

9 Words for Offsite 9

Bobby Tiwana interviews Dawinder Bansal

Bobby: Hello I'm Bobby Tiwana, I'm a Creative Producer of Live Performance, the occasional short film and a hand full of podcasts about a thing or two. In this podcast I will be talking to contemporary artists commissioned as part of Offsite 9 to complement the touring British Art Show 9 in Wolverhampton. Welcome to 9 words.

Bobby: In this episode we meet Artist, Producer and Creator of Jambo Cinema Dawinder Bansal in a retail unit in Wolverhampton's Mander Centre, which has been recreated into a 1980s South Asian sitting room and Bollywood video rental shop.

Dawinder: Well, welcome Bobby for the first time into Jambo Cinema and welcome to all the audience listening.

Bobby: Where to start Dawinder? So, we're talking to you as an offsite 9 artist and your Jambo Cinema project, but under the, through the lens of identity and because of course this is audio, people can't see how rich this place is visually. What was the starting point? Why bring it to life?

Dawinder: So I'd been working in the industry as an immersive theatre producer for a while and I sort of felt that the stories being told from the lived experience were missing and they were, when they were told in particular ways they were diluted and changed and I felt like the richness of my own story could be, you know related back to other people who are of a particular time, place, generation, second generation like me. And that coincided with me sort of you know I was in my late 30s and you know something happens to people when they start looking back on their lives and I started asking questions about my own identity and where I've come from and who I've come from and what that means. And I opened up my late father's briefcase and I looked inside, and I saw: paperwork; I saw a little card for the Indian Workers Association and I saw, I suppose, all of his dreams and aspirations in a bunch of paperwork that doesn't really mean anything to anyone else but me and I just thought this was his dream. It was his dream to have this shop. It was his dream to be someone who is a contributor in society, and also had such an impact within our family and I felt that given the fact that you know I've got my own experience of, making work and creating art in some kind of way, I just kind of wanted to tell that story and I didn't really have any idea at the time about how I was going to do it. I just knew that I had to get it out of my system, in a way. It started its journey as just a conversation with a couple of directors of organisations one of them being Multistory, Emma Chetcuti at Multistory and the other person being Ian Francis of Flatpack Film Festival and then it was just a case of "you have to, have to do something with it Dawinder." And then, I think upon them learning about the vast archive that I've got, collection of the video tapes and the shop stock and the artwork corresponding to those films, it was just a project that was going to happen at some point, but the starting point was unknown. The easiest point for me to start that project was by creating a domestic space where the actual, the humble VHS was consumed by the families and Asian families, who all used to sit round together

watching these films on a weekend as their entertainment. And really this is a working-class story of how Asian families came together to basically enjoy themselves and have some escapism through Bollywood films, whilst coming together and having that you know real human connection and interaction with each other. Usually by eating together as well, because eating and food is a really big part of South Asian culture and customs, and it was about family life. It was it's a very multi-layered project, which you know lots of people, when they come in and they experience it, they have a very emotional response, and it changes form according to whichever location it goes into. So, this is I think the fifth iteration. I suppose this version that is a part of the Offsite 9 programme now, it is the version that I had in my head many years ago and there's still room and scope for it to grow beyond this and it's quite a big shop unit located in the Mander Centre and that in itself was a very deliberate decision to take a very culturally specific piece of work about the South Asian community in the 1980s and put it in a public place whereby it is an accidental discovery. And it's also deliberate in the sense of I want people to see this who, who don't go and see work in galleries because galleries do not always feel welcoming to everyone. I often sit here, and I just see people just peering in through the shop window and they're just 'oh my god what's happening in there?' because when people walk in and even when they see it from the outside, it's you know, the shopping centre, but you've got a living room. It's very evocative of the flock red wallpaper and the red carpet on the floor and the patterns and the textiles and the sewing machine and the old vintage set and the sideboard which is wooden teak. The Kenyan Indian influence which is my heritage and background of you know the copper clock and the wooden ornaments of animals, the stereo system, the television, all of the items that relate back to a time and a place that does not exist anymore. You know, that's, that's the living room section and then when they walk through the living room the audience will be taken into the shop, the recreation of the shop which includes the VHS tape originals, the artwork, the posters and of course there's artistic licence and I've changed it a little bit, just made it a bit fun in there and I got like selfie walls and all that kind of thing because Bollywood posters in themselves are very colourful and artful and expressive, it's got the some of the iconic actors that me and my sister used to really enjoy watching and very specific Bollywood films that we would watch over and over again.

Bobby: Can you name a few?

Dawinder: Sholay. And Disco Dancer. Kaalia. Those are the three that come to mind. It's my life that I'm putting out there for everyone to see and it's so deeply personal and when people come in and they are invited to experience what it was like for me growing up as a young Asian girl in Wolverhampton to Sikh parents who came from India then to Kenya then to Wolverhampton. You know I talk about in the film, the film that I made, a short film which is 10 minutes long and it's, it talks about, it's a confessional statement about things I used to do. But it's also about a story of a working-class family in Wolverhampton an immigrant family who had these dreams and ambitions and we're just trying to make it here in the UK and this is how we did it. But it's also, at the end of that film when I talk about you know, Bollywood films having these happy endings and then me talking about, well our, ending of our family wasn't that part of our story, was not happy. I always think that particular moment when I'm watching audiences because part of a producer role, is that you

watch the audience and I still do that now and when I'm watching them there's a shift in how they responded at that moment because I think particularly coming out of Covid I think. I don't know a single friend or family member who hasn't lost someone and know of someone, that someone they're close too that they've lost you in this time, the pandemic. That added layer of talking about loss, it opens up dialogue people to actually speak about what they've been through over the last 2 years but also if you've reached a certain point in your life, you might have lost a parent and that kind of pain, people hold on to. They understand it, so people cry in here, they cry, they get emotional, they laugh, they joke, they reminisce. Erm, and I think the added interesting part of this particular installation is the fact that I host them in the space so it's an intimate experience I only allow a few people in at a time to experience this with me and that's also very deliberate because I think that in modern society with all the technology that we do have I don't find that people are more connected. I find there's a disconnect from genuine authentic deep, enriching conversations that we're all craving for and within this space I allow them to do that, and I give them some breathing space. And it's really interesting with the way that the room has been designed because the TV set, you know, is in the far corner and the way that the sofas positioned and everything it really takes your attention away from it being in a shopping centre and away from the shop window and to the TV set. Although I think it's actually a perfect time to have it in the Mander centre because they always seem to be playing 1980s music. So, it's perfect in that sense. And, you know I've had younger people come in here and they talk about the fact that they feel like the world is too busy and they want it to slow down because they can't catch their own thoughts and I thought that was actually quite a fascinating conversation. So, with being in this very personal installation that is all about me growing up people have a really deep connection to it, even though it's not even something that might be from their own heritage, you know. A lot of English people come in, Black people come in, Asian people come in and everyone has had a connection to it, which I think is absolutely fascinating.

Bobby: You say people get emotional or you know you describe people crying or connect to it in some way. Can you share any stories? Any responses? So, let's say you're not of a South Asian background, what is it about this that allows people to feel, empathy? What is it they connect to?

Dawinder: I think they connect to the detail, because you look around this room it's full of detail and it's very personal and I almost feel like the more specific something is, the more relatable it is as well. This is about an Asian family living in Britain and so we can't really get away from the fact that we've got cultures merging. I mean Elvis was a big hit in our household, so we've got a picture of Elvis. We've got the Wombles and we've got the Nat West pigs, because my father opened a savings account for me and one of the things that you used to get every time you put money into the account after a certain amount was a Nat West savings pig. We've got records. We've got items that are very evocative but also religious pictures that make it very specific to the Asian community and what, why I think that is so important to do right now is because there has been an increase in racism and generally and intolerance of difference and I feel that this particular place Jambo Cinema in the way that I've created it, is deliberately designed for people to come in and get curious and be curious about similarities between us as well as the differences and

ask questions and not feel like 'oh I can't really ask that question' from the fear of feeling like other people are going to think they're ignorant and actually I think that's very important to be able to allow people into other worlds, other intimate worlds that they might not ever encounter.

Bobby: What's been the most startling thing someone said? Unusual? Unexpected?

Dawinder: Erm, sorry, just having a cup of tea, that's what I used to do in this in this installation before Covid happened and people would come in and then we'd have a bit of a cup of tea.

Bobby: Are you not allowed to serve tea anymore?

Dawinder: Hmm. But I can drink it so that's fine. I've had people come in here who've got drug addictions, sit down tell me about it, talk about the fact that this home reminds them of a time when their life was stable. I've had people come in to here tell me about the fact that they can't have children and that they're sad that they can't pass any of this onto anybody now; a time which is special to them. I've had people break down on the sofa and cry about parents they've lost. I've had people talk about they, them having their own family businesses and what happens when the linchpin of that business goes, passes away, the person who's holding everything together. And I suppose in many ways by being very vocal and honest and open and transparent about things that I did and about my own life, it gives people the permission to be open and honest about theirs. So, whilst I've allowed people into my secret world, they then allow me into theirs and I feel like this installation has become very special to me and them because it has allowed some space for this world of intimacy, if you like, of real conversation.

Bobby: What are your plans for this in the future? What are the plans of Jambo Cinema?

Dawinder: To carry on I mean, I would love for it to be a national tour, for an international tour. I constantly get emails from people who want to see it, I've had quite a lot of emails from Canada actually and so the aspiration is for it to continue growing and developing, because every time I do this installation in a new place it's like erasing the video tape and then recording a brand-new version of it. It's definitely something that I want to continue and carry on with not just a normal straightforward heritage piece, it's actually quite multi-layered. One of the older Asian women, one of the aunties that came in she said, "this is amazing' and I really feel that our generation have actually been culturally starved and it's good to see the representation out there, but not the representation that is interpreted, but the actual lived experience." So, it's my ambition to take this further and there is ambitions to sort of add-on more installation spaces onto this, so...

Bobby: Can you give an example?

Dawinder: I don't want to give anything away yet. You'll have to, people will have to just keep connected with me on my website and then I'll be sort of sharing information about how this grows and develops but it's had fantastic support wherever it's been. It's been received very very brilliantly by not just Asian communities but by all communities.

Bobby: So, you said other installation spaces it makes me think, you've got the living space and was your dad's shop like this? You had the shop at the front and then you had the Living Space at the back is that how it was or was it above?

Dawinder: No. The living space was separate but in terms of demonstrating, people did live like this, people did have shops at the front and the living quarters at the back. But for our family, no we didn't and actually the shop was extremely small and the living quarters at the back was poor.

Bobby: So, I'm curious to know what adjoining installation spaces you might conceive? I guess you could have a tape-recording room. You know when you talk about this growing it makes me think, you know there's so much in her already, you know aspects of you, because this is so personal to you. What have you learnt about yourself through doing this?

Dawinder: I think, when I started doing this project, I'm the youngest of four, and I was 11 years old when my father died. And it's a weird thing because in Asian families at that time, they kind of like really didn't talk about, well at least my family didn't talk about death and what that meant. And actually, the confusing messages that you get about death from going to school and it's a Christian school, and then you coming home when you've got Sikh parents and then the conflicts between those two with that in mind, I think, well not that I think, I'm pretty certain I was stuck in cycles of trauma. And when people experience this work, they do feel quite emotional afterwards. I mean of course you know they see the entertaining aspects of it as well because life isn't all dark. You know it's light and shade. It takes people on a journey, makes them think about themselves and makes them think about the people in their lives, make them think about people they've lost, makes them think about people they might not be speaking to right now that they need to start speaking to again. I don't know. It makes them think about a lot of things. So, in my life when I was doing this project, I think I was stuck in a cycle of trauma, which was actually I hadn't quite processed the death of my father and all the trauma that was associated with it and that I was still carrying. Because I spoke to a friend of mine and erm, he's like "Oh Dawinder, when did your father pass away?" and I said, "probably something like thirty years ago, something around that," and then he said, "you talk about it as if it's just happened." And that's when I felt like this piece of work is probably going to be the most important piece of work that I will do as an artist, and it has been, and I think it's because it has so much emotion and personal story integrated into so many aspects of it including the shop and including in the living room. It has sort of been I suppose unexpected therapy because it's been a very cathartic process where the first time I did this piece of work, you know, getting our family pictures that I hadn't looked at in years and all of these memories were flooding back to me and the memories weren't always pleasant, some of them were very traumatic and I felt that every single time I did this project a different part of me healed. And so to tell a story in this particular way, it's sort of been many things really, it's been representation of the South Asian lived experience in Britain told from an authentic perspective and told with real kind of heart and soul, as well as it being a way to heal from some past trauma and also it's a real celebration of the strength and the pioneering aspects of the South Asian community who came here with very very little and wanted to make it and wanted a better life for their

children. And my father's business is an example of that. It's an example of the backbone of Britain which is those small independent small independent traders who were so essential to South Asian families and particularly film you know, film was so important because... Coming from India, which is colourful, you've got your family around you, the weather is bright. You know, you know the language you know the customs, you have celebrations and traditions and then coming to Britain where you know you come to the Black Country it's dark, it's gloomy, you're in a factory for so many hours a day. You don't have your family around you, you don't have much money, there's no representation of who you are and your culture and a lot of people couldn't speak English you know they could, they were good with their hands and they worked in factories, but they needed that escapism and we all need some escapism from time to time, and Bollywood that's what it provided, it provided that essential lifeline through this very humble VHS tape to take into families homes and allow the family to get together and be entertained for 3 hours and escape the outside world and to enter this world of colourful costumes and ridiculous storyline sometimes and you know it was that link. It was that link. And I think it's good to be reminded of that, that how information and entertainment and music and culture is so easily accessible now it wasn't then, and it highlights, as well the importance of art our in our everyday lives.

When people walk in you know it's a friendly welcoming warm living room environment. And then they walk into the shop and that also feels very different, it is a shop environment and when I was thinking about the creation of these two spaces side-by-side, it is also me reflecting back the family structure because the living room is a feminine space, the shop is a masculine space. And looking at how these two worlds came together in order to, to grow and develop as a family, because the roles were divided then. My mum was at home she looked after the children, she used to sew at home and do a lot of homeworking with the sewing machine and look after us. My father was always at work, I mean I never saw him, I hardly ever saw my dad, but I know that whatever hard work and ethics he had I know he's instilled in all of us as his children.

Bobby: How would you describe your identity?

Dawinder: I think my identity, I'm British, I'm Asian, I'm Indian, I'm Sikh, I have Kenyan heritage. I'm female, I'm second generation. I'm clearly from the Black Country, cos I've got a very strong Black Country accent. I think identity's such an interesting thing, but I think more and more I'm revisiting parts of my Kenyan heritage and it's really interesting because I wasn't born there, but I do you have a strong connection to want to go and to want to explore Kenya.

Bobby: How long were your parents there?

Dawinder: I think they were there for about eight - nine years but then before that my Grandparents were there and I've actually still got some family out there as well, got some uncles that are still there. Part of me when I was growing up realised that I had that Kenyan heritage because I went to my friend's house and her parents are Punjabi, I started speaking and asking my friends Dad for an iron and I called it a pasi, "Uncle can I have a pasi please?" and he was like "what the hell is a Pasi?" And I said, "the iron" and he said, "your parents aren't teaching you the right Punjabi."

Then I went home, and I said to Mum this was what uncle just said to me and she said "oh, because pasi is the Swahili word, that's why." So, then I realised actually that I had another aspect of my culture and heritage, that was different to other people. And I really love that as well. I love the fact that I've got all of these different parts of my history and my heritage and my ancestors and where have they been and who they are, and I can integrate that into who I am and that's because I'm a curious person. I want to know not just where I'm from but who I'm from.

Bobby: Are there any other you know, traditions, habits, ways of thinking, seeing, doing? You know maybe food, words, clearly, you've got some Swahili in your language. Are there any other influences from Kenya?

Dawinder: Yeah, food there is some food that is, some food that's different. Whatever you grow up with is normal to you. You don't know your different until you go to someone's house and then you're like, 'we do things differently'. Even within, a difference within the Asian community depending on family to family, cast as well of course is a different thing.

Bobby: Thinking about the three different aspects of your identity, not the only three, but three of them, so I'm talking about you know the Kenyan influence, the Indian Sikh element and the British, growing up in Britain. Would you describe them all as, have they always been positive? All of them?

Dawinder: Well, I think there is negative and positive in everything really because if you really wanna really break it down then there's identity about where you sit within the family, I'm the youngest within the family and so there's identity there from the inside world and the interior world that you grow up in in a family context. And then you've got your identity outside of that and you've got your identity within a work context. I think we are all many different identities depending on who we are, where we are and the experience, the experience, sorry I can't speak, but in the experiences we have and in accordance to where we are in life, you know, if I think about who I am now compared to do who I was 5 years ago I'm a different person. If I think about who I was 15 years ago I'm very different person. And I feel more and more that I'm, I'm coming back to my roots and looking closely at my family and my history and my heritage and wanting to celebrate that.

Bobby: What's the driver for that, for the enquiry into your family? At this age?

Dawinder: I think the driver for me is knowing that, feeling that, knowing that, seeing that, work like this is invisible in white gallery spaces, you know, and I mean that in terms of just not really understanding why something like this is important for representation in the Asian community. I think that's one of those things. And I just feel like so many stories haven't been told but I also feel that so many of those stories haven't been told from a female perspective. I always feel they get told from a male perspective and I wanted it to be a woman who told this story, who told the story of what it was like to be an Asian woman growing up in Britain during the 1980s. It was a very significant evocative time for me emotionally, in terms of everything really, I was just exposed to so many different, so many different things. You start with food, start with music, start with culture, dance, going out, you know one of the other things when I was growing up was the daytime Bhangra scene

which was like this underground movement of all these Asian teenagers who just couldn't go out at night, weren't allowed out at night and then had their own niche which was kind of taking over clubs during the day and going out partying the clubs in the daytime.

Bobby: Did you used to go?

Dawinder: Yeah, I did.

Bobby: Where did you go?

Dawinder: Foxes. Foxes' nightclub. And you know it was great. It was a moment in time, it doesn't exist like just like this. Just like this room we're sitting in now.

Bobby: What was great about Foxes nightclub at this Asian gig? Daytime gig?

Dawinder: It was like having a freeness, like you could just be free to be there. You weren't being controlled at school, you weren't being controlled erm at home, you were just with your friends, and you were just dancing and having a good time.

Bobby: You touched on it earlier, you know you were 11, when your dad passed away and you talk about cycles of trauma after that, this project came about how many years ago, first iteration?

Dawinder: 2016

Bobby: So, 5 years ago. So, has there been a significant shift from, you know, as a child experiencing loss and of course then as an adult and like you say many years of maybe that cycle?

Dawinder: Oh, five years in, I feel that I think early on, it was about processing the trauma outwardly, and I think as time's gone on it's become more of a celebration of who people are in our lives and what they've done for us and also looking at it, the contribution of the South Asian community in Britain through a very personal lens.

Bobby: I've been talking to Dawinder Bansal. Thank you so much Dawinder Bansal for your time it's been lovely talking to you, and I look forward to seeing where this project goes.

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