

# Multicultural theatre examines Holocaust with *Corpus*

## Arts Scene

by Heather Solomon

Rahul Varma, co-founder and artistic director of Teesri Duniya Theatre, is convinced that humanity is capable of not repeating the horrors of history.

"If we truly understood the Armenian genocide, then there would have been no Jewish Holocaust, and then if we understood the Holocaust, there would have been no Rwandan genocide," he says. "The way events in the world have unfolded, our common understanding is our only hope to prevent such atrocities."

He proved that storytelling and dialogue between opposing camps are a step forward when he staged *Reading Hebron* in 2000, bringing to a post-play discussion table both Israelis and Palestinians.

"Dora Wasserman was among the audience members. She came and held my face in her hands and said, 'How did you do that?'"

The Indian-born Varma, a Montrealer since 1976, created Teesri Duniya Theatre ("Third World" in Hindi) 33 years ago to give South Asians a voice. He then broadened its scope across multicultural lines.

This will be exemplified by the production of young Canadian playwright Darrah Teitel's *Corpus* Nov. 13 to 30 at MAI (Montréal arts interculturels), 3680 Jeanne Mance St., under the direction of Liz Valdez,

who recently directed *Gas Girls* at the Segal Centre.

Valdez believes it's a play about "what it means to live with shame: people try to intellectualize it, forget it, deny it, everything but live with it." She is referring to the shame of the oppressor and also the shame of survivor guilt.

In *Corpus*, graduate student Megan scrabbles frantically for a thesis topic to cap her genocide studies, landing an idea through a German online contact who engages her affections.

As she pursues her research in a chat room, time falls away and the story is brought to life onstage, telling of a Nazi officer's wife who is in love with her tutor, a Jewish *Sonderkommando* whose job it is to dispose of corpses from the Auschwitz crematoria. He has been sent by her husband to teach her Polish.

The account seems perfect for Megan's Holocaust revisionist dissertation on the psychology of the perpetrators of genocide. Her angle is to prove whether Nazi supporters were shaped by events or biology, but she finds out, says Varma, that often these people lived a "dual life – one was real and the other was pretend, only to survive."

The play won the 2010 Canadian Jewish Playwriting Contest sponsored by the Miles Nadal Jewish Community Centre in Toronto, after it was workshopped and staged in Calgary, Banff and by the Harold Green Jewish Theatre.

Toronto-born Teitel graduated from the National Theatre School

of Canada's playwriting program in Montreal. She began writing *Corpus* after her friend, the grandchild of survivors, fled in tears while hearing a group of genocide scholars casually "comparing the numbers of people killed in mass graves in Rwanda and Cambodia to the Nazi Judeocide, and deciding what is or isn't a genocide according to theoretical rules."

"I thought here is a subject for a play, academic detachment and emotional response," Teitel says. "What happens in the end teaches a lesson. Struggle as we might to make this [the Holocaust] OK, it's not OK and we have to live with that knowledge."

"It's a modern-day third generation's perspective of this historical event," says Varma, who for the last few years has been producing a series on genocide that includes his own play, *State of Denial*, to be remounted in 2015, revolving around the Rwandan and Armenian genocides.

His research came from the Life Stories project (Life Stories of Montrealers Displaced by War, Genocide and other Human Rights Violations) co-initiated by Steven High at Concordia University to record oral histories and make them available for interdisciplinary inspiration.

The cast of *Corpus* includes Susan Bain, Davide Chiazzese, Holly Gauthier-Frankel, Ian Geldart, Melissa Paulson and Gilles Plouffe. Tickets are at 514-982-3386 or [www.m-a-i.qc.ca/billetterie/](http://www.m-a-i.qc.ca/billetterie/). Sunday matinees feature panel discussions. ■



Teesri Duniya Theatre artistic director Rahul Varma welcomes *Corpus* to his series on genocide, at the Montréal arts interculturels Nov. 13 to 30. HEATHER SOLOMON PHOTO



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