Ibsen's *Ghosts* to modern day India, *When the Crows Visit* examines the dangers of misogyny and how women can perpetuate cycles of violence through their desire to be protective of their loved ones. It's a play that came from discussions Anu and I had regarding the 2012 Delhi bus rape, the horrific nature of it and how so many turned a blind eye. How does this happen? We questioned the many possible reasons behind this and how society's culture and media are entrenched with the patriarchy that permeates many countries.

The play looks at family relations and how these bonds can turn and twist. What happens when family bonds are stronger than the justice system? Unfortunately, there is an abundance of misogyny and violence against women globally, witnessed daily, and this story highlights the complexity of the issue and how we need to be vigilant in the fight against it, together.

In my opinion, Anupama is one of the most important voices coming out of India now. It has been a wonderful cast and creative team to work with; the commitment, passion and intense discussions have been both vital and invigorating. The story keeps me absorbed even through many drafts and weeks of rehearsal, and I hope it does the same for you!

THE PLAYWRIGHT

WHEN THE
CROWS VISIT

Ayesha Dharker and Bally Gill

ANUPAMA CHANDRASEKHAR

THE PLAYWRIGHT SHOCKING INDIA

Guardian Article by Arifa Akbar

Her dramas confront the growing horrors facing women in India today. Now she's reworked Ibsen's *Ghosts*, taking out the syphilis and putting in the Delhi bus gang rape of 2012.

Anupama Chandrasekhar isn't one to shy away from a tough subject. The Indian playwright has written about acid attacks, sex tapes and her home country's culture of patriarchal violence. "I have been asked so many times, mostly by men, 'Why don't you write comedies, or plays that celebrate India?'" she says. "I tell them: on the day that these things don't happen any more, I will happily start writing bedroom farces."

Her latest play, *When the Crows Visit*, takes Ibsen's *Ghosts* as its inspiration. This may seem something of a departure, but Chandrasekhar found a surprising degree of affinity within the drama. "Here is a white, male, Norwegian playwright from the 19th century," she says, "and yet, as an Indian woman in Chennai in the 21st, I find so much resonance in his work." It is a brilliantly creepy play, building up tension and horror through the crows that bridge the worlds of the living and the dead.

There is one vital – and shocking – twist in her splicing of India with Ibsen. The original featured Mrs Alving and her syphilitic son Oswald, grappling with the awful disease handed down from his father. But in *When the Crows Visit*, the toxic inheritance comes in the form of sexual violence against women. What's more, the mother figure, played by Ayesha Dharker, is both a victim of this violence and an enabler. One reference point in the play is the Delhi bus gang rape of 2012. Even though this takes place off stage, the horror is palpable, spreading through the script like a contagion.

The play is directed by Indhu Rubasingham, artistic director at London's Kiln theatre, and as the three of us sit in her attic office we talk about turning such inflammatory material into charged drama. It was imperative that the play be conceived by someone rooted in Indian society, says Rubasingham. "Anu's not only a brilliant playwright – she is writing from a place of knowledge and lived experience. Immediately after I got this job, I wanted to commission her."



Anupama Chandrasekhar

“

I'M FASCINATED BY HOW CULTURE AND PATRIARCHY EXPRESSES ITSELF IN HOW WOMEN ARE SUPPOSED TO BEHAVE – AND I THINK IBSEN WAS TOO.”

You sense the media fatigue around crimes against women. Outside of the cities, it's just another incident ... candlelit vigils don't happen

Chandrasekhar has an important reason to return to the Delhi rape. Sexual violence, she says, has become more rife in India since 2012, despite all the national and international hand-wringing that followed the case. “It was not a one-off incident. It has happened over and over again since, and has just become more gory, more brutal. But you can sense the media fatigue around the reporting of crimes against women. If it happens outside of the cities, it's just another incident. The candlelit vigils don't happen for women in small towns and villages.”

The resurgence of violence in the country has coincided with the rebirth of its rightwing movement and this, says Chandrasekhar, is complicated by the conflict between modernity and conservatism. “Even 30 or 40 years ago, Indian women were growing up freer than girls are now. My grandmother is a pre-independence woman.” India gained its freedom from Britain in 1947. “She was brought up on the idealism that women are as important as men for the growth of the country. She sees what's happening to the women around her and says, ‘What's happened to that promise?’

“You have polls in Tamil magazines debating what is an appropriate way for a woman to dress. Is it OK for them to wear joggers? Is sleeveless OK? You wonder which century you're living in, but that's the thing with India. We live in different centuries at the same time: the 21st and the 18th.”

She feels that women's rights are being reeled back around the world, not just in the subcontinent. But it is how this happens locally that interests her as a playwright. In India, the twin privileges of money and parental protection render some women safer than others. “The most disenfranchised in a lot of societies, not just India, are working-class women,” says Rubasingham. “The minute you have money and power behind you, you can get out of situations.”

The women of privilege in Chandrasekhar's play not only work alongside men in cities, often proving to be better at their jobs, but are also the enablers and protectors of the flawed and violent men around them. Female complicity is an ethically thorny area, I suggest. Was Chandrasekhar worried that the audience might end up blaming the women?

“I, like Ibsen, am just trying to be faithful to my society's dynamics,” she says. “I'm fascinated by how culture and patriarchy expresses itself in how women are supposed to behave – and I think Ibsen was too.”

So was Ibsen grappling with “the woman question” as it was labelled in his time? Could he be considered a feminist playwright? And is that why we are seeing female directors and writers increasingly adapting his works? These have included Tanika Gupta, who recently relocated *A Doll's House* to 19th-century India; Cordelia Lynn, who turned Hedda Gabler into the far older Hedda Tesman; and Rubasingham herself, who directed Samuel Adamson's *Wife*, another reworking of *A Doll's House*.

“He was ahead of his time,” says Rubasingham. “What he was really writing about was the tension between the individual and society. Just take *A Doll's House* – a woman breaking all society norms and leaving her husband in that time was unheard of.” Chandrasekhar first read the play decades ago and its resonance has never left her. “To me, Ibsen's up there with Shakespeare, because it doesn't matter which era or what culture you are living in, you find him speaking to you as a contemporary.”

“

I SAW PEOPLE MY AGE DOING IMPORTANT THINGS AND SAW HOW IMPORTANT THEY FELT THEIR VOICES WERE TO THEIR OWN COUNTRIES. I FELT I COULD BE PART OF THIS. I COULD MATTER”

Despite her love of literature as a young woman, Chandrasekhar came to playwriting circuitously. She started off as a news journalist but ended up on a business publication, dissatisfied by its focus on money and restrictive language. Yet it was this background in reporting that fed her social conscience when she began writing plays. After doing a part-time British Council course in Chennai, she got a fellowship at London's Royal Court and her career was born in earnest. “I saw people my age doing important things and saw how important they felt their voices were to their own countries. I felt I could be part of this. I could matter.”

Her first – and much celebrated – UK play was 2007's *Free Outgoing*, which dramatised the insidious power of the internet, as a teenager's sex tape is circulated around her school in Chennai (or Madras, as the capital city of Tamil Nadu state was formerly known). The same year in India, *Acid* was staged by the Madras Players, featuring the horrific titular attacks on women. Then came *Disconnect*, again set in Chennai – this time in a call centre that collects credit card debt – which revolves around a young call centre worker who becomes romantically fixated on a debt-ridden librarian in Illinois.

The threats to political theatre in India: fundamentalism and escapism

Her work has not been cancelled or gatecrashed by the police, but she is constantly under pressure to tone it down or remove its contentions. Yet she resists. There is certainly a rising generation of bold young women writers in India, she says, even if they are not all playwrights – but #MeToo is not having the same impact it had in the west. “For instance, a Tamil singer outed a very famous lyricist and you'd think that the whole of society would support her. It didn't. She has been banned by the industry and he's doing the things he always did. Her career has been destroyed. She's not the only person you see this happening to. Women are speaking, but they are being punished for it. This is the difference.”



Mariam Haque

REHEARSAL DIARY

WHEN THE
CROWS VISIT

Asif Khan, Ayesha Dharker and Soni Razdan



REHEARSAL NOTES BY TYRRELL JONES

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR ON THE PRODUCTION



First day on our Feet

Today is the first day on our feet. We have spent the last three days around a table, reading and discussing the play. Indhu likes to work quickly, keeping conversations focused so we concentrated on establishing the facts of the play, making some choices about certain characters but in the main leaving any important artistic decisions to be discovered on the rehearsal room floor. Already at the end of the first week we start to explore those decisions.

We are going scene by scene, creating a rough draft. Indhu focuses on how characters react to each other in the moment. Each line must be reactive to what was said before and actively trying to influence the outcome of the scene in favour of the character. Each time a moment is explored we try a new possibility, a new option. The favourite moments are kept, to be tested again the next time we visit the scene. It is a process of trial and error which is done with pace and efficiency, to ensure each moment gets as much testing as possible.

The focus is very much on the acting, rather than talking about acting. Many rehearsal processes can spend almost half the time discussing how the last bit went or what to do next. Indhu keeps that discussion to a minimum, ensuring that most rehearsal time is focused on the acting. You can see it paying dividends already.

Bally Gill and Ayesha Dharker



First Day with Puppets

Today we had the first session with the puppetry director, Matt Hutchinson. The crows are such an important metaphor in this piece; they are sin, ancestors, guilt, patriarchy, omens, menace, foreboding, rebirth... they are a metaphor which keeps growing and evolving as the play progresses. It is an ambitious ask.

Once we had worked out the basics we graduated to working with the beautiful crow puppet Matt had made for the production.

Of course, the puppet is only half the story, the next stage is using shadow. Using shadow to create artistic effects is a hugely satisfying and surprising experience. Light doesn't always do what you might expect it to. So, we have experimented with various effects and now have a palette to choose from. Later when working through scene changes, we will try and experiment with different options and see which works best in which moment.

Practical Puppetry Basics

Start with a Tennis Ball

The single most important skill for a puppeteer is hand eye co-ordination. To pull off the convincing manipulation of puppets you will need great dexterity.

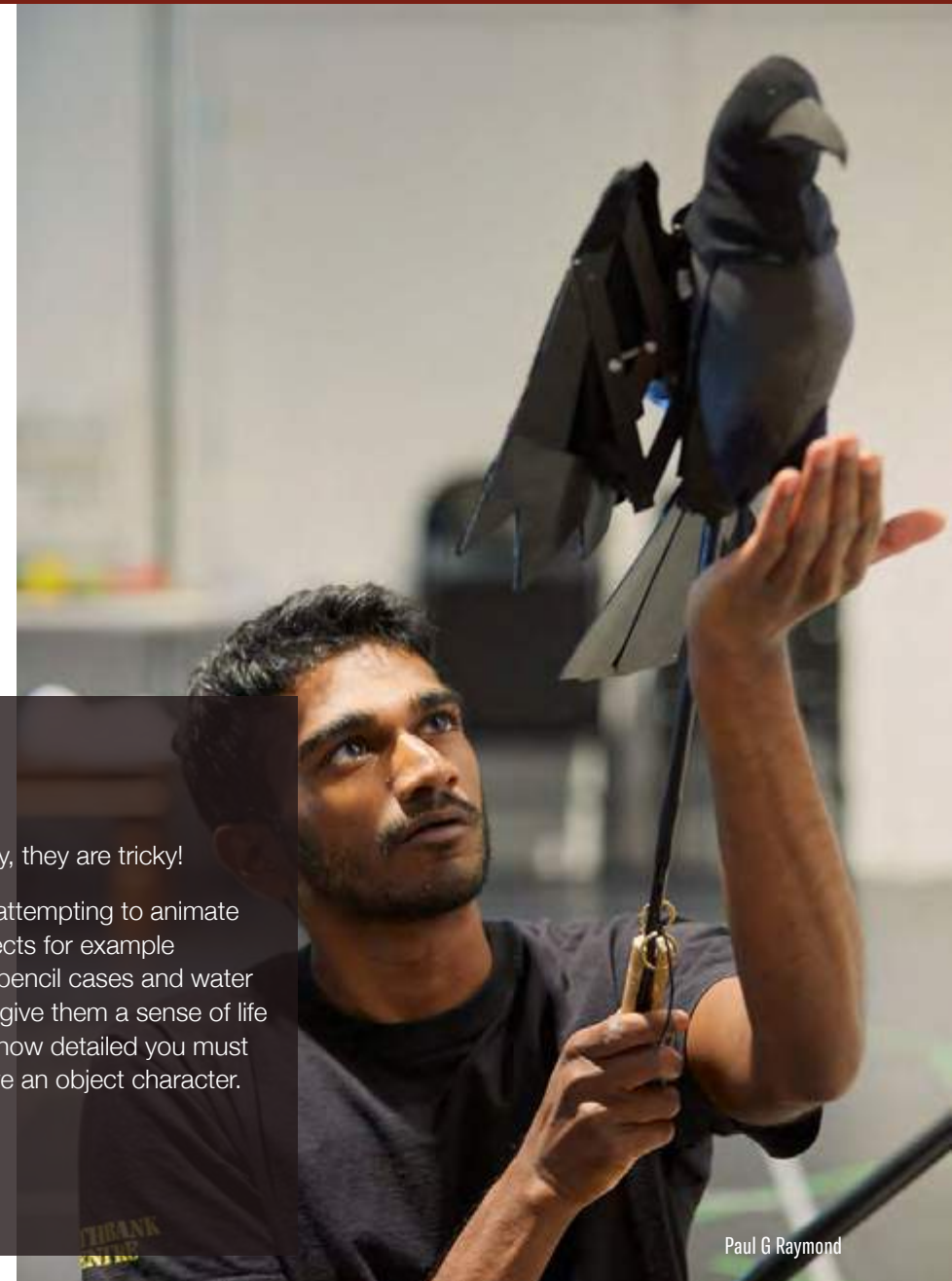
Begin with doing lots of games involving tennis balls.

For example:

1. Throw a tennis ball to a partner with one hand, while you receive a ball simultaneously thrown by your partner in the other.
2. Bounce a tennis ball to the floor from one hand to the other, then do the same thing but through your legs.

Give them a try, they are tricky!

Then work at attempting to animate inanimate objects for example puppeteering pencil cases and water bottles. Try to give them a sense of life and work out how detailed you must be to really give an object character.



Paul G Raymond



Voice and Accent work

The careful work of developing each character in the piece is happening as we try and retry each scene again and again in different ways. Indhu, giving little notes here and there focusses in on what the character wants; what is important for the actor to communicate? What story it is she wants to tell?

This afternoon we have a second visitor to the rehearsal process: vocal coach Edda Sharpe. She is an expert on accent, she has even developed an app which has a huge library of accents from all over the world. She is also an excellent teacher in how to use them in acting. She explained that the Indian accent, and south Indian in particular, is spoken with a much more relaxed mouth than the English accent. She instructs the actors to place the voice in the front of the mouth and use the tongue softly. We then work out how to say all the names in the play working out where the stress is (or isn't) in the word.

Edda explains that it takes time to really develop an accent, it requires careful vocal work and practice from the actor. It mostly likely requires hours and hours of listening to recordings of those who speak with the accent analysing what the sounds are and how the mouth technically makes them.



Asif Khan



Movement

Having been working hard developing the imaginative and vocal aspects of the actors' performances as we enter the third week of rehearsals it is important to refine some of the more challenging aspects of the physical performances, this is where movement director Diane Alison-Mitchell comes in.

Diane works supporting actress Soni Razdan in making some decisions about what exactly gives Jaya difficulty walking. She decides that she had her left hip replaced about two years ago but hasn't made much effort with the rehabilitation exercises which is why she still requires a wheelchair mostly, although she can walk with difficulty. We decide that most movement involving the affected hip is to some degree uncomfortable, and created a scale of pain which took Soni through 'twinge' through 'dull ache' and 'biting pain' to 'agony'. We explored and rehearsed what each one might look like, we then had a palette we could make use of when we returned to rehearse the scene the next time.



Soni Razdan and Aryana Ramkhalawon



Asif Khan and Bally Gill

Exercises for Multi-Roling

Physically explore the following questions with each of your characters:

- What does the character do a lot of? What are the repeated tasks? What are they good at?
- How do they move through space? Are they direct? Do they meander?
- How do they look at things?
- Where in their body do they hold physical tension?
- What is their outlook on life?
- Are they a quick thinker or do they take time over decisions?
- How do they behave when relaxed?
- How do they behave in high stakes situation?

Then vocally, choose one line from each character and speak it repeatedly, imagining different situations (work, family, home, the street etc.)

Discuss and examine the difference in the decisions you have made physically and vocally between your character. Does one character move in straight lines and the other in relaxed curves? Is one more comfortable in their surroundings and the other more anxious?

These distinctions will help physically and vocally distinguish between the two and create stronger characters



Final Week in the Rehearsal Room

As we begin to run the whole play together, we start to really understand what we have. The important thing now is to give the actors plenty of experience running the show in full. As they discover their characters' journeys through the play, things start to drop into place for the creative team. We start to think about the rhythm of the piece as a whole and realise how important red herrings are and how far we can go with them.

For instance, we realised that in the first half we could make the audience believe it was a play about police corruption when the inspector first enters if we really emphasised his corrupt behaviour on arrival. There was already a bit of this, but we brought it out more to make sure we were leading the audience on a false trail.

We also realised that the first five scenes were a danger area in that the audience does not yet know what is at stake. Indhu didn't want those scenes to feel expositional so pushed Ayesha to play Hema as unreasonable and short tempered as possible in those early scenes. This ensured the stakes were high from the beginning and there was high tension throughout, the audience searching for hints, clues as to what had created such a hard mother.

Ayesha Dharker and Bally Gill



Detail from a Scene Transition Between Scenes 7 and 8

We transition from Kavitha's city flat in Chennai back to Jaya's bedroom, where she sleeps in the middle of the day, having a nightmare. The sound design is dark and brooding with an insistent drum underneath. We are in almost blackout as the furniture is moved, we barely see the actors and stage management, just two profiles shining into the top of the rafters of the set, the haze creates an eerie effect as the light diffracts through it. Then as we hear a crow caw and the sound of feathers flapping the light above the fan fades up softly creating moving shadows on the bed and floor as the fan slowly rotates. One actor sits in the wings

with a small carousel with cut out figures of men, he spins them in front of a light shining onto the stage, creating the eerie effect of rotating shadow men around the Jaya's head as she tosses and turns. Three black feathers are dropped from the truss and float softly to the foot of Jaya's bed. The door opens and a long shadow is cast by a man in the doorway who is back-lit. She jerks awake and the man steps forward, we realise it is Akshay, her grandson. The effect is beautiful, laden with tension and foreboding. Before even the first line is spoken the audience is gripped, or at least, so we hope.



Technical Rehearsals

Technical rehearsal in this production is very much about creating atmosphere. Of course, there are all the things which are practical; when this or that object must be set, sightlines, timing of entrances and so on. But this tech week has reminded me that the phrase ‘technical rehearsal’ can be misleading. Many might assume that the phrase implies all the creative work has already been done. This is far from the case; tech week is a hugely creative time for the director. It is the time when everything comes together; sound, lights, puppets, design, actors, all the elements of the production. It takes great skill and artistry from the director to do this well. As Indhu sits amongst her creative team, it is as though she paints in four dimensions, her palette not filled with paint but with different ideas from herself and her collaborators. Even with four full days of technical rehearsals there is no time to waste. Things look as though they happen very slowly, but the decisions are happening fast. Thousands of tiny, decisions build to create a production of beauty where every light, every note, every shadow has been carefully deliberated over.



Bally Gill and Mariam Haque



WHEN THE CROWS VISIT | **CREATIVE TEAM**

Ayesha Dharker and Soni Razdan

Matt Hutchinson

SHADOW PUPPETRY DESIGNER AND DIRECTOR

Working with Shadow and Light

“So, I think I might need some sort of crow” says Richard (Richard Kent, Designer) to me as we are catching up (we have worked together in the past and he’s a brilliant friend) “Indhu and I are thinking about shadows, maybe you can help?”. These opening lines of conversations have become quite the norm for me, but it’s usually the spark that sets off a collaboration and me joining a creative team. Ultimately, I’m always looking at the language of the show and how I can help heighten, embellish or help others in the telling of that story.

Naturally, for me, there’s been some hefty research into crows - documentaries, stopping in the street to watch them, finding references on their anatomy, etc. It’s always very satisfying to take on projects like this, you become a mini expert on something for a brief period of time. Crows’ references in folklore are worth a mention here. Usually associated to premonition or a communication, in some cultures they are associated with doom and gloom and in others they bring luck. Many tie their image and appearances to that of ancestors or deceased family members visiting their living counterparts. It’s such a pivotal connection and role in this play. They also have a superbly recognisable silhouette that works well in shadow.



Matt Hutchinson

Working with shadow and light as a malleable object to play with offers a delicacy and detail for naturalism, but are easily abstracted too. In talking through the world and the design of the play it felt apt, and that we had the option, that shadow was present and had a place throughout. In watching horror films and thrillers, Hitchcock for instance being a prime example, I was really intrigued to examine how suspense and eeriness was built into a story arc, and how a character's experience or perspective can bleed into and affect the world around them. Shadows have a wonderful ability to be beautiful and yet so ominous too - perhaps because it itself isn't the actual representation of the entity. It's just an indication that something is there to cast it, watching, waiting....

Part of any puppetry process is always figuring out the purely practical matters of how we do things. Taking into consideration how much space, what is physically capable, and how to build things to make them as purposeful, functional and impactful as possible. Working in shadow I find I am thinking more about pictures and images and what it will look like as a final result rather than the elements that I need to achieve that; I've had to work backwards a lot of the time. Shows like this demand paying really close attention to the story, staging, and the moments you wish to create. You're thinking about the atmosphere, tone, sensation and how everyone can help contribute to that from their own disciplines.

It's a very real play at its heart: the characters are very real and it's set in a very real world dealing with real events; things that could actually happen. It felt imperative however that we were able to have a dial ranging from realism or naturalism, and then an ability to warp, distort, abstract, intensify and heighten.



Ayesha Dharker

A QUICK CHAT WITH SOUND DESIGNER
AND COMPOSER**Max Ringham**

I asked Max about the challenges he encountered in working on *When the Crows Visit*. He explained that the main challenge for him was getting the musical world right. He didn't want it to be too Indian, as a western composer it would have felt wrong to attempt an impersonation of Indian classical music and so too would it have been wrong to ignore that musical world entirely. So chose certain aspects of Indian classical music which would be most useful for creating a sense of tension in the music; Indian percussive style and long drone notes underscoring music.

He then worked with these using western instruments. Many of the percussion sounds you hear in the piece were actually created using a library of "prepared piano" sounds. These are sounds made by playing a piano in unconventional ways, these might include banging the body of the piano, striking the strings with finger or other implements as opposed to the piano keys, or striking the piano keys while the strings have nuts or bots attached to them in unusual places. The effect is a tuned percussive sound, but one which is not necessarily placeable for most ears. It sounds unusual, other and surprising but it does not scream western classical tradition and can make use rhythms and flavours of Indian classical music without placing the music entirely in that world.



Bally Gill and Ayesha Dharker



Bally Gill

Another of his challenges was to create the sonic world of Chennai. He was determined to capture the sound of the city, so that when an actor opened a door or window in the house, the sounds from 'outside' would feel authentic. He used a website called freesound.org where amateur sound recordists upload recordings of things they think might be of interest and give permission for their recordings to be used free of charge by anyone who might need it. Amazingly he was able to find recordings taken of Chennai, they took quite a bit of cleaning up as they had mostly just been recorded on mobile phones or basic recording equipment, but after a fair bit of work, they were high quality enough to work through the theatre's sound system. So, all the birdsong, car horns, people shouting or singing you might hear when the doors are opened, really are from the city of Chennai itself. He told me that one of his proudest moments was when some of the writer's cousins who attended the preview told him 'that he had got Chennai exactly' that 'in their imaginations they were right back home.'

His third major challenge was getting the sound of the crows right. Initially we experimented with various crow caws. It worked well but it didn't quite give us all we needed to conjure their presence. Then Max started using recordings of the feathers rustling together as a crow flapped its wings. Suddenly the picture came into focus, our imaginations made the crows very real, as though they were close by. There was something about the sound of the feathers rustling which paired perfectly with the shadow puppetry and really brought the crows to life. In addition to this, as we were using many multiple crow caws throughout the show, Max started looking at different species of crow for different moments. Unfortunately, one crow didn't seem to have the vocal and expressive range we were looking for, so we were able to give the impression of some change in the crows' attitudes or behaviour by using caws from different species of crow.

Tyrrell Jones

Assistant Director

When the Crows Visit

CAST



AYESHA DHARKER
HEMA



BALLY GILL
AKSHAY



MARIAM HAQUE
UMA / KAVITA



ASIF KHAN
GOPI / INSPECTOR



**ARYANA
RAMKHALAWON**
RAGINI



PAUL G RAYMOND
DAVID



SONI RAZDAN
JAYA

CREATIVE TEAM

**ANUPAMA
CHANDRASEKHAR**
WRITER

**INDHU
RUBASINGHAM**
DIRECTOR

RICHARD KENT
DESIGNER

OLIVER FENWICK
LIGHTING DESIGNER

BEN & MAX RINGHAM
COMPOSERS & SOUND
DESIGNERS

BRIONY BARNETT
CASTING DIRECTOR

MATT HUTCHINSON
SHADOW PUPPETRY DIRECTOR AND
DESIGNER

DIANE ALISON MITCHELL
MOVEMENT DIRECTOR

EDDA SHARPE
VOICE & DIALECT COACH

TYRRELL JONES
ASSISTANT DIRECTOR

RC - ANNIE LTD
FIGHT DIRECTOR

STAGE MANAGEMENT TEAM

KATE AISLING JONES
STAGE MANAGER

DANNI HAYLETT
DEPUTY STAGE MANAGER

MADDIE SIDI
ASSISTANT STAGE MANAGER/BOOK COVER

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Paul G Raymond and Ayesha Dharker