

Nadia Fall, AD, Theatre Royal

Interview with Nadia Fall, Artistic Director of Theatre Royal Stratford East

Sue Dunderdale

Can you talk about your background, and what made you think you wanted to direct in theatre?

Nadia Fall

At school, I was interested in English and drama and plays, but I never thought “that” was for me. I was engaged in that slightly but was always a bit shy. The girls who had been to the junior school, or were in favour with the drama teacher, were always put forward – I would be there shyly, in the background, willing my way forward. Culturally, my parents were very against any idea of “the arts” being something for me or – for girls, for women – for anybody really. They thought it was just a frivolous hobby and discouraged it at every point. I came to the arts by accident; when I was in Paris at university, I had extended my year abroad and was living there. I got involved with a dance company, who did lots of what is now called “participation work”: working in communities in Paris, using dance, art, and various elements of hip-hop culture to engage with communities – and I got the bug. I really got involved – I did a dissertation about it, I photographed it. When I came back to London, I applied for an Arts Council bursary. They were looking for trainee producers in the theatre – I got a placement in a small-to-medium touring company called TARA Arts, a South Asian company. They probably thought: “Ooh, get the South Asian girl and put her in there.” In those days, that was the thing to do, I suppose! (Laughs)

Sue

“Put her where she should be!”

Nadia Fall

Yeah, exactly. Nevertheless, it was an extremely brilliant and informing experience. I didn't really know what "theatre" was, I didn't know what a "director" was exactly, or what they did – I didn't know how the mechanics of a company, or a theatre, worked. Because it was a small company, I was able to turn my hand to everything: a bit of producing, a bit of marketing, a bit of youth work, and "participatory work". But what I was constantly drawn to was what was going on in the rehearsal room, and the actors – I've always been beguiled by actors. I remember saying to my boss, the artistic director: "I'd really like to get into directing!" And he went: "You will never be a director!"

Sue

Was this Jatinder [Verma]?

Nadia Fall

I loved him. He was a real father figure, actually.

Sue

Why did he think you wouldn't be a director?

Nadia Fall

I don't know why he said that. He'll probably not remember it – or deny it, like my father does about everything I bring up now! But the opportunity at TARA was extraordinary, and I was able to really understand theatre. I thought: "Right, sod that!" and I left. It was two weeks before a course at Goldsmiths in "Theatre Directing" – they were full, and I pleaded with the course director – anyway, I got on. What was brilliant about that course was the people I met, and that it was very practical. In fact, before that, TAMASHA Theatre Company had a two-week masterclass, bringing Asian directors and designers together – I managed to get on that, and that was what really got me into it. I made friends and got on very well with the designer, scenographer; we actually set up a theatre company together. So, my first experiences of plays was putting them on in pub theatres and found spaces, with my designer and through our company. In fact, we did that as my end-of-year play: begging, borrowing, stealing – learning how to direct. So much of being a director in this country is about being a producer, unfortunately.

Sue

For your generation, yes. Not for my generation, you see, because if you got work, you got Arts Council funding. It was always there anyway.

Nadia Fall

It wasn't the case for us – it was a complete hustle all the time. I've got to say, it has always remained that way, in some form or another. Of course, I have the privilege and honour of running a building now, through precarious times, but, even then, you're constantly working the game out – and the producing side of it out. So, “director-as-producer” is definitely what I was, and what most emerging directors are. I'm sure the maths is: you spend most of the time raising the money and the ability to put on the play, and much less time actually in the room, doing what you love: getting lost in the words, and the actors – making the work. You're constantly trying to redress that awful balance!

Sue

Do you have a producer at Stratford?

Nadia Fall

Yes, we do. We have a freelance creative producer, and an in-house person who does more of the budgets and planning. But what I've sacrificed at Stratford, I've never had artistic associates, and I found that incredibly difficult and lonely. I like to bounce off ideas, talk ideas out, however left-field, bonkers, or upside down, to have that rigour of the thought process – I often lean on colleagues and friends. I would love to have artists in the building as part of the community. Luckily, we're just about to be sponsored to have two artistic associates, on salary, part-time for two years, sponsored by Sky Arts. So, even in this bleak moment, there is that kind of “light” of having someone out there watching work, someone with ideas.

It's essential, it's the fodder: it's what we do. And I think, often – in theatres, joyful as they are – they can forget. Because so much of a building – any building – is not about what goes on on stage. It's about the administrative development – even in “participation” – there are so many departments in a modern theatre. Actually, the amount of people that understand what happens in the room is low. Consider that: if we were a shoe factory, we wouldn't spend the day not talking about shoes! You know, it's a weird world. That's what I've found about running a building.

Anyway, it was a lot of fringe work, and assisting work, that's how I began. Assisting was really key because it allowed me access to large rooms, large companies. When you're starting, of course, you're working with very small companies: one actor, two, three at most. Whereas, if you get to assist at the National

or the RSC or whatever, you've got live musicians, dancers, and acrobats, and actors – work of scale uses a different part of the brain and is a different skill.

Sue

Of course, Joan [Littlewood] had Gerry [Raffles], who supported her, did all the finance stuff for her – and that really allowed her work, I think. She didn't have to do what you're doing.

Nadia Fall

It's such a skill to understand the logistics and mathematics of running a theatre company in a building. I have a brilliant executive director [Eleanor Lang], who started halfway into my tenure – which has only been less than three years. She's brilliant at understanding the logistics; it is a different set of skills. In this country, we haven't really, until recent years, appreciated the skill and the vision of the producer. A good artistic producer understands, and is passionate about, the art – they understand the eccentric nature of the artistic director, of the artist and their needs, and that is a really important post and skill. We wouldn't have got through this moment in time without that “counter” to my personality, and to my skill set. It's not that I don't understand budgets – it's that kind of “rebel” in the artist that wants to go: “Sod this, money is not what it's about.” Philosophically, I feel that arts, buildings, theatres – whatever – should be run by artistic directors, and not by executive directors. I think that, on principle, is key.

Sue

The executive – however brilliant – should be there to make your vision work out. If you start adapting to what their financial forecasts are, you get – subsumed.

Nadia Fall

Yeah. There have been moments, especially at this point, where the “hard maths” completely has you on your knees. You just think: “Well, what then? Do we not move forward?” But there is the argument: during the pandemic, if we put on any work – however small or humble – even a monologue, it loses us thousands and thousands of pounds a week. One could argue – well, for that run of a monologue is two people's salary, or one person's salary for the year – which is heartbreaking. But I don't see the purpose of a theatre that doesn't, in some small way, attempt at making art – or work with the community or something, during this time. If we're closed for a year-plus, and don't make any artistic offering, which we have already, what is our *raison d'être*, what's the point? I can see the argument that we've got to survive – but at what cost? It's

a really tough time at the moment, not just for us, but for the entire industry. I wonder whether it will ever be the same again, quite frankly.

Sue

How instrumental was your time at the National in your development?

Nadia Fall

It was hugely, hugely important for me, on so many levels. When I joined Stratford, there was an idea that I'd been gentrified, because I'd come from this "mothership" of the National Theatre – that I somehow wasn't a woman that could understand the needs of the community and Stratford East, being a 'people's theatre', and all that. Not that many people but there was an element which broke my heart, because they didn't understand, or know who I was, by those thoughts. I don't need to go into detail, but I am not from such a background at all: I don't like to bang on about it – but I grew up in a council house. My parents still live there! (Laughs)

Sue

That's important to me, as a working-class woman. And I think it's important in the industry, because I don't think the working-class voice gets through often enough.

Nadia Fall

No, it doesn't. Certainly, and my generation and the way we dealt with it, being from a South Asian background – coming here when I was nine or ten and living between different countries until then – I learned very quickly to adapt, to understand and read the environment I was in and learn how to work within it. Of course, I understood that the National Theatre was a very important institution. But with my background: working class, South Asian, whatever you want to call it – a child of immigrants, I learned to adapt. I was always taught: "You need to work harder than everybody else, keep your head down, don't complain – get on with it." That's who my parents are and have always been. I think that the younger generations – which is very exciting and important – want to deconstruct, and pull down the buildings and the institutions, and they have a different way of dealing with it. I admire that – that wasn't my way. My way was to learn, to adapt, to fit in, to hustle, to work out until I could keep on telling my stories in the way that I would. The National was really important to me, because I had a baby – I was a single mother, and it was important to put food on the table. I wasn't in a situation where I could just put on fringe productions and lose money and use my own

money – I had to have an income base. So, I did a lot of participation work in my twenties: workshops, making work for, and with, community groups – I worked with women’s groups; in schools; in pupil referral units; prisons; mental health settings – psychiatric wards. That’s what I did, and I also worked as an assistant director. The National was so important, because I made a wage, as an assistant director. Then, I had access to the room: the room where great actors are metres away from you, acting at you. There is nothing more thrilling, and more of a privilege than that. You’re enveloped in the spirit of theatre, and the craft, at a very high standard – you have access, and you look at people with great skill. You have access to the understudy company – it’s your responsibility to rehearse and put on a show with the understudy company. It also gets you connected with other fellow artists – so you can know who that great lighting designer is, or indeed who their assistant is, who might work on your fringe show. It’s all part of learning process and having an income. I found the National Theatre to be this incredible factory that looks glamorous on the outside but is kind of shabby on the inside! We’d eat together in the canteen, we’d gossip together – even now, I love the idea of working in a kind of “factory” – I love clocking in and clocking out. I was always built for “PAYE” life: going in, seeing a person that I know, gossiping with that person – that routine. I liked my years at the National, for that reason. I was never on the “wage” officially, but I did have quite a few jobs there as an assistant.

Sue

The first time I heard about you was from an actor called Barbara Kirby.

Nadia Fall

Oh, I loved Barbara. She was fantastic. A very funny woman. She lived in Chislehurst, didn’t she?

Sue

I remember her talking about you, when you were assisting, rehearsing her as an understudy.

Nadia Fall

Habit of Art – Alan Bennett. So, yes – the National was my “coming-of-age” as a director, so it was very important to me. I walked past it the other day, and I thought: “God, will I ever direct a play in that building again?”

Sue

You have directed there since you left, haven’t you?

Nadia Fall

Yes, but I just don't know – maybe it's a bad day to be having this conversation! (Laughs) Some days, I think: "We'll be fine. It will all come good in the end". On others, I go: "Maybe theatre with big sets and big companies, costumes, and wigs – maybe that's – gone, for the foreseeable future". I loved directing there, the Lyttelton especially – I love that space.

Sue

When you moved to Stratford, how aware were you of Joan Littlewood's legacy?

Nadia Fall

I was aware of the legacy. I had been to the theatre before. I'd made work in East London quite a lot. A lot of the participatory community work that I'd done over the years was in Newham, in Tower Hamlets. So, I knew the area from a different perspective, actually – a "[from the] ground up" perspective. I'd worked a lot in different settings, mainly in Newham. Funnily enough, one of the plays that I'm most fond of – because it moved me on so many levels and will always stay with me – is a play called *Home*, which was based on real-life testimonials of young people in the largest hostel in the country. We set music to it – it was a verbatim piece that I put together for the National, and it returned twice to the National. It was based on interviews of young people in this hostel that is just behind Theatre Royal Stratford East. It's a huge tower block: two hundred beds, extraordinary place, extraordinary young people – of course, the government shut it down in the end – completely ridiculously. I know, and knew the area very well, but I'd never directed at Stratford East before. I knew of her legacy a bit, but I didn't ever really study "Theatre" at university. I did the MA in Theatre Directing, which was a short, intense, very practical course – not an academic one. I read French at university! I didn't really know much about theatre, didn't go to drama school or anything like that – so, I knew a little bit about her – but not loads. When I got the job, I remember I was doing a show at the Bush Theatre. It was opening night, and Philip Hedley came – he brought me a pile of books about Joan, and gifted them to me, which I thought was really, really sweet actually! I only retrospectively knew of the detail – I'd known about some of her iconic plays, obviously. When I was programming my first season, I thought it was really important to have a season to sort of lay out your stall and show what you love – what kind of politics you hold, that kind of thing – and to show off the theatre really. Stratford East is a proper, big Proscenium arch – it isn't a studio space, but it's very intimate in many ways. It's an extraordinary space. The first play was a

kind of homage to Joan, really: we did a version of *Fuenteovejuna* with *The Village*, adapted by April De Angelis – in four months, at breakneck speed. Things that would normally take a year or two, we’ve done in Stratford in a month or two – we had to be fast! We put it in a setting of India, because I was very, very interested in what was happening in India with the rise of Fascism in the Modi government. I thought that would give it an anchor and a setting – but really, it’s a universal story about sticking it to “The Man” – the power of community, and the power of coming together and toppling an aggressive authority. I think that was very much Joan’s politics and Theatre Royal’s politics. *The Village* was our opener, and it was great. I loved that show. I really loved our version – we did it in verse. Polly Bennett, a brilliant movement director, devised this extraordinary visualisation of the women tearing the rapists apart. In India, they have a festival called ‘Holi’, with dyes that are sprayed and powdered – we used red powders everywhere, and it was just carnage! (Laughs) It was a pretty big showstopping moment. Anya Chalotra, who played Jyoti in our production, her poster was all over town. That was her second-ever show! She went on to play the lead in a programme called *The Witcher*.

Sue

What impact do you think you’ve had so far at Stratford, in the short time you’ve had, with the kind of work you’ve done?

Nadia Fall

I’ve got a really wonderful team that’s a mix of all sorts of people. There are lots of local people: for example, Angela [Frost], who was an usher there as a teenager, is now the head of box office in her forties. Her daughter, who’s an actor, is part of our front-of-house team. That’s how we work: there is a real “neighbourhood” quality to it. People have real love and affection and have given years to the theatre – plus, there’s ‘new blood’ there now, as well. I’ve managed to convince some people I really believe in, who are highly skilled, to join the team – and take quite a sizeable pay cut by coming to Stratford East. But knowing that by coming to our theatre, they can make a tangible difference through their work – sometimes you can’t, in a huge organisation. I’m really proud of the team – together, we’ve really grown things – we’ve had “successes”, like we were nominated for “x” amount of Oliviers this year; we had the first West End transfer, for *Equus* – of any play – since Philip [Hedley]. Those are some markers of success – good reviews, or financial success. But I think the “success” is that we’ve managed to keep the spirit of the theatre, and the politics of the theatre, and still make it high quality, and give any

other theatre in the West End, or uptown, a run for its money. I defy anyone to say that they saw “such-and-such” play at the West End, at the National or wherever, and came to Stratford and saw a lesser production. The quality of the artists is on a par, the production values are on a par – we make a buck go a long way! I’m sure we don’t have the budgets of everybody else. What I feel we’ve done in the short time is raise our artistic game: the quality of work is now balanced with the politics, the community, and everything else that matters. In my generation, coming up, if you saw Black and Asian work – my parents would be so grateful: “Oh, there’s this show on. I can go and book for it – it’s about my culture.” But now I think we’re beyond that – the new generation wants more than that. We don’t just want a show that represents us, or where we can see ourselves “reflected in the actor,” or whatever. We want quality, we want to be on the same level, and beyond – we want to be leading in some spheres, as working-class people, as Black people. We’ve got a long way to go on diversity – we haven’t “arrived.” If we’re talking about deaf or disabled communities – we’ve certainly done them a disservice across the board. Stratford East is part of “Ramps On The Moon,” a consortium where we do one large-scale show with a deaf and disabled team, which then goes to every theatre in the consortium. That’s been a really successful thing to be part of, but there’s a long way to go. I really feel we can’t be part of the conversation unless the work is of a standard, and I guess that’s what I’ve taken away from the National. I want our work to be just as incredible.

Sue

That’s exactly what Joan [Littlewood] was doing as well, with her standards.

Nadia Fall

Exactly – she was a leader, not a follower – not apologetic. Sometimes doing things that are “less-than” does a disservice to the community you’re trying to uphold. You’re better off doing one brilliant thing than ten not-such-brilliant things. I feel that we have made a mark, and a reputational change. Artists want to come and work with us and will consider working with us. I can talk to playwrights that are having their shows on at the Royal Court. I can say: “What about Theatre Royal Stratford East?” When I inherited the building, we were fragile, financially speaking. We are beginning to be more stable in many ways: we’ve grown an audience, quite significantly.

Sue

From the local area?

Nadia Fall

Yes. We've done stats and surveys and analysed this: our audience is primarily an East London audience. It's still a local audience – we've got a way to go – but we are hitting box offices of 70% plus. There's been growth, and the only philosophy behind it is: "Make it good and they will come!" Of course, that's a bit tongue-in-cheek, because it's been down to marketing and participation, and going out and talking about it – it's not just 'good work'. It took time: "The Village" had rave reviews, but still it took time for audiences to understand and trust us. The second show did better, the third even better. By the time I did [August Wilson's] *King Hedley*, we had doubled our audience. Now, with the pandemic, I am frightened that audiences are nervous – about their own livelihoods and jobs – but also, about the safety of going to the theatre. I think the government's done a brilliant job of scaring everyone and making things as unclear as it's possible to be! (Laughs)

Sue

That's a heartbreaking conversation, as well.

Nadia Fall

After all that great trajectory, I don't know whether now in this moment, we will lose that momentum by the state of the world. We've tried to keep our hand in: we've made audio plays and, we did a live show on a basketball court around "Black Lives Matter." I made a film based on key workers in East London, for which we did interviews with key workers in the area. It's a bit bleak – but there you go! We made it very quickly; it's more of a testimonial about the pandemic. It's showing on Wednesday the 30th, on Sky Arts – which is now free.

Sue

So, you're keeping it going – you've got yourself money for two Artistic Associates, which is brilliant. What are your hopes for the future – for Stratford, and for yourself – however long they're combined?

Nadia Fall

Like all artistic directors, I'm there for a period of time, and want to leave it in a great place for the next person. I would love to carry on making really important plays.

We made a decision to do classic plays, modern classics, as well as new plays: I'd like to do more new plays and grow the artistic offer. That's the dream, really,

of an artistic director. Because of the finances, you start off only being able to make a certain amount of your own plays – the rest are visitors, and gigs, and so on. The dream is that you have enough money in the bank to produce whole seasons. I remember, when I got the job, sitting down with any artistic director I could get my hands on! They were all so brilliant and generous and sat with me for coffee. Everybody had different advice, but the over-arching advice was, make change, make it quickly. Don't sit there thinking, "Mañana, mañana..." I remember sitting with some great people, but I remember David Lan saying: "When I started, we could only produce one of our own plays a year" – and look at the Young Vic now. It is a journey: we're all impatient, us directors want everything yesterday! I would love to be in a position where we have that freedom of expression, have more associates – more people. At the moment, it's so precarious for freelancers: basically, freelancers have been laid off. I am so fearful of people leaving the industry in droves, and never returning.

People want to survive and will survive. But I really am scared about the future and losing that talent. One day, if we do open – where will everybody be? Our workforce is 70% freelance! Had you asked this before the pandemic, the answers might have been a bit different. Now, I just pray to the 'theatre gods' that we survive the plague, that we thrive beyond it, and that our industry thrives beyond it. Freelancers from younger generations are saying: we need to dismantle the system, because the system hasn't really worked, and has been made in the image of very privileged "Oxbridge" White men of a certain generation. Bless them – they did loads of great things for the arts but did monopolise the position. And maybe it's time to deconstruct. I think there's real power in that argument, but I really hope that Stratford East, and a lot of our theatres survive, because we make such bloody good plays in this country. I've been all over the world, but the quality of work – whatever your taste - whether it's text-based or devised, especially written work – is second to none. I just hope we don't lose it all through this pandemic. Stratford's always been ahead of the game pioneering Black stories, queer stories [et cetera]. I really hope that continues because in the theatre world, we're getting more rigorous at looking at diversity – but in the outer world, I feel the opposite happening.

Sue

I was interviewing both Rufus Norris and Michelle Terry – and it's like the establishment is starting to deconstruct from inside, with its work on diversity and gender equality, and so on. I wonder how much it's to do with the fact that the government's going more and more to the right?

Nadia Fall

Maybe it's that pincer movement! Theatre is 98% of my life. Those who work in it are all obsessed. When I go take my son to his sporting event – he's a great sportsman – and I hear the "N word" being touted at him...in our theatre bubble, we're asking all the right questions, we're going: "This isn't bloody good enough!" But in the real world, the government is stoking racism and encouraging divisive thinking: people out there aren't living in our theatre bubble. Something very dark is happening out there. People fighting for the environment – Extinction Rebellion – all these brilliant people going: "Time is running out." And then the government trying to paint them as vigilante terrorist groups. There is something going on out there that is really disgusting. As theatre people, we mustn't just look at our navels, which we're always in danger of doing – especially at this time when we're trying to survive, and do advocacy, and all of that. We forget how dangerous it is out there: we've got to respond to it. I don't know how. We've always said: let the work speak for itself. We're in this horrible situation, where none of the emergency funding from the government bailout encourages work. In fact, we're not allowed to apply for work. We're not allowed to talk about freelancers and include them – we're just allowed to keep our business viable for this financial year. Well, of course, we can't express ourselves with our hands tied behind our back, but we must – that's all the power we have. I think it's quite scary what's happening out there.

Sue

I keep hoping it's the last gasp of White male brutality. What about film and television: do you see yourself doing more?

Nadia Fall

I did a little bit, this lockdown – because I was able to, and because it was the only way of making work, really. I was lucky enough to do an Alan Bennett – one of his *Talking Heads*, which found its way onto the stage at The Bridge, and is on now. I did a film, *No Masks*, through Stratford East and Sky Arts. I really enjoy film – as a typical "woman" thing to say: I'm still learning, and I've got a lot to learn. That's what women say. Men never say that!

Sue

If you're not learning, you're not being an artist.

Nadia Fall

(Laughs) Yeah, it's a new curiosity. I'm getting to understand it, little by little, a bit more each time. It's completely different to putting on a play. I understand

rehearsing an actor and getting a performance out of an actor. That bit I “get” – but it’s a different type of storytelling. I’d love to learn and do more, but it’s never going to have my heart the way that live theatre does! It just doesn’t, so far. The thing is, I can watch every performance of a play that I’ve made, and it’s different to me every time. Not so when you’re watching the edit or editing a film and wanting to jump off the closest bridge! (Laughs) Theatre is elemental. It’s such a basic human need, to process stuff: it’s group therapy. That’s why I feel it will always survive, and never go away: because the human race needs theatre to “digest” living, if you like! (Laughs) Theatre is where my heart is, I’m afraid. I’d love to do more film, but my first duty is to Stratford. And I wouldn’t be able to do film until my time at Stratford was finished, or if I had a gap – I had a gap because we were closed, but...it’s a funny old thing.

Sue

Anything else that you think I’ve missed, in talking to you about your vision of theatre life – your life in theatre?

Nadia Fall

I fancy myself as a bit of mischief-maker.

I hate rules; I hate people telling me what to do, and conforming. You know – that feeling of, when you’re in a library, everyone’s supposed to be quiet, and it’s the right thing to be – but you are obsessed with the idea of screaming in a quiet place! (Laughs) I don’t know what’s wrong with me!

Sue

That’s great soundbite, Nadia: “screaming in a quiet place”! I like that. That might be the title of your interview.

Nadia Fall

Oh, dear! I just can’t help it. I always do that, even when I don’t mean to. I find it fascinating in these “Zooms” that we have, as London theatres at the moment. We’ve been on Zoom throughout the pandemic or lockdown, and we still continue to be. We’ve got Rufus [Norris], Vicky Featherstone, Indhu [Rubasingham] and Lynette [Linton] – we’re all on the Zooms! We all know each other a little bit. Before the plague, we were all pitted against each other with this false idea of competition – mainly brought about by critics, or agents: “Ooh, so-and-so wants this play – actually, that person wants it!” We had this idea that we were in competition – when really, we’re not at all. We all want the same thing: if theatre’s brilliant in West London, and brilliant in East London, North London...it doesn’t matter! One good thing

that's come out of this, is: we've spoken to each other, and been there for each other. Those Zooms are hilarious, because we've all got our different personalities, and egos. I feel like I'm the person who just says the naughty thing, or the "wrong" thing – I can't help myself! One "light" to come out of this time is that people are talking to each other and taking the time to have a conversation.