

**Transcript**
**The Traverse Podcast - Episode 2**

**With Abhishek Majumdar**

Video (with closed captions): https://youtu.be/QofmkJDaYal

[♪ Gentle electronic music]

**DH:** Welcome to the Traverse Podcast with me, Debbie Hannan. This episode’s guest is playwright Abhishek Majumdar. Speaking to me from his office in Bangalore, Abhishek is in his essence, an internationalist, which leads our talk today. His plays are global in vision, and his productions are often banned for speaking too much truth to power.

In early 2019, I directed his play Pah-La, for the Royal Court Theatre, an epic play about Tibetan nun who challenges the power of the People's Republic of China. It took years of research, including in 2018, a joint trip with me and Abhishek heading in a tiny car for 16 hours all the way from Delhi up through the Himalayas eventually making it to Dharamshala, where the Dalai Lama lives. We first met on this adventure, and that surreal trip cemented our connection.

Here, we speak about his experience appending at food rations during the pandemic, how it has exposed the seams of our society, and we questioned how internationalism can work post COVID and what it even meant in the first place.

Hello? Abhishek, how are you?

**AM:** I’m well, how are you?

**DH:** Yeah. I'm okay. Brilliant to speak to you. Where are you in the world right now? Can you give us a picture?

**AM:** Brilliant to speak to you too, it’s been a long time. It's wonderful to catch up.

I'm in Bangalore right now in my office, which is a flat that is about 20 minutes away from my flat, where I live. It's a place where I come to work. It has a nice little kitchen, it has lots of books. It has this mattress to sit on and a desk, pretty much all I need from 10 to 8 in a day. And then I go back home and then I come back the next day.

**DH:** The last time we saw each other, it would have been in London, probably on the opening night of Pah-La, which is now about a year and a half ago, which is how for, our listeners, how Abhishek and I met, we actually originally met in Delhi, I think it would have been at the airport-

**AM:** Yes, at the airport.

**DH:** Before we travelled in a car for about 16 hours to Dharamshala. And then we went in this car up the tiniest, most winding roads up to the mountains, about three in the morning, so that we could do further the research for Abhishek’s, play Pah-La, which I then directed at the Royal Court. So, since then the world has changed quite significantly. I'm going to start with a big question. How has the pandemic been for you?

**AM:** Oh, okay. [laughter] It's been a lot of things. I think in the beginning, I think every like many other people, even, I thought it was going to be this holiday actually for, you know, the, the playwright side of me. It wasn't too bad in the beginning is what I thought because you know, there's social distancing, which is pretty much the dream of someone who writes- everybody's shut down. So nobody's going to send me emails. That's pretty much part of my dream.

And there's this thing about, you know, it's not just India, but the whole world, which had shut down. So it wasn't like anyone was going to make any demands. So initially it was like that, but then there was a huge food crisis in Bangalore. It still is there with people who are migrant workers and who are daily wage labour. So some friends of mine and I, we ran a free school for children. And one day someone said, you know, we should go in and give some rations, dahl and rice and vegetable stew, to parents of two of our students. So we went out in our car with just enough for these two families. And people started appearing from everywhere because they were hungry and they had never asked for food. They were all people who had always earned a wage to now there was a lockdown and they couldn't, you know, India's largest economies, the informant economy. So three months later we had 9,000 families on our list and it became a huge operation, which was not only in Bangalore.

Then it was also in Bengal where there was a massive cyclone and in Kashmir and so on and so forth. So that pretty much took over my life for three months in lockdown. But about a month, month and a half ago, I got back to working and when the lockdown opened, I don't think things got solved.

The problems changed, but now I'm back to directing a show. So that's a good thing. So it's been a lot of these things and it's also been, you know, about our daughter being at home. She is the one who has adapted the most effectively, I think, to the lockdown. She's very happy that her parents are, were at home all the time. And it was great. So yeah, I think there's a few things to learn from the little ones, how quickly that after such situations, without looking like victims, which most adults, all of us were in that space. Yeah. And some projects have got every, every project has got pushed by a year. Um, which is weird because projects got pushed and also projects got signed. So I'm not sure whether it was a good thing or a bad thing, but it's all of these things.

**DH:** I think it's interesting what you said about how, uh, it's not that things have solved. The problems have changed, which I feel like is this is the exact moment that Britain is in. You mentioned directing a show, which made me really excited because theatre here has stopped still. There's a few live theatre events, but they are socially distanced or they're on headphones, but they're incredibly limited. And now you're back in the rehearsal room. So what's shifted in theatre, where you are?

**AM:** Actually, nothing has shifted, theatres are shut here as well, completely. Just a few days ago, there has been a notice from the government that from 21st September, we can have open air shows for 100 people, but the theatre that I'm directing this for, [**name of theatre**], which is the big theatre in Bangalore, and they are going to open whenever we open and I'm going to go away to Abu Dhabi most likely sometime soon. So we were in conversation and we talked, we shouldn't build a show before I leave and, we are going to play it on the stage most likely on 28th of September, without an audience and have it recorded and then streamed in about two weeks. That's one of those things which is made keeping in mind that the first thing that's going to happen with it is actually it's going to stream, which is really weird because suddenly we are making shows which stream first and then see a live audience later on. It’s the opposite of what was going on!

So, I mean, I'm having strange conversations with my sound designer. Now his first question is what platform are we streaming on? And you know, we've been working together for four years and I'm thinking, well, I've never thought of that. Yes, of course this was not a question. So he said something incredible to me yesterday in rehearsals and he said, once you make the show and it's open, I need two weeks. So I say, what do you need two weeks for? He said, I have to do a post production. I have to clean it up. I would set it up. And then I said, yeah, of course, you know, we have lived in the theatre so far thinking that on the night of the show, you will, you have a cast party, you go and drink. But now suddenly it's pushed by two weeks because the actual work starts after that, the image and the sound. And it’s strange.

**DH:** That is incredible. What's happened across the whole theatre world where you are, like, is everyone shifted online? Have places shut, have places? Or are you waiting, has the government supported?

**AM:** Oh no. Our government is very busy building the Ram Temple in North India. There is a Ram Temple, which was contested for many years. There was a mosque there, which was broken in 1992, claiming that the mythological God Ram was actually born there. I'm really interested to find out what was the date. If he was born, there must be a date as well. And I don't know, a single village in India, which doesn't have a claim to Ram. And that is the greatest thing about it Debbie, that everybody can claim it, that somehow this is the place where he was born. So the government decided to spend a huge amount of money laying down a silver, silver brick as the foundation stone for this temple, which is going to come up. And the government of that state has allotted 2000 crores, which is like $2 million or something, 2 million something, which is just a huge number for me. It's, it's really, it's a big number as far as I'm concerned to building this temple in a place, which, which has one of the lowest rates of hospitals, education and all of this. So that's what is really going on in India. In between all this, we had a major skirmish with China, as you know, India and China are COVID free, so we have time to have a battle at this point of time.

It was just bizarre because I think in these countries, you know, like America, India, partly UK with Boris Johnson, these men have led us to a point where the coronavirus pandemic has become secondary. Like I am actually not going to remember this year because of the pandemic really, it’s going to be remembered for completely different things in between all this, our prime minister does this thing for monkey bad which means the words of his heart. Like, his inner thoughts, so he doesn't do press conferences. He has never done a press conference. You can’t ask him anything. He says what he feels and you have to hear it. So he decides like, say tomorrow, you'd say this Saturday. I'm going to do monkey bad at nine o'clock. So he was going to come in at nine and you have to log in and he would say something like, he will say last time you said something about the dogs of the police and the army and how incredibly brave they are and how dedicated they are to the country. And so on and so forth. As India recorded the highest ever one day spike in cases in the world, he had nothing to say about it. He was actually talking about the dogs or the police and the canine force. Then one day he came and said that next Sunday at nine o'clock at night for nine minutes, everybody should get to the balcony or terrace, take a spoon or something and bang vessel as a means of praising the doctor.

**DH:** I think we might have given them the idea!

**AM:** But I suppose the best thing about is that he's for what? And that he's the Indian prime minister, a large part of the country doesn't have houses and they don't have balconies. The police rarely speak this idea from is a place which has a balcony. So maybe we'll have no idea what to do, but loyalists went and did it. Then he came up with this idea that the armed forces would use their helicopters to shower flower petals on hospitals as a mark of gratitude. So as people were dying on the streets and walking thousands and thousands of kilometres to go from the city to the village so that the always starvation and as all of this was going on, helicopters were dropping flower petals and people were banging this thing. And the round temple is being created. There is a guy who said, once the foundation stone is send them, the coronavirus will go the day the foundation stone was would bet out of all the people who attended it, 50% of them headquarters. So a bot is not listening. That is what is happening in India.

At the moment in the theatre world, there are so many different kinds of teams. So most people, most of the practitioners are not in the students who are the folk and traditional performance. And I think they are the ones who are most affected because there's no question of going online as far as they're concerned. And it's also a disease that is being pushed from the rich to the poor. So it is going to the villages where the facilities are much lesser than in the cities. And they don't have ultimate means of income. The traditional performance rely on performing to run their houses, which is not the dominant form of performing in the cities. Most people in the cities do something else, whatever voiceover or teaching or something. So yeah, these people have moved on like,

**DH:** So the city/country divide has deepened. Absolutely.

**AM:** Yeah. Within the city, like the city, the pandemic has shown us the real foreign lines of our cities, the 9,000 families that I just told you about, they were all within three kilometres of my house. I have lived here for 11 years in this house and never seen even like 90% of those little hearts, because they are mostly belonged to people who work in the services and who build the factory or construction workers, cleaners, cooks and their houses get lost between the apartments. So it's not on our circuit. When I go from my house to my office, to my daughter's school, these places are invisible. And I was so amazed and horrified at the same time to realise that, you know, as a writer, I go to places and research and here's like my neighbourhood, which I had no idea what the real shape of it was, until this pandemic. And it did to open this, this foreign line.

**DH:** Yeah. As you said, you go places and research. Like when I think of internationalism and theater, I think of you because you, you mentioned Abu Dhabi, you teach there who plays a really traveled far and wide a split question, but you know, geography has shifted now possibly permanently. What do you reckon is the future of internationalism? Now you've got two works on in Dubai, in New Zealand, right?

**AM:** I’m a little confused about internationalism at the moment because you know, like internationalism anywhere means something else in Europe. Internationalism means knowing more about the world and the Indian supporting internationalism means doing better than life. That difference is obviously like a post-colonial reality. But now what has happened strangely for me, the next one or two years are pretty much unaffected because I had signed up on things like I'm writing a book on theatre for Bloomsbury and all of this, which is anyway, spread out over the next one and a half years. And of course, a lot of my work in Hindi, but I concerned about what will happen after, because now when theatres open, they will have the responsibility to first employ playwrights and directors who are in the region as they should, which means that most people who were outside and were part of what is broadly called international representation, we would have much lesser work after two years.

But having said that there are a lot of small projects which are opening up. What this pandemic has also done is that it suddenly made us all similar, at least in a disease. So like I did the sleep on salt for a Swedish Tiana, which then translated to three or four Indian languages and it's getting performed, which was like, I, I never thought that it would be a serious sort of claim, which would have a life. I thought it was a one-off thing. Those kinds of things are happening. Dubai is opening because of the export. And I'm not really sure what that means. Do I have decided long ago that a lot of money has been spent on the expo. So things must be normal by October. So everything is open and people in Dubai are going out and hosting and everything

**DH:** For another quick bit of context, the expo he's referring to is the 2020 world exposition in Dubai where Abhishek teaches playwriting for a few months, each year. It's like a huge international festivals meant to bring the world together. And this was meant to be the first one in the middle East. When I was speaking to Abishag, it was still meant to be going ahead, but it's since been delayed a year, the buildings are made for it are absolutely incredible. The sustainability pavilion is beautiful and it's well worth the Google after this.

**AM:** So they are doing a Hindi play of spine, which was, which is not an under five, maybe five years old. And in New Zealand, they're doing housed in high street in Mexico, they are doing something. Uh, but I wonder if there is a serious pattern to it. I think it's just that I'm a bit lucky that people have these plays and they want to do them. There is some element of luck involved, you know, like people have read it or they've come to know about it. And they want to, they think these plays are speaking to them. I'm surprised that, you know, somebody New Zealand wants to do something Aboriginal or somebody in Mexico is interested. But I do think internationalism is change. I mean the big fear is the irony that we are at a moment where the diseases travel around the world, but it will end up making us more insular.

**DH:** Could you describe for the listeners, what Soul is about?

**AM:** Soul is about two women, a mother and two daughters, all of whom stay in a small hut, opposite a construction site. And during the long winter they don't have enough to eat. So the mother gives the children, rice and salt. So every day the rice reduces and the salt increases because there's, and she started to kind of pass it off because it looks white and it's the same kind of thing. So the mother believes that the children eat as long as they have a story. So the mother is trying to create longer stories. So then the children feel that they're eating more. Then as the children have their own versions, the older sister believes that, okay, I am not going to hurt my mother. So I think she's going to start telling really short stories. So there'll be finished with you because there isn't much.

And the youngest child thinks that hunger is the competition that she's winning. She really believes that if you love the country, you have to go hungry. And she's kind of doing better than her mother and sister. So it's this thing about, you know, how hunger plays out in a family, a poor family and the children think the mother is telling the story, keeping in mind how much food they have. And the mother thinks that eating, they bring in mind, how long has a story. So it's, it's about the connection between, you know, stories and, and food and about dignity. You know, like we were going to so many places for those three months with food and really what was more difficult to unpack for ourselves than hunger was shame, you know, to, to ask for food in front of your children, it's killing, you know, like if you've loved all your life and you might be poor, but you have this frame, you're telling your children that, you know, you have to grow up to be hardworking people. That's why I'm sending you to school. And then one day you see that, you know, in the apartments, people are buying things online and deliveries arriving. And actually, you know, they're posting pictures of cakes and, you know, people are trying Greek salad and all of this is happening and here's this family which has done nothing, nobody in their family has ever traveled abroad. They have not brought the virus from anywhere, but they just cannot blow out and work and get rags.

**DH:** Yeah. It's incredibly striking. I read it on the Bengala review that published it or read it there. I think your breadth of interest and your breadth of reading and cultural influence seeps into your work. And even though potentially on paper, it might be strange that someone from Mexico connects to this, there's something in the, in the very dramaturgical, like bases of the writing that does open it out to different cultures, because we've all read, you know, there's plays about a moment. And then there's plays that, use that moment to talk about bigger things. And I think you're in that sort of second camp, but then the inside experience that of course is that you're still a playwright, right. Who wants to get commission, like there's philosophy, there's connection. And then there's like getting your deadline. Um, but that is the truth of the writer. Yeah.

**AM:** I’m actually not very, you know, my life has not been made commission based. You know, I live in India and sometimes in Abu Dhabi for some time. And then I live in sometimes in London, but my home is even when I've lived away from India for two years, I've always believed that this is, this is home. So I'm very clear in my head, you know, it's, it's next to a river. It has a tree and I can eat city anywhere with my hands like that. Even if I lived abroad for 50 years, for me home would be that, uh, anywhere in the world, if you give me a river, a tree and a place thing that I can eat with my hand, I'm in India. So it hasn't been really about that much about permission. So I'm really enjoying writing this book for Bloomsbury, which is about which is called Theatre Across Borders, which is about making theatre in Tibet and making it in Kashmir and make, when I was commissioned for this complete disaster has turned out to be a career.

This bizarre thing that there's no one place that I work in. And if I'm interested in working somewhere like in West Africa, then I'm in West Africa. There's no industry really that I belong to, which is good and bad. I'm very lucky to have been at the Royal Court two times already. And this is the third time and every time. And I'm a bit surprised, like everything that I've written for the Royal Court has been banned in one country or another. So it is it's bizarre commissioning. My sister says this to me know my sister is eight years older than me. She's the most encouraging sister you can find on the world. I remember at the Royal court, they said there was a scene in which I had written 11 characters.

Then my sister called and I said to her, you know, they're talking about this. And my sister said, reduce it, got some characters and have less. I said, what do you mean? You don't even know what play I'm writing. And she said, look, you have been a loss-making proposition, all your lives. You weren't nationally a loss-making proposition. You were in loss-making proposition for your family. And you're going to turn out to be a loss-making proposition in the world, like international. You'd be known as somebody who could sink your money on. So that's pretty much it. So I'm I'm okay. Like anybody I could come and do a play with you get banned or whatever. So

**DH:** I wish I could offer you a play with 20 characters. It will be banned. Um, at least one government will turn against you.

**AM:** Then somebody would stop the printing of the book that has also happened last year. I suppose the hard thing is that, you know, sometimes like last year when the whole thing with Pah La happened and was banded in China, it was valid China. It means also then it's been debate, right? There are copies of the play in Tibet, but they are not actual copies. And now we have this Tibet and translation. So that is available. The problem is that in about four months, last two last year, when we were making Pah La, two of my players had got banned. One was in India and one was in China. I saw the first time I found myself thinking that, but then what will I do? You can start writing something else, right? I mean, I'd have to go back and change my whole life from the age of five to get to a point where you write something else, you just write what you write. It's not to a client. There's no client in the game. You're writing a play, but independent. I also think that's the least of the world's problems. It's like my place. And if they can do a little bit of, if they can speak for a word for anyone, I'm happy

**DH:** And thinking about you teaching future playwrights in Abu Dhabi, how are you speaking to them about the world and their writing now? Because exactly like you said, British theatre anyways, and this massive online moment of existential crisis, that everyone is just like, why are we doing it this way? And what are we doing and how are we doing it? Should we be doing it? So I'm wondering how you're speaking to your students from all over the world about their place in the world. Now, as playwrights?

**AM:** I’m very fortunate to have a very diverse class in New York university. Now, would that be in the last five years? I've probably had once that did have two students from the same country. So they're always like Jordan and see I'm from, you know, from the US, from UK, which is helpful because this is such a moment that when they listen to each other's assignments, listen to each other's drafts. I think automatically you feel a kind of, you feel that you're not alone, which is what I think a lot of students are feeling. I started teaching on next Tuesday, but we're already in touch with students to find out what are the conditions that they're in? Do they have a room to themselves? I have a student who's sitting in Taiwan and then once you've been sitting somewhere in Africa and then the third student is sitting somewhere in the middle, East different time zones. And I'm here, I'm in Bangalore where, you know, as a professor, I have to tell them on day one, that there might be a power cut and you'll have to wait till the end of you have to wait for two minutes for it to come back, which is not a problem for me. I grew up with no power at nights online very often. So for me, the notion that you are going to have for us power is just about 10 years old. But I don't know for many students, it's not like that. You know, like children who grew up in Dubai or New York, or they, they, they don't think of this as a, as something that can happen, but it's bringing us together in a strange way, right? I think that is internationalism each other's jobs and see each other's issues. And we really don't know what is happening in Nepal during the pandemic there, I've never seen a news report anywhere in any newspaper, which says Nepal has this, or I've seen something about Sri Lanka, but even the representation of the pandemic is so dependent on power, which countries big and no it's as if some lives are more important than others.

And all of this, even in our subcontinent, India, as the news next followed by Pakistan, then Bangladesh. Then she looked at then Nepal, then Buddha. So I think the playwrights are going to be working on very differently this year because of the way they can work. But at the same time, I think as storytellers, they're living in a time where there is a huge event, but you can't find a moment for it. Like, you know, when the bomb fell on Hiroshima, people could write because there was a moment this happened when the world was started, I stopped, you know, Hitler shot himself. Okay. So there's a moment. This is when the chemical weapons is, there's a moment, but now we're at a time when there is no moment it's continuous. And we don't know if the worst is over or if the worst is coming.

We don't know if the virus is the big problem or hunger is the big problem or unemployment will be the huge issue or domestic violence is the big issue or what is what I'm very concerned about to end this answer is, you know, when the vaccine comes out, be able to see the shape of the world in its full form, because it's going to be there in the world, but it's not going to be available to everybody. We know who's going to get it first and who's going to get it last. And who's never going to get that will go up a lot of things for even these spirits to think about, even start to make art from the middle of all this fucked, I think you're not is still in a better place. I think our greatest limitation is this will dependence on conflict.

**DH:** Suppose everything was fine. All theatres would shut down. It would be impossible if you're in, you would be able to do a play about four seasons and it would last like 70 hours. And it'll be fine. But if you're in any kind of restaurant, but we have all been taught that performance is conflict. The only real challenge for us is that pandemic is telling us that your structure of playwriting is now going to be closer to sort of environmental piece or more broad open time kind of scene, as opposed to something you can write about a quarter time. Compressing time is very different, I think at the moment. But I also think the fallacy of it is this deep online world will save the theatre know, or like you have to start writing plays differently because we are online because I'm thinking of, you know, the moment when printing was started, did we start writing plays differently?

**AM:** Because we started printing, did we started writing plays differently because we had, you know, like ink pens and not so a new technology, which we have not invented was there. We are just using this thing. So why would it change how we make the other something? I cannot understand if we change how we see things like maybe practically people would not be able to see the full size of the actor or the scenography in that way, but structurally, why this would change something in writing or even in direction. I mean, you should, you should tell me like, as a devices I can understand, but what does it change your metaphor, your sense of metaphor?

**DH:** I think it comes back to time for me when I speak to younger directors, probably unhelpfully esoteric, but I always tell them that their medium is time. Like you think your medium is sound and light and people, but your actual medium is time because that's what you've bought into with this person who's arrived in the room to watch you. So how are you shaping their time for this two and a half hours? And you can stretch a moment. You can compress it. And I think time is maybe the thing that is hardest to manage with the experience to the screen, because you are hoping rather than definitely holding. So you're hoping that people don't pause, don't walk away don't or do pause and walk away at the right moment, but it doesn't necessarily shift metaphor. I think you're right. I think it just shifts the elements that you can control and the way that you hold the tension.

**AM:** I almost think of this time as this experience I had in Burkina Faso in West Africa, there is a tender school called can be in Gambini. There is like a hostage. The stage is partly covered. And the audiences in open air and a lot of 10 doesn't work enough are sort of like that in the capital. Somebody was telling us that every night at about eight, 15 or eight 20, there's an aircraft of Ethiopian areas, which comes from Addis Ababa. And at that time, when the flight was the players and the audience, no matter what moment, what scene they just stop, nothing happens. But everybody actually takes responsibility to keep the moment. Everybody understands this, that if one of us drops it, we lose where we were. But at the same time, it's a theatre understanding what people don't do in [inaudible], which I think they would do in Delhi or Bombay is that they don't take out their phone and such.

They don't do that because they know that Otello is in the room and I have to wait for it, human airlines to cross, and then it'll happen. I think we are in that moment right now, when this plane is going over our head and we have to wait for it to go, and we have to believe in each other and tell each other, you know, we'll all hold the moment. We don't have to pull out our phones. We just believe that it will go and we will get back, which is not to say that we prepare for the future, but remaining for the future is the way we prepare for a teller, but then finish the scene. It's not to change what we are inside.

**DH:** That reminds me of sitting in the Arches in Glasgow, a very different part of the world. And when the train goes overhead, everyone waits. Uh, final question for you. What do you hope for right now?

**AM:** I hope for the health of my family, first of all, because in India, the numbers are increasing. I think we are quite safe, but immediately that's my greatest concern. I hope people have enough greed. It's been an intense experience going to all these places where people it's actually changed. What I eat. It's completely changed what I can eat and how much I can eat, because, you know, I've seen people running like with a packet of salt so that, you know, they get that. But yeah, if I have to put my finger to it, it would be the health of my family, my daughter, and my life, my sister, all of them, all of you, friends, you know, around the world. Yeah.

**DH:** And let's keep her health so we can hold this pose until it finishes. Thank you so much. I will check as ever for your insight and humour and warmth, and I wish you'd on nearest health. Thank you very much. It's been a pleasure.

Thank you for listening to my conversation with Abhishek Majumdar. Tune in next episode where I'll be speaking to director Leo Rae Gasson about being someone who was already working in digital theatre well, before everyone had to turn online. The music for this podcast was composed by Patricia Panther with sound designed by Richard Bell. And I've been your host, Debbie Hannan, please do check out traverse.co.uk to see our upcoming work in Trav three, our online venue. The Traverse is funded by creative Scotland and the City of Edinburgh Council with additional support from the Scottish Government Performing Art Fund.

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