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In conversation with Helena Bell

We talked to Helena Bell, Kali Theatre’s Artistic Director who is currently directing the much anticipated Sundowning, her first commissioned production for Kali, written by the award winning playwright Nessah Muthy.

Q. When you first read the script what was your reaction?

The script has been developed very slowly and was first commissioned for my previous company Pursued by a Bear (PBAB) and so our development period started there in 2014 with a series of scenes from Nessah and a showcase at the Basingstoke Festival. We followed this with quite a bit of research and community work in care homes to prepare further. Fast forward four years and two babies later (Nessah not me!) and with my new role here, Kali took over the commission and are finally producing this beautiful, tender, elegiac piece with the generous blessing of PBAB.

Sundowning marks my first commissioned production for Kali in a forthcoming 4 year programme of new work to include actor training; writer development and 3 more annual touring productions.

Q. Why did Kali want to produce this play?

Apart from Nessah’s incredible gifts as

a playwright, I’m interested in the kind of families she chooses to write about - often dual heritage young women growing up in white, working class families. In Sundowning we explore the same backdrop but without comment on who comes from what ethnicity. It feels wholly contemporary and a very topical approach to the prediction that by 2020 London will be 50% mixed race.

Q. What should the audience be prepared for?

Sundowning is a moving, tender, funny, frank play that looks at mental health, fragility, love and old age in a wholly honest, unvarnished way. It asks how best we should care for our Elders. But doesn’t provide any answers. It’s a family story of guilt and love and grief. Honestly compelling because we can all recognise the rich gamut of feelings the play runs. There’s also a lot about the weather! (Sundowning is a neurological condition that affects some people living with dementia who can become highly anxious during Sundown).

Q. Who is your favourite character in the play?

Totally love them all. And the actors are sublime. Intelligent, sensitive, funny, charismatic. What more could a director ask for. Apart from a brilliant creative team which we also have!

Q. What do you feel is the message the play is trying to send?

No message. Many questions. And a very real concern for the future care of our Elders living with dementia.

Q. The cast and creative team is majority female, is this a direction we will see Kali take in the future?

Our priority is to employ women of South Asian descent in as many rich and varied roles as possible - both on stage and off. But our (exclusively) female writers are the heart of the company and once commissioned it’s they who choose what characters they wish to create so our first priority is to honour their vision. I was very proud however to be able to announce an all female backstage and design team for our recent WAR Plays season alongside our 7 writers, we also employed 5 female directors so yes we are trying to create jobs for women to balance the inequalities still prevalent for female artists in the overall theatre ecology.