

## An interview with Anupama Chandrasekhar

**T**he Indian playwright Anupama Chandrasekhar has seen her works staged across India, Europe, Canada and the US. She was the first Indian to be nominated for the Charles Wintour Prize for Most Promising Playwright (2008), as well as for the John Whiting Award and the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize for her Royal Court Theatre-commissioned play *Free Outgoing*. Her screen adaptation of the play was a finalist at the Sundance International Screenwriters' Lab. Her play *Disconnect*, also staged at the Royal Court Theatre, has been translated and staged in German and Czech languages and saw its American and West Coast premieres in 2013. Her short story *Wings of Vedanthangal* was Asia's winner of the Commonwealth Short Story Prize in 2006. She was the Charles Wallace India Trust Writing Fellow at the University of Chichester for 2015.

This interview is about her play for children, *The Snow Queen*, an Indian adaptation of the Hans Christian Andersen story, which opened at Christmas 2011 at the Unicorn Theatre, London. Trestle Theatre production company remounted the play to open the Chennai Metroplus Theatre Festival in 2012, and it toured India and the UK until 2013.

### 1. Gerda and Kai are now Gowri and Kumar, the crow drives a rickshaw in Mumbai, scenes include a Bollywood dance battle and Bollywood stunts – what inspired you to re-tell *The Snow Queen* in an Indian setting?

Carl Miller, then Literary Manager of the Unicorn Theatre (the UK's foremost theatre for children and young people), was the primary resource person at a workshop conducted by the Royal Court Theatre in Mumbai. At the workshop, we got talking about children's theatre and Hans Christian Andersen and I evinced interest in writing for kids one day.

Many years later, when my play *Free Outgoing* was staged in London, he asked me if I was still interested and what I thought of adapting *The Snow Queen*. My first memory of reading the story as a little girl is a sense of being enthralled, much like Kai, by the magic that Andersen wove. He is a complex story teller, and he doesn't shy from delving into the darkness in human nature.

I read the story again with an adult's eyes and was enthralled yet again. I knew just how well it would work if set in India. (In fact in Andersen's story there are a couple of references to India. Obviously, stories about this exotic land had reached his ears!) The journey of Gerda in the original takes place through the four seasons. In my mind's eye, I could see her journey through four different regions/terrains/worlds in India, each with a particular colour – and soundscape and physical grammar.

The Unicorn Theatre was excited by the idea and commissioned the play for their main stage Christmas production in 2011. It was directed by the wonderful Rosamunde Hutt.

In my version of *The Snow Queen*, the children Gowri and Kumar live in a fishing hamlet in Kanyakumari, in the southernmost tip of India. They'd never seen snow until the Snow Queen arrives with a freak snowstorm and takes Kumar away to her Ice Palace in the Himalayas. Gowri's rescue mission takes her via verdant Kerala (where a paradise island casts a spell of forgetfulness on her), glitzy Mumbai (with its own Bollywood prince and princess), the dry, red Chambal Hills (notorious as a seat of dacoits [Hindi: bandits]) and finally to the Himalayan mountain range in the North, where war has ravaged the land and left the kingdom entirely without men. There are no completely evil creatures in my play. Only misguided ones.

**2. Your adaptation does not shy away from fairy-tale magic: it includes whirlwinds, snow storms, vanishing queens, goddesses turning into stone, a three-headed man and a talking tree. Did you have a clear vision of how this would be achieved in reality, or do you trust in the production team to create the magic?**

I left it entirely to the director and the creative team. They were absolutely brilliant at it – finding unusual, creative yet simple ways to create stage magic. Right from the word go, I was encouraged to let my imagination loose. And I did. It was the most fun play I'd written.

**3. What is it like to hand over a work to a director? Is it important to you that they share your vision, or is it more interesting to have a different vision brought to the script? How much input do you have?**

It is important that the director gets your world. The director Rosamunde Hutt did. She visited India to soak in the culture, the heat and the colours, and what she and her team created was both magical and Indian.

Rosamunde Hutt's one big piece of advice to me before I started to write *The Snow Queen* was: "Don't worry about how hard something is to stage. Just write it, and I'll find the solution." In fact, in the workshops I found that the more difficult something was to stage, the more creative the team got. For instance, the snowscape was created entirely out of bits of paper, the snowfall by feather-light pieces of paper kept airborne by actors using delicate Chinese fans. The mirror bursting into a million shards was staged using metal plates. The actors physicalised waves and whirlwinds and shape-shifting plants. Sophia Lovell Smith's sets and costumes, Phil Clarke's lighting and Arun Ghosh's music helped in transporting the European tale to India.

#### 4. Do you prefer to evoke realism or fantasy in your work, or should there be a balance of both?

I believe that every fairy tale and myth is in fact rooted in realism. For instance, in both the Indian epics, *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, there are descriptions of various weapons used by the armies. The Brahmashtra was known to be the most potent and most destructive weapon ever created, and once fired it cannot be stopped, only redirected (as is demonstrated by Lord Krishna in the fierce battle of Kurukshetra). Perhaps it was a precursor to a nuclear weapon? In any case, the weapon proved to be deadly and cost both sides dearly in both epics.

Since *The Snow Queen*, I've been using a lot of myth and folklore in my adult, nearly-naturalistic plays as well. The play I'm currently working on extensively uses crow myths. Another play is set in Kanyakumari, where the central deity is Kumari Amman, a virgin goddess who was tricked into celibacy so she could protect the people of the village against evil.

#### 5. What elements of Indian folklore have you used in *The Snow Queen*?

My knowledge of and love for folklore comes both from books and comics (particularly Amar Chitra Katha) and from the stories that the elders of my family told me as a little girl. India has such rich folk traditions and an endless supply of folktales. What I've taken from all these and used in abandon in *The Snow Queen* are character archetypes – e.g. the feisty goddess, the soulless jinn – and the raucous humour that are invested in a lot of folktales. I wanted to also find the right balance between Andersen's European original and my Indianness and between folk and contemporary, while staying true to my voice.

#### 6. Did you look at many other adaptations of *The Snow Queen* before starting?

No. I didn't want my version to be influenced by others. But I read stage adaptations of a couple of other fairy tales to get me started.

#### 7. How is writing a play for children different to writing one for adults?

One huge lesson learnt quite early on in the development process: never underestimate the intelligence of children. They are capable of grasping complex subtext. Also, I've discovered, there are fewer theatrical rules for children than for adults. I find a sense of freedom with children's theatre and with fairy-tale adaptations that I don't normally find with naturalistic adults' theatre.

#### 8. You said in an interview in *The Criterion* that 'Each play is a response to an incident, a happening, a trend in society that angered me or upset or worried me.' Is this also the case for *The Snow Queen*?

Yes it is. As a playwright, I react to what's happening in contemporary India. Even while adapting a fairy tale, I was reacting. *The Snow Queen* is fun and dance and happy-ever-after

on the one hand, and on the other, it's an exploration of the mindlessness of war, of isolation and loneliness and of the basic human need to love and be loved.

I write plays because I want to understand the world around me. In that respect, I think I'm still a journalist (I worked for an Indian daily for a few years) but writing in a different medium. As a playwright, I'm trying to figure out why something is happening, and why it's happening NOW. Thematically, I'm interested in the conflict between the old and the new and in the place of the individual in a globalised world. The 21st-century India is as much present in my version of *The Snow Queen* as the ageless, mythical India.

### 9. How much do Indian folklore and fairy tales influence your work (and perhaps life)?

A lot. I've grown up on Indian mythologies and folktales and I can see how my sensibilities as a writer have been informed by them.

I love the way Indian mythologies and gods are constantly evolving. For instance, new stories are now being told of the Hanuman (the monkey god) temple near where I live. Over the last couple of decades, the deity has been gaining a stellar reputation for causing visas to be granted to devotees who prostrate themselves at the sanctum sanctorum. The God is called Visa Hanuman and he's proved far more effective in handling First World red tape than any document prospective applicants can produce!

### 10. And finally, as part of a great *Gramarye* tradition, what was your favourite story when you were young?

The great Indian epic, *Mahabharata*. It still is. The characters are complex, the motives universal, the stories dramatic and layered. The stories gain more meaning and poignancy as I age – and that's the magic of the epic! It's for all time, for all ages. I'd love to adapt it for the stage one day.

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## Heather Robbins