

**I saw the SAMIA MALIK COMPANY-Norwich Arts Centre March 6th 2018. Note that name. Why? Read on...**

I just want you to know that I've got bragging rights on this one! You missed your chance. Now you'll have to wait until singer-songwriter-artist, Samia Malik from Norwich, UK, and this incredible company of musicians, choose where and when they'll repeat the performance that premiered at the Norwich Arts Centre March 6th. You'd better hope it's soon. The studio could only accommodate about 100. It was full.



From the first note of the first number there was astonishment and rapt attention. There was a real sense of seeing something never tried before. Experts talk of "fusion"...but no-one's seen fusion like this. No wonder Arts Council and Lottery Funding have been impressed enough to offer support.



How is it possible for that strong, expressive voice to speak in Urdu about gender, birthright and love, to predominantly non-Urdu speakers, and yet be perfectly understood?

How is it possible for a grand piano in the control of world music supremo, Al MacSween, to sound entirely Indian? How on earth can improvisation outside of jazz work like this? Have you ever seen a pianist sweep his right hand across the exposed strings of a grand as if it were a swarmandal or zither, whilst continuing to play keys with his left?



What did the uniquely respected, Giuliano Modarelli, do to make an acoustic guitar drive and speed mesmerically with flashes of flamenco, jazz and unparalleled improvisation and emerge with a new genre?!! And then there were the flying fingers of virtoso tabla player Sukhdeep Dhanjal. Born in Leicester and a recognised master of the most complex of percussion instruments. His opening gambit is the uthaan - a beat so fast, powerful and deep that feet are tapping before the singing begins. Respect!



In the whole of the UK it's reckoned there are only 3 people playing what's known as the Indian classical tradition professionally with western instruments. Two of them are here. Al MacSween, a breathtaking pianist, born in Lancashire who studied at Leeds College of Music, and spends up to three months a year in India honing his craft which is so heavily dependent on the most ferocious improvisation. Stage right is Giuliano Modarelli - another product of the Leeds Conservatoire. Born in Milan, he came to the UK at 23 because he regarded it as the place to learn this world music format.

In the dressing room before the show, I hear an incessant tapping. Like pouring rain. But in sweeping rhythms. I turn to find Sukhdeep Dhanjal's balletic fingers playing his credit card wallet. He can't stop it. "It drives my wife mad," he says. The imagery is so appropriate. Sukhdeep can't rely on music for a family living. He works in Buckinghamshire in credit finance. "I'd give it up at the drop of a hat...or the drop of a turban.. in favour of full time tabla."

Samia Malik's songs and the rendition could not be more relevant to the here and now. What is a woman's place? Cultural identity. *Whose* cultural identity? Projected onto the backdrop are her own startling art works speaking of gender and society.



She herself admits that her last show "Azaadi-Freedom", which she's toured successfully twice, took her 30 years to write. By which she means a lifetime. "Azaadi," she explains, " was telling the story of the journey of a Pakistani, Muslim woman from an Asian background growing up in Britain looking for spiritual freedom and peace. Now I've arrived. This is a place of freedom. I don't need to tell of the journey. I'm not "an Asian woman". It's about being alive, not about the background. It's about talking the same language of loss, love, anger: universal human feelings but all rooted in the form language and tradition that I'm used to."

What's more, once the cultural curtain is swept aside, the performance works. The songs, translated on the programme, shriek 2018. Some of the lyrics reveal anger and frustration, "You fly your flags, you give me lectures, What do you seek in my hijab?...And what was it you found? How could you find heaven in hell?" Others are crusading and hopeful. Junum Ke Dookh(Birthright):

"Break your chains.  
Don't follow empty traditions.  
Your birthright is freedom.

Believe in your own truth  
Claim what was always yours  
Tell your own story

Wear ankle bells and dance  
Let the world disapprove  
Your birthright is freedom"

"I speak to people after my shows," says Samia. "They get it. Even middle class, white men, saddled with their own cultural labels, appreciate it. I'm not allowed to do what I do in my culture..so I'm a loose woman. Physically standing on stage says it all. Maybe that's why I did it. My mother found it very difficult at the start and still struggles with it. She was proud when I toured India twice. She read about it in the paper because we had just grown apart. The first song, "Mother Tongue", is about that.. How can I speak to my mother when I don't have my mother tongue?"

Her father was much more liberal. When Samia was 6, he brought his wife and 3 daughters to the UK because he wanted them to be independent. The tragedy was that, unexpectedly , he died of cancer when Samia was 14. Since which time she's been fighting for the freedom he envisaged. Her last song is a tribute to the man who, so futuristically, gave her the chances.



I spoke to the audience afterwards. Some had known what to expect, others had not. Norfolk is not a county brimming with cultural diversity, but there were a good number from divergent ethnic backgrounds. Of course, those who would be diametrically, traditionally, opposed to a Muslim on stage, were not here. But, to those who dared to confront the politics, neither gender, colour, culture nor religion made any difference. I noted down the responses...and after a while there were no more superlatives. "Amazing." "Brilliant" "Dynamic" "Astonishing" "Incredible" etc. etc..But , as I said at the start, we were the lucky ones. You'll just have to wait...

Janet Trewin