



NIKKI  
SHAFFEULLAH'S

# A POEM FOR RABIA

A Tarragon Theatre production in  
association with Nightwood Theatre  
and Undercurrent Creations.

Nightwood Theatre ●●●

UNDER  
CURRENT  
CREATIONS

CO-DIRECTED BY  
CLARE PREUSS AND  
DONNA-MICHELLE ST. BERNARD

**TARRAGON** THEATRE  
OCTOBER 17 - NOVEMBER 12, 2023

October 17 - November 12  
Extraspace

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Please Note: icons highlighted in yellow may be of particular interest to educators.

# About the Playwright

Nikki Shaffeeullah (she/her) is a theatre & film artist, facilitator, producer, writer, equity worker, and community organizer.



Her work has included serving as Artistic Director of The AMY Project; Editor-in-Chief of *alt.theatre: cultural diversity and the stage*; and Assistant Artistic Director of Jumblies Theatre. With the National Arts Centre - English Theatre, she conceived, curated and produced *Stages of Transformation*, a multi-year research and creative project exploring how theatre intersects with abolition movements and transformative justice. Nikki has also taught in the performance departments of University of Toronto Scarborough and the University of Alberta. She produces film, theatre, and sector-change projects through her organization Undercurrent Creations, and is a founding member of Confluence Arts Collective, a group of artists-activists who believe in transformative justice and a world without prisons. An award-winning theatre and film artist, Nikki works as a director, writer, actor, improviser, and producer, and collaborates with companies and artists from across “so-called Canada”. She has held residencies with organizations including Canadian Stage, Why Not Theatre, The Theatre Centre, SummerWorks, and others, and she is a Fellow of the Salzburg Global Forum for Young Cultural Innovators.

As a facilitator, Nikki supports grassroots groups, non-profits, and public institutions to uphold equity and accountability in all aspects of their work, and runs facilitation training initiatives for equity-seeking artists and activists leading community-engaged work. She is an alumnus of Training for Change's JCI Fellowship for Trainers of Colour.

Nikki holds an MFA in Theatre Practice from the University of Alberta, where her thesis won the Canadian Association for Theatre Research award for Intercultural Theatre, and a BA from McGill University.

A queer Indo-Caribbean artist born and living in Toronto, Nikki's work is informed by a family who loves music, puns, justice, and food. She is grateful to live the complex, diverse metropolis of Toronto; land that been stewarded for many thousands of years by Indigenous peoples including the Anishinaabeg, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat peoples; land that is subject to the precolonial Dish With One Spoon covenant, and the colonial Treaty 13, held with the Mississaugas of the Credit Nation.

Nikki believes that art should disrupt the status quo, centre the margins, engage with the ancient, dream of the future, and be for everyone.

# Creative Team

**Clare Preuss** - Co-Director

**Donna-Michelle St. Bernard** - Co-Director and Dramaturge

**Rebecca Ablack** - Assistant Director

**Sonja Rainey** - Set Designer

**Jawon Kang** - Costume Designer

**Echo Zhou** - Lighting Designer

**David Mesiha** - Sound Designer

**Amani Dorn** - Dialect Coach

**Gurkiran Kaur** - Dialect Coach

**Andrew Prashad** - Dialect Coach

**Sandi Becker** - Stage Manager

**Kayleigh Mundy** - Apprentice Stage Manager

**Intisar Awisse** - Additional Dramaturgy

**Sasha Tate-Howarth** - Additional Dramaturgy

**Rachel Penny** - Consulting Creative Producer

# About the Play

## Synopsis

An epic journey across time, oceans, and tectonic shifts in political history.

*A Poem for Rabia* weaves the stories of three queer women from the same bloodline: Zahra, a disillusioned activist in 2053, navigating a Canada that has just abolished prisons; Betty, in 1953 British Guiana, caught between her new secretarial job at the Governor's office and the growing national independence movement; and Rabia, an Indian domestic worker in 1853, abducted by colonial 'recruiters' and sent sailing from Calcutta to the Caribbean on an indentured labour ship.

# Playwright's Note

Many years ago, a mentor encouraged me to make a play about Guyana. I tried, and I couldn't. A place is a setting, not a story, I thought. And after all, I am from many places - where I was born (Toronto), where my parents and their parents and their parents and their parents were born (Guyana), and where most of my ancestors are from (India).

A few years later, I participated in an Arrivals Legacy Project workshop, in which artists explore the stories of one's own ancestors. This set me on a path I have been on and off of for the past decade, a path that has taken many forms and has included archival research, conversations with family, workshops with community, trips to motherlands, and life-affirming explorations with fellow artists.

Throughout all of this, I was thinking about the symbiotic relationship between how we connect with ancestors, and how we build a better future. I thought about how some (all?) impossible-seeming goals have actually been done before, and about how writing can facilitate time travel. I made art in prisons and parks, and dreamed with friends about what a future without punishment could look like. I read a reflection by author Suzette Mayr where she says: "I tell you this story as truth about my ancestor even though it is 100 percent fiction." I thought about how history repeats itself. I thought about how a series of places, when collaged together, can start to tell a story.

Like a person, a play is born from the collaboration of many people across time, space, and generations. I am grateful for the very many who have helped nurture *A Poem for Rabia* into existence.

## Directors' note

"All good things must begin." Octavia Butler

As we enter into Nikki's story we are reminded that, in our work and in our world, we are at various stages of various processes. We are witness to some change in its seed state and other changes coming to fruition.

The layering of realities in Nikki's nuanced play, brings us to vital questions as artists and community members. How can we find value and nourishment in the evolution of those who have come before us while also challenging the present and envisioning ever growing possibilities? Can we inherit the fruits of our ancestors' struggles without the trauma? What is the point of hoping beyond what currently seems possible?

This play lets us see our present as a seed for the future, so that we will contemplate what we cultivate. Good luck with that. We believe in you - in all of us.

Clare, DM & Becky



# Calcutta to Guyana 1853: Indentured Labour



1

## How Britain Used India To Replace Slave Labour

After abolishing slavery, Britain looked to India to replace the labour on its plantations.

2

## Indian Indenture in the British Empire

In this lecture, Dr. Maria del Pilar Kaladeen discusses the erasure of indenture from British colonial history.



3

## What of the Indian Women in Indentured Labour?

This article from the Museum of London Docklands examines three objects connected to London and the Caribbean, to explore the lesser-known women's history of Indian indentured labour.



4

## Old Indian-Guyanese Woman Talks About Indentured Servitude Under British Empire

Hear from the last surviving witness of this system.



5



**Gaiutra Bahadur: 'How could I write about women whose existence is barely acknowledged?'**  
The author of *Coolie Woman* explains how research into the life of her own great-grandmother exposed a hidden history of exploitation.

6

### **The History of Indian Indentureship in the Caribbean**

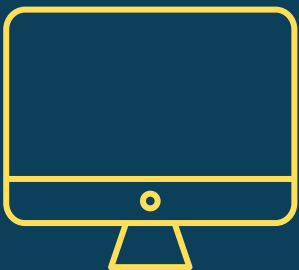
This week episode of *Strickly Facts* discusses the roots of Indian indentureship with scholar Cristine Khan, and how connecting these histories is integral to Caribbean connections moving forward.



7

### **The Things We Carried**

A 6-part digital archive from the South Asian American Digital Archive, including links to oral histories and archival materials.



8

### **We Mark Your Memory: Writings from the Descendants of Indenture**

A unique attempt to explore, through the medium of poetry and prose, the indentured heritage of the 21st century.



# British Guiana (aka Guyana) 1953: Politics

1

## A Brief History of Guyana



From *Crónica Panamericana* with professor Luis Jiménez



From the Encyclopedia Britanica



Or check out this 2 minute version from Mr. History



2

## MI5 Files Reveal Details of 1953 Coup that Overthrew British Guiana's Leader

Documents released by National Archives show prime minister Winston Churchill feared the colony would turn communist.



3

## More Than 50 Years Since Independence, Colonial Violence Plagues Guyana and Its Diaspora

In tracing the colonial roots of gender-based violence, scholars point to the power structures enforced in both slavery and indentured servitude.



## 4

### Guyana's Prime Ministers

Often referred to as Guyana's most influential politicians, former Prime Ministers Cheddi Jagan and Forbes Burnham provide two perspectives on the political life of Guyana.



***The West On  
Trial: My Fight for  
Guyana's Freedom***  
Cheddi Jagan

Premier of British Guiana 1961-1964  
President of Guyana 1992-1997



***Destiny to Mould:  
Speeches by the Prime  
Minister of Guyana***  
Forbes Burnham

Premier of British Guiana 1964-1966  
Prime Minister / President of Guyana  
1966-1985

## 5

### 'A Mouth Is Always Muzzled' Is A Sprawling Look At Art And Resistance

This review summarizes a few surprising facts outlined in Natalie Hopkinson's book on the art of resistance.



## 6

### President Dr. Mohamed Irfaan Ali Discusses Reparations

Hear from the current president of Guyana in this *Good Morning Britain* segment.



## 7

### ***Drilled Season 8: Light, Sweet Crude***

This 9-part series investigates Guyana's contemporary navigation of foreign power, new oil colonialism, poverty and climate crises.



# Canada 2053: Decarceration and Abolition

1



## The Prison Abolition Issue

Award-winning magazine *Briarpatch* asked prisoners across Canada and the U.S. to reflect on the question, "Can you imagine a world without prisons?"

2

## Stages of Transformation

This multi-year project of research, rumination, creative exploration and conversation, created by theatre artists and creative communities, provides multiple points of entry into learning about abolitionist movements.

Curated by playwright Nikki Shaffeeullah.



Check out the *Theatre as Healing for Formerly Incarcerated Woman* section of *Stages of Transformation*. Artists and community workers reflect on the roles art can play as healing for women with lived experience of incarceration.



3

## Toronto Prisoner's Rights Project

This webinar series featuring various academics and activists explores topics such as: Black Liberation, the effects of COVID-19 in prisons, and defunding the police.



4



### **An Action Plan for Decarceration**

A proposed Canadian Bar Association resolution would urge Canada's governments to take action on finding alternatives to incarceration for Indigenous peoples.

5

### **We Do This 'Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice**

What if social transformation and liberation isn't about waiting for someone else to come along and save us? In this timely collection of essays and interviews, Mariame Kaba reflects on the deep work of abolition and transformative political struggle.



6



### **The Cutlass Podcast**

In this episode, Brian Ramcharan speaks with Prakash Churaman on his early life, incarceration, and liberation movement.

## Conversation Starters

Discuss your family's history of relationship to land (e.g. migration, Indigeneity, etc.)

Do you have a practice of connecting with your ancestors?

What is a significant body of water for you and why?

Share 1-2 historical facts that you learned while watching this play.

Discuss the connection between Zahra, Rabia, and Betty.

What do you think is meant by "a culture of secrecy" in the play?

Discuss the different forms of inheritance and intergenerational connection within the play.