



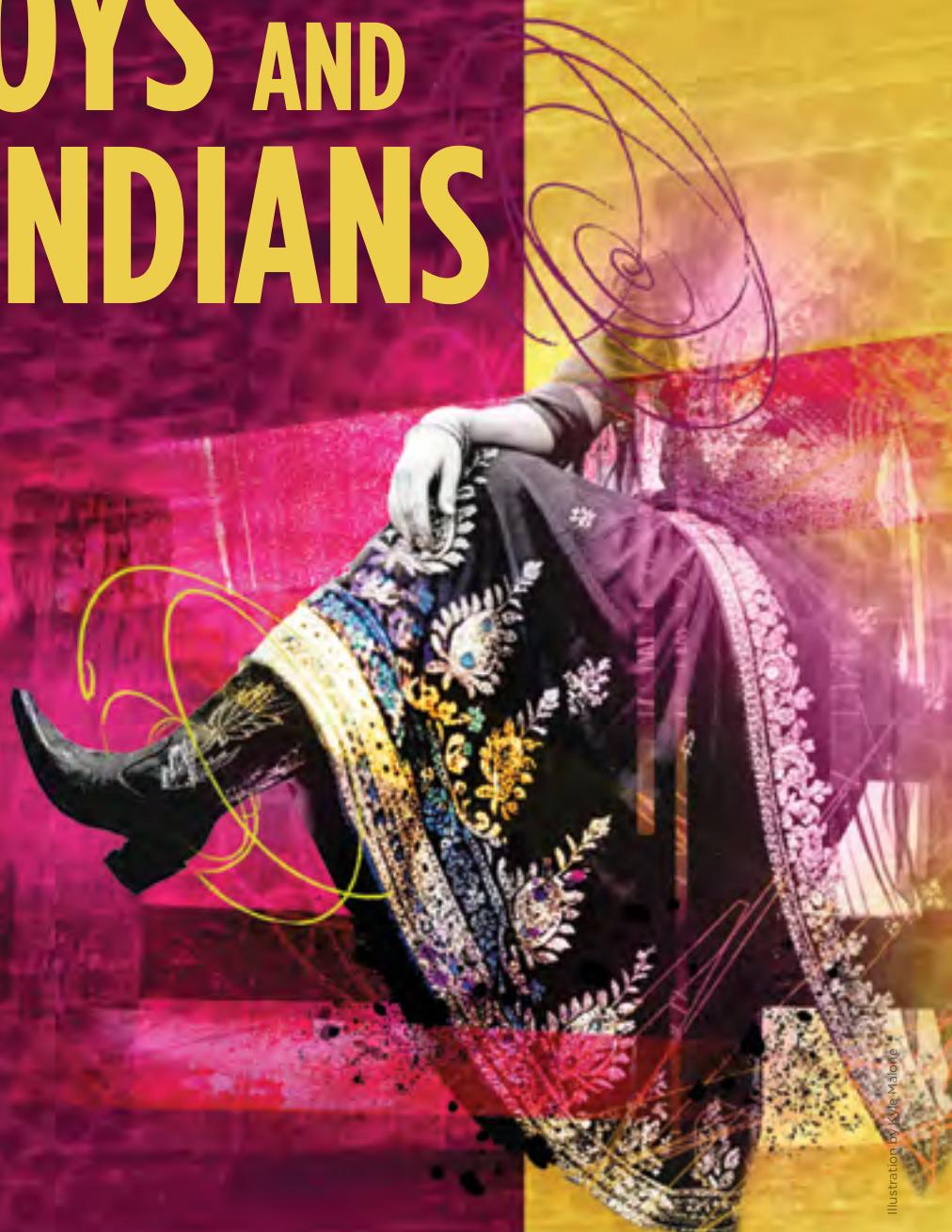
DENVER CENTER FOR  
THE PERFORMING ARTS  
Theatre Company

# INSIDE OUT

A DEEP DIVE FOR PATRONS

WORLD PREMIERE

# COWBOYS AND EAST INDIANS



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# INSIDE OUT

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World Premiere

## **Cowboys and East Indians**

By **Nina McConigley and Matthew Spangler**  
Directed by **Chris Coleman**

**JAN 16 – MAR 1**  
SINGLETON THEATRE

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Recipient of the Denver Center Theatre Company's Women's Voices Fund  
Recipient of an Edgerton Foundation New Play Award

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# SYNOPSIS: COWBOYS AND EAST INDIANS

Adapted from Nina McConigley's award-winning collection of short stories, *Cowboys and East Indians* follows the Sen family as they grapple with expectations and cultural collisions moving from India to Wyoming.

Lakshmi "Lucky" Sen's dad calls her a prairie dog — hesitant and scared on the side of the road. Now on a mission to fulfill her mom's final wish, Lucky has to figure out saris, how to stop burning the spices, and the many other things she didn't

pay attention to while she was busy trying to fit in. But on the eve of her sister's wedding, a family secret resurfaces, and Lucky realizes there might be a lot more about her mom and being a "good Indian daughter" that she doesn't know.

A rare exploration of rural immigrant experiences in the American West, *Cowboys and East Indians* examines the question of how one understands their identity when they don't see a reflection of it in their community.

## BIOS: AUTHOR, PLAYWRIGHTS, AND DIRECTOR

**NINA MCCONIGLEY, AUTHOR/PLAYWRIGHT** is the author of *Cowboys and East Indians* (Viking) and *How to Commit a Postcolonial Murder* (Pantheon). *Cowboys and East Indians* was the winner of the PEN Open Book Award and High Plains Book Award. Her work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *Orion*, *O, Oprah Magazine*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *American Short Fiction*, and *Ploughshares*, among others. In 2019-2020, she was the Walter Jackson Bate fellow at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University and a recipient of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) Creative Writing Fellowship. She teaches at Colorado State University.

**MATTHEW SPANGLER, PLAYWRIGHT.** *The Kite Runner* from Khaled Hosseini's novel (Broadway, West End, US and UK tours); *The Beekeeper of Aleppo* co-written with Nesrin Alrefaai, from Christy Lefteri's novel (UK tour); *Operation Ajax* co-written with Farshad Farahat; *Tortilla Curtain* from T.C. Boyle's novel (San Diego Rep); *Albatross* co-written with Benjamin Evett (off-Broadway); *Striking Back* co-written with Kellie Hughes, from Mary Manning and Sinead O'Brien's memoir (Dublin Theatre Festival); *Forgotten Empress* co-written with Farah Yasmeen Shaikh (Z Space, San Francisco). He is currently working with Sukanya Chakrabarti on an adaptation of Rabindranath Tagore's *The Kingdom of Cards*. Matthew is Professor of Performance Studies at San José State University, California, and Writer in Residence at the Hinterland Festival, Ireland.

**CHRIS COLEMAN, DIRECTOR** is passionate about the connection between stories and community. He joined the DCPA Theatre Company as Artistic Director in November of 2017 and has directed *Little Shop of Horrors*, *Rubicon*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, *Hamlet*, *A Little Night Music*, *Hotter Than Egypt*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Rattlesnake Kate*, *Twelfth Night*, *A Doll's House*, *Anna Karenina*, and *Oklahoma!*. Previously, Chris served as Artistic Director for Portland Center Stage in Oregon for 18 years. Under his leadership, PCS renovated the city's historic Armory into a new home, saw annual attendance nearly double, workshoped 52 new plays that went on to productions at over 100 theaters around the US and UK, and became a national leader in how theaters engage with their community.

In 1988, Chris founded Actor's Express in Atlanta (in the basement of an old church), a company that continues to be a cultural force in the Southeast today. He has directed at major theaters across the country, including Oregon Shakespeare Festival, the Alliance Theater, Dallas Theater Center, Baltimore Center Stage, Actors Theatre of Louisville, ACT/Seattle, the Asolo, Pittsburgh Public, 59E59, and New York Theater Workshop. He and his husband, actor/writer Rodney Hicks, live in Reunion.

Since moving to Colorado, he has hiked Dominguez Canyon, wandered the Cliff Dwellings of Mesa Verde, explored a working mine in Creede, and rafted down the Arkansas River.

## CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS

**LAKSHMI "LUCKY" SEN**, 22, Indian-American. Wyoming girl trying to be a good Indian daughter.

**RAJAH SEN**, 30 / 54, Indian man, striving to be a model family man and breadwinner.

**CHITRA SEN**, 28 / 52, Indian woman, engineer by training, and housewife.

**RICHARD LARSON**, 42 / 66, businessman and Wyoming cowboy.

**NANCY LARSON**, 42 / 66, epitome of 1980s fashion, friendly.

# KEY THEMES IN COWBOYS AND EAST INDIANS

By Lisa Bornstein

**Assimilation:** As immigrants to the United States, Rajah and Chitra are between two worlds, adapting to a new culture while trying to retain the old. Rajah is seeking to embrace 1980s Wyoming. Part of his adaptation is a desire to please his new boss and to fit in on the oil rigs, where he is a petroleum engineer. He also wants to encourage Chitra to accept their new home. Chitra misses her family and has difficulty adjusting to the climate and isolation in Wyoming. While Rajah attends company parties and takes Chitra on a nearly three-hour drive to a college student's graduation party in Laramie, he extols the beauty of the open range and the snow. Chitra responds, "It's just a big stretch of *nothing*." Chitra, however, may be connecting to their new home at a deeper level.

**Duality:** No one in *Cowboys and East Indians* exists on a single plane. There are secrets held and competing identities for the major characters. Rajah code switches, or shifts his language and behavior, showing different personas with his family versus his boss. Chitra was once an engineer, but now she hopes to be a stay-at-home mom. Rajah's boss, Richard, and his wife, Nancy, seem like happy-go-lucky Americans but soon reveal their own depths. As for the next generation, Lucky's older sister, Sita, has moved away from Wyoming but returns for

her wedding, for which she will wear a white dress while her bridesmaids put on saris. Lucky, however, doesn't feel like she fully fits into either Wyoming or Indian culture, so she struggles to be both things at the same time.

**Duty:** Everyone in the play is enacting roles in which they feel only partly at home. Many of these are the result of a sense of duty: to family, to culture, to traditional gender roles. For Lucky, that sense of duty leads her to ineptly attempt to reproduce her mother's cooking for both parents; to struggle between earning an engineering degree at MIT and staying home to care for her parents; to embrace her Indian heritage despite her discomfort. Rajah adopts American customs in an attempt to further his career and provide for his family; Chitra gives up her career to do the same.

**Loss:** A sense of loss is woven throughout the play. Characters face the loss of a nation and a culture. There are losses through mortality and loss experienced by conforming to the dominant culture's requirement for both ethnic and gender roles. A loss of comfort comes from adapting to a new culture or straddling two disparate ones. All of those losses come to light through memories, both distinct and poignant.

## INTERVIEW WITH THE PLAYWRIGHTS: NINA MCCONIGLEY & MATTHEW SPANGLER

By DCPA NewsCenter

Now receiving its world premiere at the Denver Center Theatre Company, *Cowboys and East Indians* was developed in the DCPA's 2024 Colorado New Play Summit. Co-adapters Nina McConigley and Matthew Spangler spoke about their play with the DCPA before their Summit reading. This interview has been edited for length and clarity. [View the original interview on YouTube.](#)

**"If my whole writing career is retelling and reimagining the American West, then I'm happy to do that." — Nina McConigley, Author & Playwright**

### — The Story —

**NINA MCCONIGLEY:** Being an immigrant in Wyoming is its own special [experience]. There's just not a community at all. I really wanted to read and write a book about what it's like to be an immigrant in a place where nothing reflects you — there is no restaurant, there is no grocery store, there are no other Indians. Really...you are it.

People always have a narrative of what Wyoming, Colorado, the West is, and it's usually a kind of cowboy masculine narrative. I think it's been really fun to subvert that, and to sort of say, "No, there are stories, there are people that live here who are not what you think."

I think *Cowboys and East Indians* is about the rural immigrant experience in America, which is not an experience that's talked a lot about. I also think it's a story about an East Indian or South Asian family in Wyoming, and how they're trying to make a life there.

### — The Adaptation —

**MATTHEW SPANGER:** We've known each other since high school. I could put a number of years on that, but then I'd be aging us. I read *Cowboys and East Indians* in 2014, 2015. I write plays based on books, and I thought at the time that there could be a play based on the short stories here. So, I reached out to Nina, and we started talking about it.

**NINA:** Yeah, it was really casual. We were sitting over dinner, and [Matthew said], "Have you ever thought of *Cowboys* as a play?" And I just thought, "No. No, I have not."

**MATTHEW:** You had no idea that was a business meeting?

**NINA:** No. No idea. I was excited about the steak we were eating.

**MATTHEW:** There aren't a lot of immigrants of any type in Wyoming, but there are some, so this is a play about that immigrant experience. What does it mean to move to the rural American West and Wyoming in particular, and see Wyoming through the eyes of these newcomers?

**NINA:** Seeing a reflection of yourself on stage is pretty powerful and seeing it in popular culture is really powerful. There haven't been a lot of South Asian stories for the American West.

**MATTHEW:** The play, in some sense, is grappling with how we make sense of our lives in this space and mitigate the loneliness that inevitably is around us. The possibility that we don't fit in even when we should.... And what do we do with that fact?

### — Impact of Matthew Shepard —

**NINA:** We both grew up in Wyoming, and in 1988, when Matthew Shepard was killed, that really put Laramie and Wyoming on the radar for a lot of people in the US. Matthew Shepard was a gay University of Wyoming college student. He was beaten to death. I knew Matt; we went to school together...the same junior high. I mostly knew him through church. He was a very real person to me.

We hear this expression of "cowboy up" all the time or, you know, "be tough." There's a sort of ethos of the Marlboro man or the masculinity of a cowboy that I think is really destructive and can be really dangerous.

When I wrote that story, Matthew Shepard was completely on my mind. I wanted to have part of a story, set in Laramie that really addressed this idea of what it means to be a man in Wyoming. I think being an immigrant is hard. I think being a certain performance of masculinity is hard.

### — The Commission & Colorado New Play Summit —

**NINA:** I think [the adaptation of the book into a play] really started to become serious over the last 2-3 years, but it's hard to prioritize an artistic project unless you have support behind it. When the DCPA came in and was willing to give us a commission, it really changed it for us.

**MATTHEW:** It is so incredibly rare to have the sort of support that you have [at the DCPA] for a new play that's never seen the light of day of public audience. A play that's totally just existed on somebody's computer.

**NINA:** I'm a fiction writer in my normal life, so people read my stories alone in a room. I don't see them react to my work, and I think it's going to be really surprising to see an audience and to see how they laugh, to see how they breathe or how they are listening.

**MATTHEW:** We came [in 2023] to see the Colorado New Play Summit, and we were really impressed with the plays and the experience that that group of people was having. We didn't know at the time that we'd be back at the Summit the next year.

**NINA:** No, but we were pretty inspired. We got to work soon after that Summit. We got the commission and really wrote. It was our priority, and we have spent a lot of hours in Wyoming and at the DCPA writing, writing, writing. It's been kind of a magical experience.

### — Full Circle —

**NINA:** Matthew and I were talking, and I think for both of us, the first big play we ever saw was at the Denver Center when we were in junior high. We took field trips from Wyoming to come here to see plays.

**MATTHEW:** I only remember going to the Denver Center show and having dinner at Casa Bonita. To be working here and to have this play on here now *literally* in the same theater that we were in when we came down to see the show all those years ago is incredible.

**NINA:** Yeah. Even walking into the rehearsal rooms, it feels almost a little sacred.

# A SHORT HISTORY OF INDIAN IMMIGRATION TO THE UNITED STATES

By Lisa Bornstein

The main character and narrator, Lucky, is the daughter of immigrants from India who first moved to Toronto before settling in Casper, Wyoming, a town in which they found no connections to their culture of origin. Even today, Casper's Indian community is just 0.073 percent of the city's population. As of 2023, only 2 percent of Casper residents were born anywhere outside of the United States.

*Growing up, when people would ask me, "What are you?" I'd mumble Indian, and then not correct them when they assumed I meant Arapahoe or Shoshone. I was just happy they thought I belonged. – Lucky*

After the Civil War, immigration to the United States rose, and many newcomers found work as laborers during the nation's westward expansion. European-American backlash resulted in the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. Indian migration increased as job opportunities in fields and lumberyards of the Pacific Northwest became more abundant. In a repeated pattern of American attitudes toward immigration, that invited influx was followed by backlash: in 1907, Indians were

attacked by white laborers, saw their homes set afire, and were forcibly expelled to Canada. Three years later, some Californians began pushing for an Indian Exclusion Act but were thwarted. When racist labelling failed, geographic limits were imposed, resulting in the Asiatic Barred Zone Act (echoed in 2017 when the Muslim Ban became a ban on specific, Muslim-majority countries). In 1923, the Supreme Court ruled a Punjabi Sikh ineligible for citizenship based on the Naturalization Act of 1906, which the Court determined only applied to Africans and whites. Not until the Nationality Act of 1965 were Indians again freely permitted to emigrate to the United States.

According to the Migration Policy Institute, there were 206,000 Indians in the United States in 1980, the decade of Rajah and Chitra Sen's arrival in Wyoming. By 2010, that number had increased to nearly 2 million, aided by the H-1B, which allowed for highly skilled non-immigrants to come to the United States to fill jobs, many in the tech sector. That visa is currently a political point of contention for those who feel the visa shuts citizens out of those jobs.

Resources:

[South Asian American Digital Archive](#)

Indian Immigrants in the United States, by Madeleine Greene and Jeanne Batalova, Migration Policy Institute ([migrationpolicy.org](https://migrationpolicy.org)), Nov. 8, 2024  
Indians in the United States: Movements and Empire, by Sherally K. Munshi, History Now, Issue 65 (Winter 2022), The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, [gilderlehrman.org](https://www.gilderlehrman.org)  
[Indian American History](#)

## COSTUME DESIGN: SOURCING SARIS

By Lisa Bornstein

Staging the world premiere of *Cowboys and East Indians* required not only American and Western wear, but a great number of saris and other traditional Indian garments. Most saris sold in Colorado are for formal occasions, such as weddings, so Costume Design Associate Meghan Anderson Doyle looked to India, ordering saris and other traditional garments from online stores.

"The script calls for a design from a particular region, so we went to the source for that particular piece," Doyle says, alluding to Southern India and, specifically, Tamil culture. A shop in Mumbai built choli blouses to order.

Anderson ordered more than the half-dozen saris required by the script, knowing that extras would be needed for props – in the play, Chitra describes the many saris she received as gifts before leaving India.

Because the play is partly a period piece and set entirely in Wyoming, it required additional costumes. "As the play moves back and forth from the early 1980s and the early 2000s, this show is largely pulled from our incredible stock and from purchased pieces," Anderson says.

There are vintage pieces from the 80s that take us back and some more contemporary pieces that land us a little closer to today."

After many discussions with the director, Doyle researched clothes and hair from both periods and worked up renderings for each character. She then shopped and built outfits, creating a "closet" for each character. Only after the actors' fittings were final decisions made as to what they might wear in a particular moment.

A plot point centers around Lucky's failed attempts at draping a sari. "We did learn to properly drape saris from a variety of places!" Doyle says.

Some of the actors had their own cultural knowledge of saris, and playwright Nina McConigley's mother gave a tutorial of her own in the rehearsal room. Additionally, Eishita Nariani from Mudra Dance Studio in Centennial provided two instructional sessions. "We all watched tons of online videos and reached out to our community partners as well," Anderson says. "Some of our saris are quick-rigged to accommodate quick changes in the script, but more than one is draped onstage in front of the audience. No rigging there, just skill!"

# A GUIDE TO TRADITIONAL INDIAN CLOTHING

**Sari:** A long length of woven fabric that is draped to form a long skirt. One end is tucked in at the waist or petticoat and the other draped over a shoulder, sometimes exposing the midriff. Saris are draped differently according to region, with the pallu, or ornamented end, usually draped diagonally across the shoulder.

**Choli:** A fitted blouse, usually cropped to expose the midriff, and worn with a sari.

**Salwar kameez:** Worn by both men and women, the salwar refers to pants, usually narrowed at the bottom, frequently with a kurta, a loose, collarless tunic, worn on top.

**Lehenga:** A long, pleated skirt worn with a choli.

**Veshti:** A long piece of fabric worn by men, draped to form pants that are baggy through the thighs and narrow at the knees or calves.

## SIGNIFICANCE OF SARIS

By Suzanne Yoe

“Sari” (or saree) is Sanskrit for “strip of cloth.” First worn as far back as 2800-1800 BCE during the [Indus Valley Civilization](#), saris are typical garments worn in Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and India, among other countries. They range from the mundane to the sublime, serving as everything from a practical garment in extremely hot climates to attire in coming-of-age ceremonies for Hindu girls.

[According to National Geographic](#), saris are “symbols of national pride, ambassadors for traditional (and cutting-edge) design and craftsmanship, and a prime example of the rich differences” in India’s 28 states.

Once simply made of cotton and transformed into vivid color using natural dyes, contemporary designers now use 4 to 9 yards of linen, silk, chiffon, or synthetic fabrics that are dyed, embroidered, and decorated — sometimes with gold thread, precious stones, and elaborate patterns. Historically, the more extravagant the design, the more it reflected a higher social standing of its owner.

Though the basic design may seem identical at first glance, saris may be worn in more than 100 ways. The versatility of this swath of fabric is seemingly unending and influenced by factors ranging from region to fabric, length, and width of the garment.

PLAY ►

[LEARN HOW TO DRAPE A SARI](#)

Dyeing, printing, and weaving of textiles is a big industry throughout India where each region adds its own nuance to saris. From the weave of the fabric to the way in which the dye is applied, a sari is as versatile as the person wearing it. In fact, many designers weave stories into the fabric reflecting the history, customs, and unique traditions of their communities.

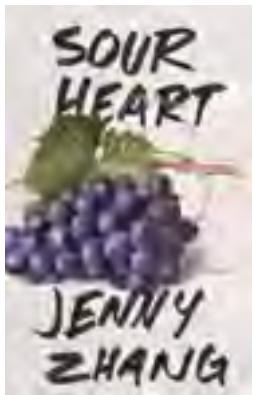
Their [one-size-fits-all quality](#) allows them to be passed down from generation to generation making them timeless and rich with cultural significance.

### Resources:

Medium — [The Origins of the Sari](#)  
National Geographic — [The surprising history of India's vibrant sari tradition](#)  
The Sari Series — [How-to Drape Films](#)  
South Asia Time — [The Sari: A Timeless Tradition Woven Through South Asian Culture](#)

# WANT TO KNOW MORE?

## The Denver Public Library recommends:



### READ!

[\*Sour Heart\*](#) by Jenny Zhang

Similar to *Cowboys and East Indians*, readers are introduced to a collection of stories centered on the families of immigrants, like the overbearing mother that gives up her artistic aspirations to come to America and her only outlet is karaoke, or families having to dumpster dive for food and scam Atlantic City casino buses to make a buck. Focusing on a community of immigrants in the 1990s who have traded their endangered lives as artists in China and Taiwan for New York City, Zhang shows the many ways that family and history can weigh us down and also lift us up.

### WATCH!

[\*The Farewell\*](#), dir. Lulu Wang (2019)

Since a central theme of *Cowboys and East Indians* is cultural identity and trying to find one's home, the first media that came to mind was the 2019 film *The Farewell* directed by Lulu Wang. Like the play, characters in the film are struggling with their cultural identity and traditions as they deal with the mortality of a loved one. Watch the Golden Globe-nominated film by itself or enjoy other films featuring Asian actors in one of our binge boxes.



### LISTEN!

[\*1975\*](#) by No-No Boy

In an interview, *Cowboys and East Indians* playwright Nina McConigley says she was inspired partly by the lack of South Asian stories in the American West. No-No Boy is the music and multimedia project of Dr. Julian Saporiti, who tells buried stories of the Asian diaspora through song. His album *1975* blends the historical sources collected for his dissertation, his Vietnamese heritage, and a lifelong love of music across genres.

### DOWNLOAD!

[\*Wedding Sari Showdown\*](#), dir. Kylie Bolton (2005)

This acclaimed documentary echoes many of the themes of *Cowboys and East Indians*. A couple weds secretly in Australia without the obligations and cultural expectations of their traditional Indian families. They strive to maintain their independence while learning to appreciate and even enjoy aspects of the old ways as they try to make everyone happy. All Denver residents with your library card can stream this free on Kanopy with your Denver Public Library card..



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# DISCUSSION GUIDE *COWBOYS AND EAST INDIANS*

By Lisa Bornstein

## Pre-Show Questions

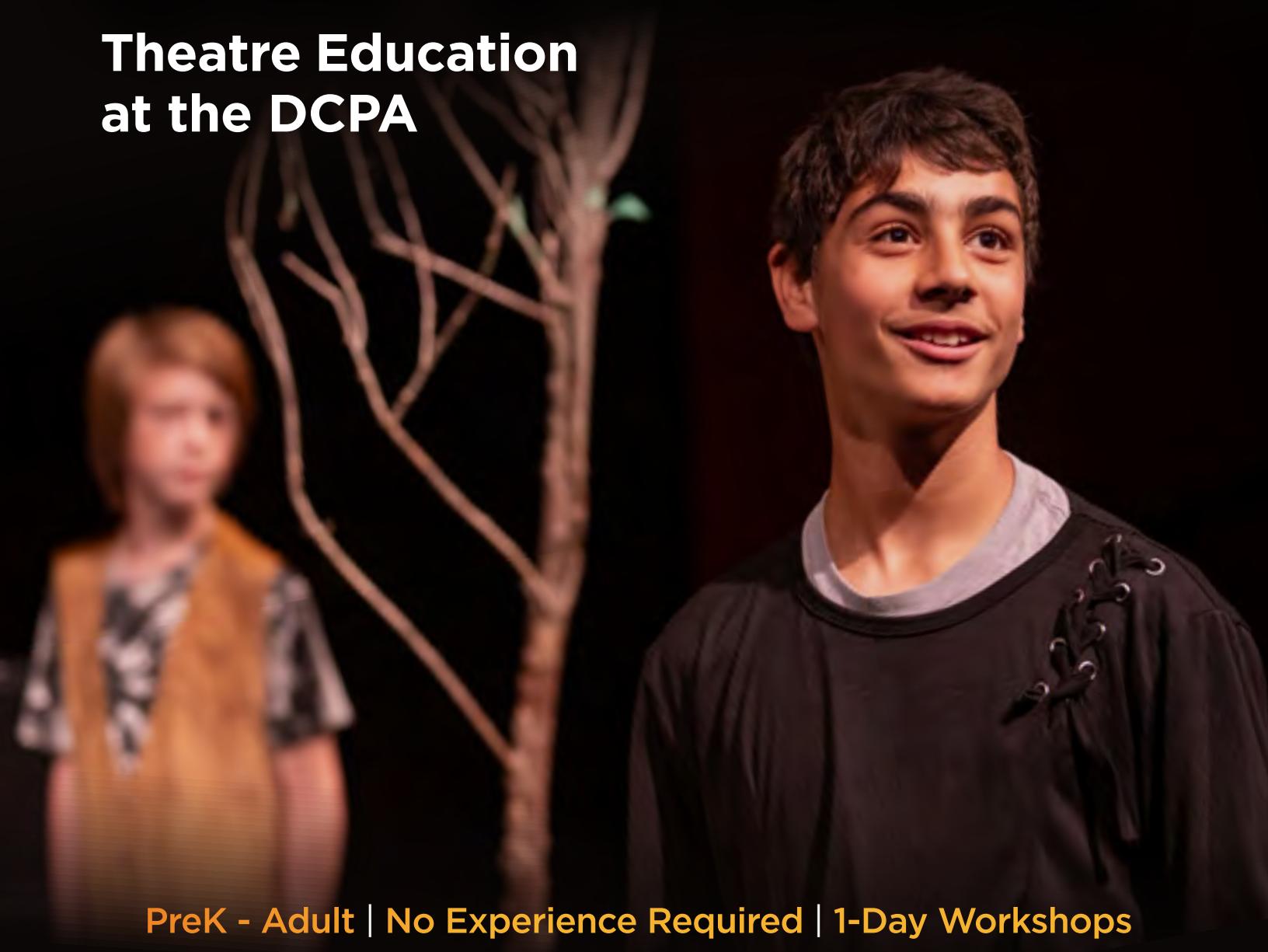
1. How does the place or culture we grew up in inform the way we see ourselves and the world?
2. In what ways do we demonstrate a connection to or responsibility towards our families, communities, and cultures?

## Post-Show Questions

1. How are the different characters masking their whole selves to fit in with American expectations of their period in time?
2. How do the costumes of the play reflect character, time, and place?
3. How do the playwrights convey a sense of place in the script?
4. When Chitra interacts with Richard and Nancy, how do her words hide her true feelings?
5. All of the characters in the play are confronting different forms of loss or change in their lives. How do they deal with this loss, and how does it affect their relationships with one another?
6. To what degree does the Old West still exist today, and how has it adapted to or absorbed new cultures arriving?

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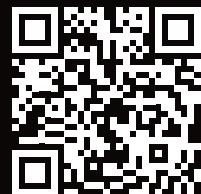


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