

**A Reflection of Myself, Who I Came From, and Who I Could Potentially Be**  
**Opinion Piece for *A Poem For Rabia***

**Written by Shaharah Gaznabbi**

*A Poem for Rabia* was like watching my reflection in the ocean. I found myself looking at this piece like a body of water that I could see myself in, slightly distorted by its ripples making me question my features. In this water, in this show, I'm looking into a tangible representation of history. *Mine*. The water I'm looking into has traversed time; it has always existed. This water has travelled and cycled, having been in the sky, in the air, and lives within us. It's most likely the same water that the dinosaurs looked into when they themselves were existentially contemplating their own history (I assume).

*A Poem for Rabia*, in such a specific way, was different from any other show I had seen before as it allowed me to see *myself*, who I came from, and who I could potentially be.

**The Opportunity I Had to Work Around the Show**

I've wanted to see *A Poem For Rabia* ever since Tarragon Theatre announced it for its season. I couldn't believe that there was going to be a Guyanese story being told onstage at one of my favourite Theatres in the city. Then I saw that Nikki Shaffeeullah had written it and it was an automatic yes for me. I thought the closest I was going to be to the show was simply from the audience, which in itself would've been a revolutionary experience.

When I was accepted into The Nightwood Innovators program, one of the opportunities we would have was a potential invitation to *A Poem for Rabia*'s Dress Rehearsal, as Nightwood was a co-producer. That possibility made me feel so lucky, and I was ecstatic.

Then, all at once I suddenly had 3 people in my inbox, one of them being Jade Silman who is the Artistic Associate and Head of Communications at Nightwood, sending me a call from Undercurrent Creations for a program in tandem with *A Poem for Rabia* called Many Waters, designed specifically for Queer Guyanese Artists. I was speechless because that's something that N E V E R happens. Never never never. Being gay is still illegal in Guyana, and oftentimes the LGBTQIA+ community is forced to remain closeted as the Caribbean, unfortunately, remains quite homophobic. There was a gravity I felt, in being asked to apply to be part of this Queer Guyanese program, and I didn't know when another program like this would happen again, so I applied. I believe my application for the program was just a gush about how

much Nikki's work meant to me. Luckily they didn't find me too creepy and accepted me into the program! I also asked one of my favourite humans and a fellow Queer, Guyanese artist named Amara Sukhnanan to participate alongside me. That built out the Many Waters Program which was made up of five Artists: Daniel Lyght, Chantele Sitaram, the LEGENDARY Guy Anabella, Amara, and myself.

This program was made possible through Undercurrent Creations, for which Nikki Shaffeeullah is the Artistic Director, and the AMY (Artists Mentoring Youth) Project, which Nikki is currently a Training Director for (and served as Artistic Director from 2015-2019), as well as in collaboration and additionally organised by Nightwood Theatre. I was blown away by how hard each of these organisations worked to reach out to people and find a community around the show. It felt incredibly selfless, and they treated each of us as legitimate artists who deserved to be showcased as part of everything they built around *A Poem For Rabia*. I think it speaks volumes to Nikki's work, especially in collaboration with the AMY project, of bringing emerging artists *in*. This program was gorgeously facilitated by Michelle Rambharose, Roya DelSol, and Morgan Davis.

### **About Nikki Shaffeeullah**

Nikki Shaffeeullah is like the cool older cousin I always hoped would be at the family function. When I first learned about Nikki, I was shocked that she existed. Honestly, I didn't think there were other Guyanese artists out there, never mind other Queer and Guyanese artists! Identities aside, I was delighted that there was someone like me who was creating the art I wanted to see. She facilitates spaces for emerging artists and is constantly rethinking how to make them safer. Nikki is laying down the foundation for future possibilities I'm working towards in my own art.

One thing was clear: Nikki was cool as Hell. She also seemed really really nice. I felt like if we ever got to meet, we would have this shared understanding that wouldn't even need to be put into words because we would both simply "get it". That is why meeting Nikki Shaffeeullah was surreal. I was out of breath from walking up the Tarragon stairs and I had just sent a really chaotic email, yet she recognized me right away even though I had my mask and a huge backpack on! She was such a lovely person right off the bat and helped me get settled, ensuring I felt right at home in the space. I felt like the luckiest kid getting to meet someone who I looked up to and genuinely respected for such a long time.

### **Backstage Insights & Personal Connections to Cast + Crew**

The day I had the opportunity to sit in on an early rehearsal through the Many Waters Program was the day I met the cast of *A Poem for Rabia*. I caught Adele Noronha, Michelle Mohammed, and Anand

Rajaram on a break when they were sitting on couches outside of the Near Studio upstairs at Tarragon Theatre. They asked me if I was from the Many Waters program and I said yes. They were incredibly approachable and, right away, invited me to sit: welcoming me into their conversation. They were lovely to share space with, however, when they reminisce about that first time I met them, they joke about how they “hounded” me with the question: “Are you Guyanese?”. When I answered yes, they eagerly leaned forward and suddenly I wasn’t talking to Michelle and Anand anymore, but rather Betty and Ramesh!

“How does me accen’ sound?” They asked as I cackled. It was glorious. What an incredible situation I had found myself in. Anand and Michelle genuinely sounded very good! Michelle was so in character that I legitimately didn’t know if it was her natural accent or not. Whenever Anand did *his* accent, the higher the pitch of my laughter in reaction to it was, the more accurate it was. There were moments when he sounded exactly like my authentically Guyanese uncles, and I was doubled over laughing.

Then, as they continued practising their speech, in true actor fashion, they started reciting Shakespeare monologues from memory in their Guyanese accents. I was FLOORED. They were *studying* the Guyanese accent, the accent that my mom came to Canada with in the 80s and soon after lost because she had trained herself to Canadianize her voice to avoid getting relentlessly bullied by her white peers. Now, these actors were working to refine that same accent, practising it with professionalism and so much care. It broke down any preconceived colonial idea I had potentially acquired about the Guyanese accent, as even my Grandmother felt that she spoke “proper” (aka with “less” of an accent), being from the capital city of Georgetown.

My heart was *bursting*, sitting in the Near Studio for the first time ever watching Co-Directors Donna-Michelle St. Bernard and Clare Preuss facilitate the rehearsal space. I wanted to make sure to soak up even the smallest things I was noticing. Again, Donna-Michelle was someone whose work I looked up to, and I couldn’t believe I was meeting (she co-wrote the text I was using in my 4th year Directing course!). The most impactful thing I learned from watching that early rehearsal was the way they analysed the script with the actors. They kept close attention to offers the actors were making as the directors facilitated a mature, intrinsic conversation when analysing the text, diving into its minute meanings.

My favourite direction Donna-Michelle St. Bernard offered in the room was “Today I’m hearing...”. Proving that she was really listening and staying receptive to what the actors were offering *that day*, she offered notes like “Today I’m hearing that Zahra feels...”. In my potential future as a director, this is

something I am empowered to include in my vernacular when I run my own rehearsal rooms. It was such a lovely, welcoming environment I had the pleasure of being a spectator in.

### **What I Loved About the Show**

#### Nikki's Writing

*A Poem for Rabia* is a show that allowed Nikki Shaffeeullah's unique ability to write powerful poetic imagery to emerge and blossom. What I responded to most was the imagery that Nikki uses in her writing, especially when describing the multi-sensory way we interact with water.

Other than the amazing poet she demonstrates herself to be, Nikki shows a very strong ability to develop character relationships. The relationship between Betty and Marsha was beautifully subtle in comparison to Anu and Rabia but still effective. I leaned in and felt their connection deep in my heart even though the closest moment of physical intimacy they had was a hand hold. With them, there was a trust yet struggle that Betty had in opening up again with Marsha, and watching Betty navigate that was very compelling. My other favourite relationship in the show was that of Rabia and Anu, the rich woman with the sari. The reveal that these two women were romantically involved, as well as how happy these two women seemed to be together made it a synesthetic experience for me. I could picture the lavish bedroom they were in, the golden lighting that must've filled the air, and the slight clanging of Anu's bangles.

Nikki also had a very brilliant way of leaving the audience with a sense of heartache, like the one I felt when we learned Anu plagiarised Rabia's poem in the Edinburgh Newspaper. Nikki layered it in such a way that my sorrow for Rabia didn't come from the fact that she was "wronged", but that her name would be historically forgotten. This poem was written by her, and nobody would ever know. That realisation made my stomach drop, and it was incredibly well done.

#### Performances (Adele Noronha, Michelle Mohammed, Virgilia Griffith)

There were fantastic performances offered by all members of the cast, and I want to particularly highlight Adele Noronha (Rabia), Michelle Mohammed (Betty/Anu), and Virgilia Griffith (Sheree/Marsha).

Adele, in the title role of Rabia, was playful, mischievous, mesmerising, and emotional. Noronha is the physical embodiment of "a sparkle in her eyes". Every cell of her body transformed into Rabia when she took to the stage, and I as an audience member was automatically transported to nighttime in 1852. Not

only did Noronha have this incredible ability to become Rabia, but she had this unique ability to build an environment through her acting. I felt this most when she was describing her finding comfort in one small, dirty, rickety corner on the deck of this overcrowded unsanitary boat soon to embark on her three-month journey. I saw what she was seeing, and that's the odd psychology of theatre, isn't it? It was truly incredible to watch, and Noronha completely immersed me in the story.

Michelle Mohammed's versatility and talent as an actor is beyond anything I have ever seen from a single performer in a theatre show. Mohammed played the roles of Betty and Anu, arguably taking on the most throughout the show, and dear lord did she deliver. She effortlessly switched between Caribbean and Indian accents throughout the show, masterfully embodying the two souls of Betty and Anu with no overlap when she was one or the other. There was no trace of Anu in Betty, and vice versa. Mohammed also had the incredible ability to play the two eras she was cast into with justice, moving effortlessly from a rich flamboyant 1851 woman in a sari to the very analog, straight-laced, no-nonsense 1952 secretary/typist. Michelle's performance was my parent's personal favourite:)

Virgilia Griffith portrayed a fantastic Marsha and Sheree. I felt the strong desire to sympathise with her two characters and felt that she had the outstanding ability to layer the complexities of each of them in very captivating ways onstage. There was a fire in both of her characters as they each had their specific relationship to activism. Virgilia balanced this within her two characters in sympathetic yet firm duels in 2052 with Zahra and 1952 with Betty. It was a pleasure to have the opportunity to watch Virgilia perform.

### Loss of Grandparents

I adored the way Nikki Shaffeeullah challenged me to think about this history that I am only at the beginning of my journey of uncovering.

For example, her character of Zahra wrestled with the grief of losing her grandmother and being called a "fairweather descendant" when calling her grandmother an ancestor. Another reason why *A Poem For Rabia* was an oddly timely show for me was because this year I lost both of my Grandparents on my Dad's side 10 days apart from one another. I don't think, before then, I appreciated how much of my Guyanese identity was grounded in my grandparents.

In my case, my grandparents were the ones who took the leap and decided they wanted a change. They were the ones who decided to immigrate to Canada for better opportunities for their children's futures.

When I was looking through my hundreds of pictures to make collages and to give to my cousin Marishka to make the funeral slideshows, I realised that my grandparents had led an entire lifetime before any of us grandchildren came into the picture. My grandfather always told us how he travelled to England, and went on roadtrips, and even about his childhood being the equivalent of a boy scout back home in Guyana. They had a whole history before they devoted the rest of their good years to taking care of us. The character of Zahra helped me reconcile and question within myself, when does a puddle become a pond? When does a rain shower become a storm? When does a lost grandparent become an ancestor?

### Nikki Shaffeeullah's VOICE

When Nikki Shaffeeullah began to sing, the air in the room shifted and I started to live Zahra's catharsis. Nikki's voice made me aware of the weight I held in my body. I felt my stomach turn to a knot; her vocal intonations spoke to me in the same way that her poetry painted vivid images in my mind, for example of hard raindrops pattering on a metal rooftop. Nikki's voice was synesthetically ethereal as it felt like I could feel, and see the colours leaving Nikki's body as she moved between tones. It was almost as though Nikki's poetry made me reflect, whereas her singing made me sink and melt into the character's pain.

### If My Ancestors Could Talk

These vocalisations moved us into my personal favourite part of the show when the ensemble started building a makeshift table downstage in the pool of water which had otherwise been a presence throughout the piece, and Rabia, Betty, and Zahra had this ethereal, liminal intergenerational conversation. It was dynamic, and solidified these three women as family. I also appreciated how comedic it was. They argued with each other, vouched for each other, and shared food together. It made me wonder what it would be like if my ancestors could talk to me? It also helped me appreciate that some things are passed down, and some things are lost. If this show taught me to reconcile with anything, it's that things change, and I found beauty in those little realisations of loss.

### Stick it to the colonisers?

From the synopsis, I knew that the journey of the indentured labour ships my ancestors came over on would be explored onstage. I was so ready. I was SO ready for my "cool older cousin" to RIP INTO THE COLONISERS with her piece. I wanted Nikki to give them a taste of their own medicine and use this show on the Canadian stage to express the white hot lividness that I had developed in my own research into my history, of what they did to people like my family when they first came over on those boats.

I was shocked, however, that Nikki shared POVs that I hadn't considered. Hell, I'm a 20-year-old who only recently learned of the atrocities that my family had to endure when they first came to Guyana, so of course my initial reaction was fury. Guilt, even, that I had always felt so connected to this Caribbean country when the welcome that my ancestors got was false hope and hours of indentured servitude, which was really a disguised form of slavery and in all honesty, a genocide.

However, Nikki offered in her show that we come from ancestors who were resilient. Yes, many were tricked, having their fingerprints used as a form of a signature, "signing" documents in a language different from their own. Though many wanted to create change in their lives and get out of their bad situations, believing in the promise of a better opportunity. While, for my ancestors, this promise was a life sentence of indentured slave work, I believe that we as Guyanese people can pinpoint where in our lives we require change and find ways to create it. Just like how my grandparents on both sides of my family decided to immigrate to Canada, or how I decided to switch universities to pursue Theatre. *A Poem For Rabia* helped me appreciate the resilience that Guyanese people have.

### **Moments of Clarity/Critique**

My love for the show and everything around it, however, doesn't go without some fair critique, or rather, where I craved clarity in the script and why.

### **Clarity with 2025 & Realisation of Prison Abolition Movement**

I believe, in general, the timeline I yearned for more clarity with was that of 2052 and its relationship with abolition.

My first introduction to Nikki Shaffeeullah was from her feature in the Canadian Theatre Review titled "Safety and Justice in Our Artistic Spaces", one of the only readings I can say that I legitimately did in my second year of Devised Theatre at York University. Of all my readings, I randomly took the initiative to read this one. I didn't even know who Nikki was then, though what really pulled me into this feature was that the concept made me so curious.

This article was the first to ever introduce to me the idea of the abolition of prisons. Nikki masterfully used this concept to break down 10 strategies to rethinking any space where there is a hierarchy, especially if it is a perceived power dynamic (specifically in theatrical spaces, but I personally feel it can be applied elsewhere as well). She introduces the big concept of Transformative Justice, which she admits

“can be an intimidating idea” that “carries with it big activist goals, like the abolition of the prison industrial complex”. This is a concept so big that I feel my forearms getting numb at the thought of it. Yes, it makes so much sense, but in my mind (as well as the minds of my parents when I explained it to them), a big HOW comes to the forefront. “It’s difficult to imagine a world without prisons, especially if we haven’t been given the space to imagine what the alternatives could be”. I think, having known that this topic is at the forefront of Nikki’s work, and also being curious myself of what that “alternative world” where prisons are abolished looks like, it was something I really looked forward to *A Poem For Rabia* tackling through Zahra’s activism in the 2052 timeline.

If I hadn’t read Nikki’s article beforehand, I am not sure if I would’ve understood the weight and meaning behind the movement to end the prison industrial complex, and that balance between liberty and the newfound responsibility of upholding it. I think in a future iteration of the show, I would challenge Nikki to show the audience, like she did in her Canadian Theatre Review, why this debate is such a freaking good one, and to throw the audience into this world where, when we look out the window, we don’t know whether it’s a utopia or dystopia. How does Zahra work to uphold this new world she helped create?

### **External Questions That Arose for Me from this Piece, and My Participation in Programs Around It**

I want to finish this piece with a contemplation I’ve had since the final day of the Many Waters program when each of us five artists participated in a panel before the show. There was one woman who asked us what we were personally doing, as Queer Guyanese artists, to better the lives of Queer people in Guyana and around the Caribbean who are afraid to come out or can’t, and have come to accept that they may never find someone they can wholeheartedly spend the rest of their lives with.

How can Canadian theatre work to advocate for the rights of the people we portray on our stages? If we travel somewhere and see an atrocity and depict that on our stages, how do we support ending that ongoing atrocity? How do we support the people in Guyana who are afraid of going on dating apps because they are afraid that they are being “set up” and could be harmed in their search for love?

Leaving this whole experience and walking away from the show, I ask myself how am I, as an artist, working towards upholding the responsibilities of the next generation?

"Safety and Justice in Our Artistic Spaces." *Canadian Theatre Review*, vol. 180, 2019, p. 8-13.