

# The Indo-American Arts Council: 15 Years of showcasing, promoting & building an awareness of the performing, visual & literary arts of India in the US

BY AROON SHIVDASANI

The Indo-American Arts Council was born 15 years ago, in 1998, to urge the United States to take notice of the artists and artistic disciplines of India. It is unbelievable that less than two decades ago awareness of the art and culture of India was invisible in this amazingly diverse country.

Attorney Talat Ansari (Kelly, Drye & Warren), Artistic Director Jonathan Hollander (Battery Dance Company) and I (Aroon Shivdasani) founded the first Indian Arts Council in the United States, with a passionate mission to showcase, promote and build an awareness of the performing, visual and literary arts of India. The late Gopal Raju (Editor, India Abroad) donated seed money for this brave new venture and we were off to a galloping start. This passionate venture was very much an uphill task – championing little known Indian artists (both veteran and emerging), engaging and educating mainstream audiences, creating an awareness of identities in first and second generation Indians, ensuring media interest, organizing the logistics.....

Long time supporters like Salman Rushdie, Mira Nair, Deepa Mehta, Shashi Tharoor, Shyam Benegal, Madhur Jaffrey, Shabana Azmi have made it possible for us to attract audiences to younger, emerging talent that has now proved their mettle in each of the various artistic disciplines.

Likewise, our interns and volunteers are instrumental in allowing us to present these fantabulous events with meagre resources. Their passion, energy and enthusiasm



*Samrat Chakraborty, David Hamilton, Aroon Shivdasani, Deepa Mehta, Salman Rushdie*

ensures our success.

Like the people of the US, the IAAC is the first and only Indian Arts Council in the US representing all the artistic disciplines. As a pioneer, secular and non profit volunteer driven arts organization that encourages the participation of young and old, it pioneered the first annual Indian film festival in North America (NYIFF). The New York Times likened us to Sundance as we proudly present a week of Indian Independent, diaspora, arthouse and alternate cinema – premiere features, documentaries and short films with industry panels, post-screening discussions, award ceremony, special events, retrospectives.

IAAC pioneered the first Indian Theatre Festival in North America showcasing Vijay Tendulkar, Girish Karnad and Mahesh Dattani, and the first Playwrights Festival of the Indian Diaspora 2000-2009 in collaboration with the Lark Playwrights Development Theatre and initiated an annual Playwright Resident Award.

We are also behind the annual Erasing Borders and the traveling Erasing Borders Festival of Indian Dance with free Outdoor performances for the public as well as indoor performances, workshops and panels in each of the traditional genres as well as modern, contemporary and fusion choreography.

Our annual music concerts (vocal and instrumental) including Ustad Shujaat Khan, Ustad Amjad Ali Khan, Pandit Hari Prasad Chaurasia,



Vijay Iyer, Sachal Vasandani, Indian Ocean and several other musicians in varied musical genres have come to be very popular. In addition, we present myriad theatrical productions including an amazing month long Tendulkar Festival as well as a Perspectives of Gandhi festival (theatre, film, philosophy, discussion) - both part of the greater New York theatrical community.

Our numerous fascinating book launches including



*Riz Ahmed, Kate Hudson, Aroon Shivdasani, Mira Nair*

books by Salman Rushdie, Shashi Tharoor, Madhur Jaffrey, Bapsi Sidhwa, Pepita and several others along with several CD launches with live music both traditional and contemporary – most recent being Grammy nominee Chandrika Tandon’s Soul Call, have been highly appreciated.

It’s been our vision to be part of the amazing diversity of the New York cultural landscape, while striving to build an awareness of the arts and artistic disciplines from the



*Shashi Tharoor, Mallika Sarabhai*

Indian subcontinent, educating the mainstream America about the culture of the Indian subcontinent through organizing discussions and workshops during and after each of our artistic presentations from every country in the Indian subcontinent.

Not content with arts alone, IAAC has sought to be part of the sufferings and pains of India, and used art as a means to raise awareness and support especially when man made and natural calamities overpowered us. We raised money and awareness for the victims of the Tsunami via an Art Auction and Fashion Show at Christies. We also raised money and awareness for the victims of the Maharashtra and Gujarat Earthquakes via a play and an art auction, after which I visited each of the devastated areas to ascertain exactly where the money was most needed.

Today, it is an Indian summer! There are myriad Indian theatre, dance, film, music and literary platforms for Indian artists. The IAAC set an example and opened the doors for artists and artistic groups from the Indian diaspora as well as the Indian subcontinent to enhance, educate, entertain and join the wonderful diverse cultural landscape of New York City.

My dream for the IAAC is to have a home of our own where artists can create, nurture, produce, exhibit and exchange ideas. I hope there is a philanthropic white knight out there who loves the arts, wants to give back to the community, wants to become a cultural ambassador for India, will receive a tax deduction for his/her donation of space and/or money, and is passionate about the artists and artistic disciplines from India, that have so greatly added to the creative wealth of this country. If that person reads this plea, I hope he/she connects with us immediately.



*Sakina Jaffrey, Sarita Chaudhry, Padma Lakshmi*