

rifco theatre company

RIFCO THEATRE COMPANY IN ASSOCIATION WITH WATFORD PALACE THEATRE
PRESENTS

WATFORD
PALACE
THEATRE

HAPPY BIRTHDAY SUNITA

WRITTEN BY
HARVEY VIRDI

DIRECTED BY
PRAVESH KUMAR



2023 TOUR

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Charity number: 1123986 Photography by Michael Wharley Designed by Desk Tidy Design



ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

Happy Birthday Sunita originally came out of a series of workshops Rifco undertook with writer and performer Harvey Virdi in 2013. When we premiered the piece in 2014 it immediately struck a chord with the audience, and coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic seemed the perfect time to revive it - people have been battered and bruised over the past three years, and the manic, but ultimately loving trials of the Johal family is the perfect antidote.

As a director, it is rare that you get the opportunity to revisit your work afresh, and it has been a true delight to return to *Happy Birthday Sunita* with a brilliant new cast. I have been struck both by how much our attitudes have changed in the past decade, but also by the stigma that remains around open discussion. Family remains family, each with its own secrets and conflicts, and it can be an institution frustratingly resistant to change. Ultimately, however, the Johal family do find a way to accept growth, both in themselves and in their relatives. I hope that this truth is the one that people leave the theatre with; as maddening as it can be, family can afford us true acceptance.

I would like to thank our extended Rifco family: our wonderful designers and actors, the backstage and office teams, and our home venue Watford Palace Theatre, for working to bring this piece to life. For more than two decades, Rifco has worked to champion British South Asian voices and stories, through our productions and Rifco Associates Programme, something that feels as vital now as when I founded the company. It remains a privilege and a pleasure to make work for our community, and we hope you enjoy our latest offering.

Thank you for your support!

Pravesh Kumar

**Pravesh Kumar MBE,
Artistic Director of Rifco Theatre Company**



Harvey Virdi & Pravesh Kumar

THE CAST



Bhawna Bhawsar
Sunita



Keiron Crook
Maurice



Devesh Kishore
Nav



Rameet Rauli
Harleen



Divya Seth Shah
Tejpal

CREATIVE TEAM

Writer

Harvey Virdi

Sound Designer

Nick Manning

Production Managers

Hannah Blamire & Tom Mackey

Director

Pravesh Kumar MBE

Choreographer

Andy Kumar

Stage Manager

Sophie Slobodjani

Designer

Colin Falconer

Fight Director

Ronin Traynor

Deputy Stage Manager

Emma Cook

Lighting Designer

Mark Dymock

Vocal Coach

Lottie Williams-Burrell

Wardrobe Supervisor

Mark Jones

WITH THANKS TO WATFORD PALACE THEATRE

CAST BIOGRAPHIES

DIVYA SETH SHAH TEJPAL

Divya Seth Shah is an Indian film and television actress, who started her career playing Majhli in the television serial *Hum Log*. She is the daughter of actress Sushma Seth and Dhruv Seth. Divya has performed on the Delhi stage with theatre groups such as TAG, Stagedoor, Masque, Yatrik and Primetime. In Bombay she took part in iconic shows such as *Daraar*, *Banegi Apni Baat*, *Delhi bhai Delhi*, *Adhikaar*, *Sparsh*, *Janam*, *Rishtey*. She is currently shooting *City of Dreams 3*, *The Vaccine War* and *Duranga 2*. Most recently, she starred as Amitabh Bachchan's co-star in the Bollywood film *Goodbye*, playing the role of Dolly Aunty. Other film credits include *Jab We Met*, *English Vinglish*, *Dil Dhadakne Do* and *Patel ki Punjabi Shaadi*. Web series include: *Fittrat*, *The Married Woman*, *City of Dreams*, *Hiccoughs* and *Hookups*.



BHAWNA BHAWSAR SUNITA

Bhawna is known for her role as Franny/Ruana Singh in the stage adaptation of Alice Seabold's novel *The Lovely Bones* (World Premiere/National tour). Bhawna made her television debut in 2021 as Dr Shah in *EastEnders*. Other television and film credits include: *Eastenders*, *Newark Newark*, *Emmerdale*, *The Undeclared War*, *Doctors*, *Casualty* and *Cuppa Chai*. Other theatre includes: *Stars and Seeds* (Mashi Theatre); *Mara Ba* (Nottingham Playhouse); *Maryland* (New Perspectives); *Diary of Big Man*, *The Whiz* (Birmingham Rep); *Big Sister Little Brother*, *Tree Child* (Spark Arts); *A Crack in Time* (Rosamunde Hutt); *Home Sweet Home* (Freedom Studios); *Guantanamo Boy* (Brolly Productions); *The Crossing* (Tamasha/London Bus).

DEVESH KISHORE NAV

Theatre credits include *The Bone Sparrow* (Theatre Royal, York); *GHBoy* (Charing Cross Theatre); *The Lady Killers*, *Guards at the Taj* (Theatre By The Lake); *Child of the Divide* (Tamasha); *Gangsta Granny* (Birmingham Stage Company) and *Tales of the Harrow Road* (Soho Theatre). Television and film includes *Last Light* (MGM); *Casualty* and *Echoes*.



RAMEET RAULI HARLEEN

Theatre includes: *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Butterfly Theatre Company); *The Peace Dove, Unmade* (Tristan Bates Theatre); *Frankenstein, Macbeth, The Office Xmas Party* (St James Theatre); *Once Upon A Time* (Booktrust); *Playing The Game* (Tabard Theatre). Television includes *Maternal* (ITV); *Find Me in Paris* (Hulu/Disney/Nickelodeon); *Warren, Call The Midwife* (BBC); *Ride* (Nickelodeon); *The Athena* (Sky); *50 Ways to Kill Your Lover* (Thumbs Up Productions). Film includes: *Little English* (Resource Productions) and *An Actor's Life for Me*.



KEIRON CROOK MAURICE

Keiron played the gangster Al in *Coronation Street* and can be seen in Channel 4's *Screw* as prisoner Farrow. Previous credits include *Violet* (Charing Cross Theatre); *Mamma Mia* (World tour); *The Sound of Music* (UK tour); *High Society* (UK tour); *Wind in the Willows* (Lyric Theatre/Hong Kong); *Marguerite* (West End); *Wit* (West End); *The Tempest* (US tour); *Wrath of Achilles* (US tour); *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat* (West End); *Jesus Christ Superstar* (UK/European tour); *Jerry Springer the Opera* (UK tour); *Phantom of the Opera* (UK tour); *Moon Landing* (Derby Playhouse); *Love Story* (Minerva Theatre, Chichester); *The Rat Pack Live From Las Vegas* (West End). Television includes *The Agatha Christie Diaries* (Sony TV). Recordings include *Coronation Street the Musical*, *The Attic*, *Time's Up* and *Marguerite*.



BIOGRAPHIES

HARVEY VIRDI WRITER

Harvey is currently playing Misbah Maalik in Channel 4's *Hollyoaks*. Writing credits for Rifco Theatre Company include: *Happy Birthday Sunita* (2023, 2014); *Miss Meena and the Masala Queens*, *Where's My Desi Soulmate?* (Co-Writer); *Meri Christmas* and *Airport 2000*. Other writing includes *Dick Whittington Goes Bollywood* (Tara Arts); *Park Life* (Radio 4); *Two Old Ladies* (Co-Writer, West End).

Theatre includes: *Twelfth Night*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *When We Are Married*, *Playboy of the Asian World* (West End); *England People Very Nice*, *The Threepenny Opera* (National Theatre); *The Borrowers* (Sherman Theatre); *The Roaring Girls Season*, *Arabian Nights* (RSC); *Tiger Country* (Hampstead Theatre); *The Misanthrope* (English Touring Theatre/Liverpool Playhouse); *Tales from the Harrow Road* (Soho Theatre); *Volpone*, *The Duchess of Malfi*, *Dr Faustus*, *The School for Scandal* (Greenwich Theatre); *Rafta Rafta* (Bolton Octagon); *Benzti* (Kali Theatre/ Birmingham Rep); *Calcutta Khosher* (Kali Theatre); *Higra* (West Yorkshire Playhouse); *14 Songs*, *Two Weddings and a Funeral* (Tamasha Theatre Company); *Exodus* (Tara Arts); *Twelfth Night*, *Bravely Fought the Queen* (Border Crossings).

Television includes: *Not Going Out*, *Citizen Khan*, *Doctors*, *Class Dismissed*, *Holby City*, *Casualty*, *Cherished*, *House Across the Street* (BBC); *The Windsors* (Channel 4); *The Jury*, *Coronation Street* (ITV); *Lucky Man II*, *Little Crackers - The Lazy Uncle* (Sky); *The Kumars* (Hat Trick); *Murphy's Law* (Tiger Aspect); *Britz* (Mentorn), *Boohbah* (Ragdoll). Film includes: *Honour*, *Jadoo*, *Notte Finisce Con*, *Gallo*, *Brick Lane*, *Venus*, *Bride & Prejudice*, *Thunderbirds*, *Bend It Like Beckham*.



PRAVESH KUMAR MBE DIRECTOR

Pravesh is the Artistic Director and Chief Executive of the award-winning Rifco Theatre Company, and he was awarded in the Queen's Honours List 2022 for Services to Theatre. He started the company in 2000 to make a different kind of theatre for a community that could not see themselves represented on British stages. He has been at the forefront of bringing British South Asian audiences into theatres in their thousands, often for the first time, by making entertaining and accessible theatre.

Pravesh has a background in film and worked in the commercial Indian film industry, often called Bollywood, for many years. His theatrical directorial debut was in 2000 with *Bollywood - Yet Another Love Story* (UK tour). He has gone on to achieve critical acclaim for Rifco Theatre Company productions: *Dishoom!*, *Pyar Actually*, *Miss Meena and the Masala Queens*, *Laila The Musical*, *Britain's Got Bhangra*, *Happy Birthday Sunita*, *It Ain't All Bollywood*, *There's Something About Simmy*, *Airport 2000*, *Meri Christmas*, *Where's My Desi Soulmate?*, *The Deranged Marriage* and *Break The Floorboards*.

His short film *Gods on Mountains* was nominated for the Satyajit Ray Short Film Award. His short film *The Deranged Marriage* was selected for the BAFTA - accredited BUFF festival in 2019. Pravesh wrote the book for the acclaimed rap musical *Mushy: Lyrically Speaking*. Most recently, Pravesh's debut feature film *Little English* (Resource Productions) is playing in selected cinemas throughout the UK, based on Rifco's play *There's Something About Simmy*. Selling out many screens all over the country, proving yet again that underrepresented audiences will come out in their thousands when you tell their authentic stories through their own lens. Pravesh is writing an ambitious new main-stage musical that will hit the stage in Spring 2024. He leads the Rifco Associates programme finding new British South Asian voices of the future.



COLIN FALCONER DESIGNER

Colin studied Interior and Environmental Design at Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design, and Theatre Design at Nottingham Trent University. Theatre includes: *The Misanthrope*, *The Blue Room* (West End); *The Merchant of Venice* (Royal Shakespeare Company); *After The Dance*, *Perfect Nonsense* (Theatre By The Lake); *Richard the Second*, *Doctor Faustus*, *Volpone* (Tangle); *Travels with My Aunt*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Three Sisters*, *The Misanthrope*, *The Secret Rapture*, *Hysteria* (Chichester Festival Theatre); *Cabaret*, *Urinetown* (Arts Educational); *Blue/Orange* (Theatre Royal Brighton/tour); *There We Have Been*, *Everything and Nothing* (Sadler's Wells); *The Importance of Being Earnest*, *Travesties* (Birmingham Rep). Television includes: *UNA*, *EastEnders* (BBC).

MARK DYMOCK LIGHTING DESIGNER

Previously for Rifco Theatre Company: *Glitterball*, *Abigail's Party*, *Miss Meena and the Masala Queens*, *The Deranged Marriage*, *Mummy Ji Presents*, *Break The Floorboards* and *Happy Birthday Sunita* (2014).

Theatre includes: *Tony! Tony Blair the Rock Opera* (Harry Hill/Stephen Brown); *Once the Musical* (National tour); *One Man Two Guvnors*, *Grandma Saves The Day*, *Kiss me Quickstep*, *Rope* (New Wolsey); *The Wisdom Club* (Theatre Royal Bury St Edmunds); *Soldier On* (The Other Palace/Canadian Stage); *Ken* (Hampstead Theatre); *Revenants* (Pleasance); *Macbeth*, *All's Well That Ends Well*, *Measure for Measure*, *Alice In Wonderland*, *Loves Labours Lost* (GSC); *Dell Computers Gala* (Buenos Aires); *Love Letters*, *Kiss Me Quickstep*, *Haunting Julia*, *Roll Over Beethoven*, *Don't Look Now*, *Return to the Forbidden Planet*, *Godspell*, *The Merchant Of Venice*, *Can't Pay? Won't Pay!*, *They're Playing Our Song*, *Jack And The Beanstalk*, *Cinderella*, *Ladies Down Under*, *The Woman Who Cooked Her Husband* (Queen's Theatre); *Cathy* (Soho Theatre); *East* (Brighton Festival); *Peter Pan*, *Snow White*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Aladdin* (Evolution); *Northanger Abbey* (Theatre Royal Bury St Edmunds/tour); *Clybourne Park* (UK tour); *Return to the Forbidden Planet* (25th Anniversary tour); *Cathy* (Cardboard Citizens/tour); *Betty Blue Eyes* (UK tour); *Butterfly Lion* (National tour); *Snow White*, *Peter Pan*, *Wind in the Willows*, *James and the Giant Peach*, *Noises Off*, *Friend or Foe*, *The History Boys*, *The Hired Man* (Mercury Theatre); *House and Garden*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *Peter Pan*, *Pinocchio*, *Arabian Nights*, *Treasure Island*, *Wind in the Willows* (The Watermill Theatre); *Walking the Chains* (The Passenger Shed); *The Full Monty*, *Best Little Whorehouse in Texas*, *Oliver!* (City Hall & Arts Centre, Bermuda); *Educating Rita*, *Breezeblock Park* (Liverpool Playhouse); *Shirley Valentine* (Royal Court Theatre, Liverpool); *Farm Boy*, *The Hired Man*, *Kissing Sid James* (New York E59).

NICK MANNING SOUND DESIGNER

Nick is Assistant Technical Manager at the Linbury Theatre, Royal Opera House. Previously for Rifco Theatre Company: *Happy Birthday Sunita*. Theatre includes: *Jack & the Beanstalk*, *Aladdin*, *Ghost Stories* (Lyric Hammersmith Theatre/West End/Liverpool Playhouse/UK tour/

Australia/New Zealand tour): *Jack & the Beanstalk*, *Terror*, *Seventeen*, *Shopping and Fucking* (Lyric Hammersmith Theatre/Edinburgh Lyceum) and *Pinocchio*; *Tumulus* (Soho Theatre/Vaults Festival); *I Capture the Castle* (Watford Palace Theatre); *Mr Swallow – The Musical* (InvisibleDot); *Trout Stanley* (Southwark Playhouse); *Candida* (Theatre Royal Bath); *Jumpers for Goalposts* (Paines Plough/Watford Palace Theatre/Hull Truck); *The Acid Test*, *The Empire* (Royal Court); *Grumpy Old Women 2*, *Britt on Britt*, *Grumpy Old Women* (Avalon); *Gizmo Love*, *Excuses*, *Out of Our Heads* (Actors Touring Company); *The Unsinkable Clerk* (Network of Stuff); *Airsick*, *Crooked*, *When You Cure Me* (Bush); *Darwin in Malibu* (Hampstead Theatre); *Rabbit* (Frantic Assembly) and *Great Expectations* (Bristol Old Vic). Opera includes: *Susanna*, *The Lost Thing* (Royal Opera House); *The Intelligence Park* (Royal Opera House/Music Theatre Wales).

ANDY KUMAR CHOREOGRAPHER

Andy Kumar is an Indian public figure well known for his quirky sense of humour and unique style. Andy was the first openly gay Indian television presenter in India, using his voice to create pathways to equality. Andy has worked in film and television for the past 17 years; his credits include *Brand Face* and *VJ Channel V* from 2008-2011. He has hosted the shows *Dare to Date*, *Style Junkie*, *Get Gorgeous*, *India's Got Talent* (Colors TV), *Box Cricket League* (Sony Ent TV), and *What's with Indian Women?!* (Fox Life). Andy also hosts *Filmfare Red Carpet* (Sony Ent TV). Andy became a household name from his participation in the reality shows: *Bigg Boss* (Colors TV), *Jhalak Dikhla Ja* (Colors TV), *I Can Do That* (Zee TV), *Mehmanawazi* (Life OK), and *Killer Kareoke* (AND TV). Film includes: *Bachna E Haseeno* (Yashraj Films), *Leela Ek Paheli* (Paperdoll Productions) and *Kya Kool Hai Hum* (Balaji Films). Online series include: *Untagged* (Viacom), *Dev DD* (Balaji). More recently, Andy has been presenting shows and creating content for a dedicated audience on YouTube.

RONIN TRAYNOR FIGHT DIRECTOR

Ronin is a Master Teacher with the British Academy of Stage and Screen Combat and a Firearms Instructor with the Society of American Fight Directors. Previously for Rifco Theatre Company: *Meri Christmas*. Theatre includes: *Usagi Yojimbo* (Off West End). Film includes: *The Intent 2*; *Olive Green*; *Little English* (Resource Productions). Computer games include: *Total War Series: Attila*, *Battles*, *Empire*, *Napoleon*, *Rome II*, *Shogun II*, *Three Kingdoms*, *Thrones of Britannia* and *Troy*, *A Total War Saga* (Sega).

HANNAH BLAMIRE & TOM MACKAY PRODUCTION MANAGERS

The Production Family are a group of production specialists working across dance, theatre and live events. Recent credits include *Dreamachine*, an immersive experience with closed eyes and *Rising* (Royal Opera House). Previous productions include the Royal Exchange Manchester and the 20th Anniversary of the Guggenheim Bilbao Museum. The team production manage over 20 large scale shows each year across the globe.

SOPHIE SLOBDOJANI STAGE MANAGER

Sophie graduated from the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in 2022, where she specialised in both Stage Management and Sound. Most recently she worked as Deputy Stage Manager at *Dick Whittington* at The Theatre Chipping Norton.


EMMA COOK DEPUTY STAGE MANAGER

Emma is a freelance stage manager, and has toured all over the UK to a variety of theatres, venues, fields, and outdoor spaces. She previously spent 12 years as part of the in-house team at Oldham Coliseum as Deputy Stage Manager and Props Maker. Theatre includes: *Ladies That Dig* (UK tour); *Life of Pi* (West End/Sheffield Theatres); *Mayfly/Adrift/Grow* (UK tour); *Hound of the Baskervilles* (Bolton Octagon); *Bang Bang!* (UK tour); *Sleeping Beauty* (Lawrence Batley Theatre); *Seagulls* (Bolton Octagon); *Prison Factory Cult Circus* (UK tour); *Turn Of The Screw* (UK & Ireland tour).

MARK JONES WARDROBE SUPERVISOR

Mark's eclectic career covers productions from Mozart to *The Muppet Show* including works for Unicorn Theatre, London Bubble, EPOC, Trestle, Covent Garden Festival, BBC, Almeida Theatre and Regent's Park Theatre. The 27 operas he has costumed for Buxton International Festival included working with Lez Brotherston, Russell Craig, Francis O'Connor and Elijah Moshinsky. Contemporary dance pieces have included works by Crystal Pite and Wayne McGregor. He was Costume Supervisor for the immersive *Doctor Who - Time Fracture*. Since 2012 Mark has costumed all shows produced by Watford Palace Theatre. This is his ninth production for Rifco Theatre Company.



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Bringing your space to life

Our *Happy Birthday Sunita* set has been proudly sponsored by HEP Kitchens and HEP Supplies, who provided the Johal's new kitchen and the Bosch appliances just in time for Sunita's birthday. If you would like a new kitchen or appliances, please visit Hep Kitchens: hepkitchens.co.uk