

## The New Yorker – “All of his (The Delhi Walla’s) work together may add up to one of the most eccentric and encyclopedic ground-level portraits of a megacity in the Internet age.”

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### SPECIAL REPORT – **NEW STARS IN DELHI THEATER**

November 18, 2007 - by [The Delhi Walla](#) - In [General](#)

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(Clockwise from left: Aditee Biswas, Rudra Deep Chakrabarti, Amitesh Grover and Sankar Venkateswaran)

*The emerging heroes of Mandi House.*

**[Text and picture by Mayank Austen Soofi]**

A quick way to get noticed, even in the backslapping small world of Mandi House theatre, is to shock the audience. Reinterpret the classics, preferably heretically. Broach controversial themes (incest always helps). Ask questions, skip answers. Kick up dust. Stage acts that not many understand. Be post-post-postmodern. Indeed it is customary for the new generation, whose primary duty is to be ambitious, bold and different, to undergo this ritual. All this hard work, sometimes, concludes in stage thunder, strobe lightning, and glowing Sunday supplement reviews.

28-year-old director, actor, and musician, Sankar Venkateswaran carries with him the heavy odour of Gold Flake cigarettes. With a career that reads like an extended tour -theater studies in Calicut and Singapore; performances in Nairobi and Seoul; and workshop in a prestigious theater company in Tokyo - he certainly has the broad experience to match his ambition. Of his four-year-old actors' collective, Theater Roots & Wings, Sankar says, "The agenda is to prepare actors to initially communicate only through their bodies, then voice, text and finally to reach a point where an actor who isn't physically moving, is moving the audience."

Good luck to him but Delhi audience can be difficult to move. (They are usually indifferent) However another young stalwart, Rudra Deep Chakrabarty, a 27-year-old director from Kolkata, achieved the feat rather effortlessly on the opening night of *City of Djinn*s. Based on William Dalrymple's book, the play received rave reviews and ran to full houses. Although Chakrabarty has directed five plays since graduating from the National school of Drama (NSD) five years ago, Dalrymple's play was his big break. The budget was massive (Rs. 35 lakh); the cast star-studded (Tom Alter and Zohra Segal); and the audience included luminaries like Alyque Padamsee. Dalrymple was also impressed. "It was a really good effort. I never imagined that the book could have been mounted on stage," he says. (Trust Dalrymple for phrases that could be interpreted in more than one way)

Chakrabarty's first major venture was an equally mind-boggling and eclectic production – Ladakhi language adaptation of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. His tendency to stage complex productions is perhaps due to his fixation with history, archeology and politics. Well, this long haired director will need all that for his next project. Mahabharat. Scripted by Farookh Dhondy, the epic is being produced by Bobby Bedi (of Bandit Queen fame). Meanwhile Chakrabarty is doing his research in Kunuskhetra, Mathura, Dwarka, and of course the ruins in Delhi to get his ideas right. "We are re-visualising the epic for a new generation and have plans to employ innovative technology that has never been used before," he says.

Slightly younger than Chakrabarty, UK actor and Delhi resident Steven Baker stands out in the city theatrescape. He is a gora. After studying Drama in London, he has been successful in finding a place in the Mandi House scene. "I wanted to become more familiar with the traditions of theatre in India, and was lucky enough to train with Barry John sir on his last course in Delhi, before he located to Mumbai," says Baker.

Baker is a case in reverse osmosis. While the trend is to move to Bollywood after a stint in theatre, he is doing the opposite. Having worked on 15 films including block busters like *Krrish* and *Salaam-e-Ishq*, and madcap comedies like *The Loots of Punjab*, he made his debut on the British Council stage, with the classic line '*Kitney aadmi the?* All his Hindi dialogues were inspired by the film *Sholay*. Baker's most recent performance was at Kamani in the light drama *Khel Khel Mein*. "Steve's acting is always convincing. He also has a gift of striking an immediate rapport with the audience," says director Naveen Kastaria who cast him as a British soldier in the play.

Baker is one of the lucky few to be linked with Bollywood. Another young talent, director Aditee Biswas does not rule out the possibility of working in Bombay studios if the opportunity arises. She addresses controversial themes such as suppressed female desires. Her diploma piece in NSD was German playwright Dea Loher's *Tattoo*, a vividly told tale of incest (yes, incest!).

The portrayal of a father-daughter relationship got her instant recognition. Immediately after graduating, she was hired by Mahesh Dattani as Set Designer for his *Seven Steps Around the Fire*. M K Raina took her on as Assistant Director for *Meera*. More recently Biswas returned from a theatre trip to Japan, as the Assistant Director of *Helen*, of the three segments of the play *Performing Women*. It was performed in Bunka-mura, Tokyo's hallowed art-house complex. Biswas' strength primarily lies in her ability to interpret characters in novel ways by exploring subtextual references. Intrigued by the human mind and how it can be used to drive plots and characters, her fellowship play in NSD dealt with hysteria, a disorder that she describes as "striving to seek people's attention". (Hey, that's theatre!)

There are other ways of seeking attention. By manipulating the space, or interposing visuals. 27-year-old director Amitesh Grover used all that to show how a 90-year-old woman would look back on her life. One evening his actress sat down in the British Council courtyard as projector beamed images on a giant Buddha sculpture behind her. The projection was split into separate frames that ran clips, videotaped on different occasions of the protagonist's life. The snippets appeared one at a time with no linear chronology. Here's the teenager. There's the middle-aged lady. Now a happy wife. Now a divorced woman. The old lady expressed wonder that those strangers were once a part of her.

"*Memorable Equinox* was about digitization and memory," says Grover. This Kirori Mal alummus ("Keval Arora is the reason why I'm in theatre", he says) does a lot of crossover work where pre-recorded videos blend with live action and sound to create a uniquely different experience for theatregoers. Few months ago audience in Max Mueller Bhawan were mesmerized by *Electronic City*. A video camera placed on the roof captured the actor blowing bubbles on the floor. The effect on the screen, behind the stage, was that of a snowfall.

Grover, who studied 'visual language of Performance in London', has directed four plays in the city. All explored performance spaces and (ahem!) post-modern themes. His next play, in collaboration with Mayakrishna Rao, will deal with masculinity.

In December, theater lovers can decide for themselves if these talents have it in themselves or not. Sri Ram Center will premiere Sankar Venkateswaran's *Quick Death*. Scripted by Richard Murphet, it is the first time Delhi will witness the staging of a physical text, a genre in dramatics. NSD's Bharat Rang Mahotsav has invited Aditee Biswas to stage *Portrait of Dora*, Heléné Cixous' account of a Freud's patient suffering from hysteria. Amitesh Grover will discuss gender and sexuality in a new play with promises of "live images manipulation". Finally in February, Rudra Deep Chakrabarty will unleash the great war of Mahabharat. In Purana Qila, no less.

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promita - December 8, 2007 at 08:03:00 ->

I have a picture with me which intrigues me and pulls up a smile in dull moment

Rajendra - November 1, 2008 at 15:33:00 ->

I really wonder to see such talent in theatre world,who is so simple and clear in his thought.It's my privilege to meet a wonderful man like Rudra Deep Chakravorty by chance today.As I've some interest in theatre but his planning of Mahabharat is really exciting.Hope we'll see some mind blowing and altogether different Mahabharat.I pray to GOD for your grand success in life-Rajendra s.Vidya,Sita Devi Foundation,Delhi

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**The blogger is a devotee of Sufi Saint Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya and Author Arundhati Roy**

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**Biography of The Delhi Walla**

Since 2007, Mayank Austen Soofi has been collecting hundreds of stories taking place in Delhi, through writing and photography, for his acclaimed website The Delhi Walla. Every day, Mayank walks around the city with his camera and notebook to track down the part of extraordinary that exists in the seemingly mundane aspects of urban lives. By exploring and documenting the streets, buildings, houses, cuisines, traditions and people of Delhi, his work is also an attempt to give the megalopolis an intimate voice, and to capture the passing of time in this otherwise restlessly changing city.

Mayank is also a daily columnist for Hindustan Times newspaper, and the author of *Nobody Can Love You More: Life in Delhi's Red Light District* (published by Penguin) and the four-volume *The Delhi Walla* guidebooks (HarperCollins).

Mayank Austen Soofi compulsively publishes texts and photos on his website, Facebook and Instagram. Follow him:

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