

Strictly Balti



About the Show



“We thought dance class was good, we thought dance class was English. We were wrong. Now we see you are fully English, because you argue with your parents. In Bangladesh this wouldn’t happen. Well you’ve done what we never could. You’ve left Bangladesh behind.”

Ballroom dancing is not the only humiliation heaped on Saikat by his ambitious parents. There’s catechism and Latin too. And no-one gets his name right, ever.

Join Saikat as he dances precariously through his dual-identity childhood, torn between the familiar sights of Birmingham and the mysteries of Bangladesh. Meet werewolves in the playground, nuns in the corridors and tangerines in the dancehall... The play takes a humorous look at what it means to be British from someone who had to learn the hard way.

This is a show for anyone who ever had to grow up, a show about being a second generation immigrant in the UK but feeling like an Englishman abroad.



Writer's Vision

As a comparatively new writer, I am still trying to find my 'voice', isn't that what new writers do?

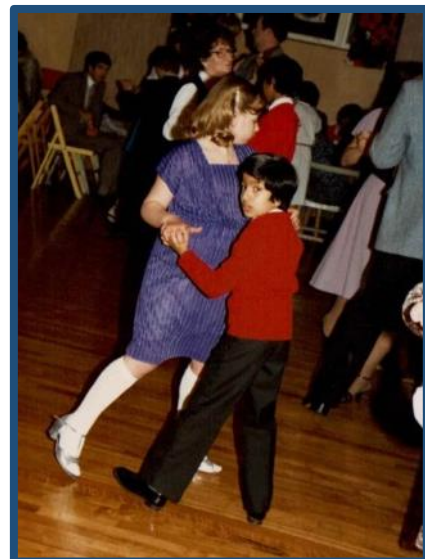


However that search for my identity (be it my literary voice or otherwise) is actually what I find fascinating. Strictly Balti started off as a show about being a second generation immigrant in the UK. That's what I sat down to write, immigrants often have issues of identity bubbling away under the surface. But very quickly I realised that the piece, whilst dealing with issues of identity from a cultural standpoint was more about growing up, a universal process we all grow through, wherever we're from. Defining one's own identity, even if it means juggling twin lives, is something we can all relate to.

The piece tries to be personal and honest, with only a sprinkling of artistic licence. No notions of secrecy or self-preservation, I've kind of laid out my childish heart on the page. I don't think I realised just how personal the story was while I wrote it, that realisation came later in the rehearsal process.

However, I wouldn't change it. I think especially when dealing with a younger audience, truth is of paramount importance. I want the audience to really engage with emotions that run deep, with confusions that sit in the pit of their stomach, with memories, both mine and their own, that have long been forgotten, and if I demand that of the audience then it's only fair that I should come to the piece with an open heart. If I'm trying to find my own voice, it's got to start with the truth, my truth. Everything else can follow later.

Saikat Ahamed



Origins of Strictly Balti

Strictly Balti came out of a discussion between Travelling Light's Artistic Producer, Jude Merrill, and Saikat Ahamed. Having worked with Saikat as an actor in several of our shows, Jude went to see him perform the first play he wrote, *The Tiger and the Moustache*, and had the idea of collaborating with him on a piece of work for young audiences.

The Tiger and the Moustache is concerned with the formation of Bangladesh and Saikat's mother's childhood during that period in Asia and how she came to arrive in the UK with his father. Having seen the show, Jude was interested in discovering more about Saikat's own story, his childhood growing up, almost the next chapter of his parents' story.

So *Strictly Balti* started off life as a show essentially about the experience of growing up as a second generation immigrant. However, as Saikat started writing the show, it became apparent that what was more interesting were the universalities to be found in a tale of growing up. The immigrant aspect is important as it drives much of the conflict in the piece.

The idea of a 'parallel self' as seen in the character of Sid is something that we can all relate to. All of us play different roles in our lives, and as children we often adopt a persona with classmates that is different to the one we show our parents – or indeed our wider family and friendship groups.

The show is deeply personal, perhaps more personal than Saikat realised when he was writing it. His childhood is laid out on stage (with a little artistic licence in places). But however personal it is, the aim is that young people should recognise some truths about their own lives in the piece.



Historical Context – Bangladesh

The show has as its backdrop the formation of Bangladesh. Bangladesh is a relatively young country but its history stretches back to before its independence. Key moments:

1947 – Partition: the British divide up India. Pakistan is created in two parts (West Pakistan and East Pakistan) divided by India between them. Government situated in West Pakistan decrees that national language will be Urdu despite objections from East Pakistan.

1952 – East Pakistanis killed during language protests. Bengali becomes a national language alongside Urdu but now East Pakistanis want either independence or more autonomy.

1958 – Martial Law declared in East Pakistan.

1971 – War between East and West Pakistan leading to independence of Bangladesh (formerly East Pakistan). India assists Bengali troops in fighting back West Pakistani army.



Bed Granny and Grandad



Saikat's Dad

Style and Practice

Travelling Light is widely associated with producing devised theatre or original scripts. The company uses a mixture of live and pre-recorded music, simple but effective design and physical performance. Travelling Light's touring shows (which make up most of the work) are small scale and visit both venues and schools.

Creating a Travelling Light show is a very collaborative process. The creative team – all of whom are freelance theatre makers in their own right and brought in for specific projects – spend a significant amount of time working together in a **research and development** periods around four-six months before the show is made properly.



In the case of **STRICTLY BALTI**, the script was written in draft form before rehearsals began, and then cut and shaped during an initial week of rehearsal. This was followed by some 'try out' performances in schools, separately to Year Six, Eight and Ten classes. The feedback of these performances helped to shape the script and the final show you are going to watch.

The show was rehearsed for one more week before embarking on a short pilot tour into schools and theatres.

In schools, **STRICTLY BALTI** is performed with the audience on four sides – in the round. In venues, it will be performed end-on, with audience all on one side, or thrust, with audience on three sides. Saikat uses just four stacking boxes to perform on, with only one prop – a poetry book. The music is pre-recorded and is controlled by Saikat on stage, unless he is performing in a theatre where there is a technician who can operate the sound cues.

The characters

All of the characters Saikat plays are real people
– Or an approximation of them.

They include:

- Saikat at different ages
- His mum
- His dad
- Bed Granny
- His cousins / aunts / uncles
- His school mates
- Sister Catherine
- Donna
- Enid



The script

The play is divided into 14 scenes, each of which is titled according to what happens. They allow Saikat a structure to follow and which also neatly move the story along – not necessarily in chronological order.

The scenes are:

- Boxes
- Christmas
- The Present
- Primary School
- Twin Lives
- Video Night
- Reunion Weekend
- Patka
- Big School
- Dance Class
- Donna
- The Argument
- Bed Granny Dies
- Bangladesh
- The cemetery
- Going home



Script Extracts

Following are some extracts from the play for you to take a look at in more detail before or after the performance.

BOXES

This is the opening scene of the play.

Boxes.

Our lives are full of boxes.

We live in them, two up, two down, we travel around in them, encased in steel and glass, we take our food out of them, put our waste into them, we receive our entertainment from them.

All our lives are filled with boxes and when we die...

(Beat as I stare into the 'grave')

Boxes tell us who we are.

Which box do you fit into?

Gender

Are you male? Are you female? Sorry, what was the first one?

Religion

Are you Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu?

I don't really know

Ethnicity.

Are you a) White British? By white do you mean a pinkie fleshy sort of colour or do you actually mean white, like the undead?

Are you b) mixed race? Well yes I may be but they're all contained within me. They don't seem to be spilling out.

Are you Black? Are you Chinese? Are you Asian?

Why, do I look Asian?

Are you British Asian? I can be, is that better? Yes. I guess so.

British Asian. That's who I am. I am British Asian.

PRIMARY SCHOOL

This scene is a good example of Saikat playing multiple roles, using clear changes in physicality and voice to define them.

FX: SOUND CUE – SCHOOL BELL (bell is part of SQ2)

Back at school, after the Christmas break, snow still thick on the ground but no time to play. Except play-time.

St Teresa's Catholic Primary School. Children in brown jumpers herded around by nuns in black habits.

(As Sister Catherine) So children, put your hands together as we give thanks to Christ the saviour who was born in Bethlehem so that we could live/

And so we could get piles and piles of Christmas presents

(As Sister Catherine) For his is the glory, the beauty and the sanctity forever and ever, Amen

Saikat, I'll thank you not to talk during my assembly.

Sorry Sister Catherine.

In the playground, all the talk turned to Christmas presents;

Oh yeah I got the latest Meccano set with gears and everything

Kerry McKenna, my best friend. Mad about Meccano, we should have called him Kerry Meccano. But we didn't.

Yeah well, I got a huge Boba Fett from Star Wars

Stuart Hubble, class clown

It's really cool, its' head comes off and you can pour out his gloopy insides!

Pretty sure that's bubble bath.

Even Arvinder, the Sikh boy who had joined in year 2, kept himself to himself, even he celebrated Christmas

What did you get Arvinder?

New patka.

Patka?

(indicates top of his head)

Oh the handkerchief thing on top of your head. Wait, is that a Nike tick on it?

Yeah

Cool!

Did your mum stitch that on?

Yeah.

Cool (*unsure*)

What about you Sai?

Yeah what did you get?

What did I get? Well, I'm glad you asked. I was exceptionally fortunate this year. I got a Bengali book of poetry, written by Nobel-prize winning author Rabindranath Tagore!

Pause

That's what I could have said.

But instead what I actually said was:

Oh Christmas was great! I got a Boba Fett too and some Meccano, bit of Lego oh yeah and the Millennium Falcon and then we had a huge Turkey, bigger than an elephant and watch so many cartoons that Mum and Dad actually turned into cartoons. Yeah!

Pause

Wicked!

Sounds great!

You had the best Christmas Sid!

PATKA

This scene looks at Saikat's struggle with identity, as well as touching on issues of diversity.

No, school was where I felt at home, where I could get back to Sid again.

I got you!

No, you didn't!

Two weeks before the end of the summer term in my final year at Primary.

You have to turn into a werewolf now!

Fine!

We were all there, Kerry, Stuart, Carl and Richard, even Arvinder.

As the minutes to the bell trickled away, the game got more and more frenetic.

You're the king of the werewolves now!

Yes!

Sister Agatha was coming outside with the bell when...

Pause

Stuart Hubble sticks out his hand to tag Arvinder. As he does he grabs hold of something cloth-like and Arvinder's patka pings off.

As Arvinder's shiny black hair cascades down like a waterfall there is a stunned silence.

Followed by laughter.

Loud brutal machetes of laughter.

Look at that

He's got hair like a girl!

Look, it's Rapunzel!

I stand and watch as my friends taunt this boy from the Asian subcontinent for being so very, very different, so different to Kerry, so different to Stuart, so different to everyone and I say nothing.

And then to my horror, I hear Sid joining in with the laughter and I can't do anything to stop him.

SQ 3- Pete's Dream theme repeated

And that night, again I dream as the flying tree soars above the wild Sunderban mangrove jungles, but this time I can sense someone down below lost; lost in the tropical flora and fauna.

Is it me?

No.

It's Sid.

Sid!

And as I see him wandering aimlessly through the Sunderbans, I realise it's actually me that's lost.

Music out

Drama

Strictly Balti can be used as a reference for many different drama mediums. Here are some examples and questions to think about.

Solo performance

- How does this affect the performer?
- How does this affect the rehearsal process?

Multi-role playing

- What techniques are used to support this?
- How does it aid solo performance?

Consider the means used to portray a role using vocal and physical skills.

Physical theatre

- How would this performance be different without physical performance?

Think about the rate at which the action moves along and the extent to which this changes.

Acting techniques

- What techniques do you think have been used?

New writing

- This is a new piece of writing very personal to the performer, how do you think this affects the piece?

Enhancing a production through music and design

- Why do you think music is important in this piece?

Discuss the way the story is told, how the characters are portrayed and/or how the themes are depicted.

- How does the design support the performer?

For example, stillness vs. activity

Reviewing a live production

As well as the above elements you could also consider:

- More detail about Set and Costume
- The different characters
- Dialogue style
- Pace and timing
- Memorable moments

Creating a Sound Design and Original Music



Pete Judge has worked with Travelling Light on many shows since he first worked with the company as a musician on CLOWN. Most recently he was one of two musicians in THE LAST VOYAGE OF SINBAD THE SAILOR, alongside Alex Vann.

Here are some questions we put to Pete, when he was preparing to begin rehearsals for STRICTLY BALTI last year?

1. What do you need to consider when creating the sound and music design for a one-man show?

There are some major practical considerations! Saikat is never offstage and is always performing, and also operating all the sound cues for the show at most of its performances. So any music has to be easily 'activated' in a way that doesn't detract from the action, and isn't fiddly to do. There are also creative considerations: how much music is needed? will Saikat be speaking over the music at any points? Should the music be specially composed or 'found' from other sources? - These are all questions which rehearsals should help to answer. It would also be far too easy to put too much music in the show...less will be more!

2. What techniques have you used or will you use for helping Saikat make the world he wants to inhabit for the show?

I'm aiming to use a combination of instruments and styles to suggest the 'caught between two worlds' theme of the show. There will be some recognisably Bangladeshi instrumentation and musical ideas, but also (I think!) some more traditionally Western instruments, and some 'found' music that links in to the period in which the show is set. I'm also aiming for a mixture of atmospheres, from dreamlike and moody to playful and witty, in keeping with Saikat's writing and performance. Let's hope it all fits!

3. What elements of Saikat's story, or the background to it, particularly interest or excite you?

The whole project is exciting because of the new challenges it brings: I've never worked on a one-man show before, nor a show exploring the tensions between two distinct cultures. Saikat is a brilliant performer, and I'm very much looking forward to seeing how he interacts with the music in rehearsal.

Designing a Touring Show



Katie Sykes was the Designer for our production SORTED in 1995 and for the vast majority of our shows since then. Katie has probably had the biggest influence on Travelling Light's aesthetic and our ability to tour neatly into theatres, schools & non-traditional performance spaces.

Here are some questions Katie has answered about her work with STRICTLY BALTI:

1. What do you need to consider when creating the design for a one-man show?

When designing for a one man show the most important thing to consider is simplicity. This is because Saikat will be on tour by himself so he can't have too much stuff to carry in and set up at each venue. It is hard work performing on your own and a big set would tire him out before he had even started!

2. What techniques have you used or will you use for helping Saikat make the world he wants to inhabit for the show?

The show references a very wide range of locations so we decided to give him some plain but very useful building blocks/boxes. It is the same idea behind giving a child a cardboard box to play in - it allows their imagination to make it into anything they want because it is a "neutral " object.

3. What elements of Saikat's story, or the background to it, particularly interest or excite you?

The story excites me because I find it very moving and because it is a story that can relate to many families . All parents struggle with how to do the best for their children and all children struggle with the need to carve out their own identity whilst wanting their parents approval. It's complicated! However Saikat's particular circumstances are also fascinating because of the mix of cultures and all the fun and confusion that can bring.

Directing



Sally Cookson saw Travelling Light perform INTO THE WEST while working for the Bristol Old Vic Young Company and was so inspired by the show that it helped her to define the sort of plays she wanted to make. To date, she has directed sixteen of our productions and won two of our three awards.

STRICTLY BALTI'S Director Sally, also shared her thoughts:

1. What do you need to consider when directing a one-man show?

One of the most important aspects of directing a one man show is considering the relationship between the actor and audience. Because Saikat is alone on stage, he has no one else to interact with and so the audience become the other character. Saikat confides in the audience as he tells his story, so that they take on the role of 'confidante'. This relationship is key and unless the audience feel connected, they won't engage with the story. This is why in schools we have made the decision to have Saikat perform in the round – it allows him to be fully immersed and for the audience to have a close relationship with the action.

2. What techniques have you used or will you use for helping Saikat make the world he wants to inhabit for the show?

Because there are many different characters in Strictly Balti, I have spent time with Saikat ensuring that each character he depicts is clearly defined, both physically and vocally. It can be confusing for an audience when one actor is portraying lots of people, so clarity of character and precision of movement and voice is crucial. So for example when Saikat portrays his father, his body becomes more upright and his voice deepens, and when he portrays his mother he lightens his voice and softens his movement. Technically, it is a hard thing to achieve and requires a lot of rehearsal.

The story takes us to Bangladesh and music has been key in helping us depict the atmosphere and culture of that country. Pete Judge has written and sourced evocative music to help us bring these places to life.

3. What elements of Saikat's story, or the background to it, particularly interest or excite you?

It has been fascinating learning about Saikat's family and his childhood. I've never met his parents but I feel as though I know them now and I think if I was ever introduced I'd want to throw my arms around them and give them a hug. I've felt really privileged gaining such insight into a very special family. Our childhoods are such a fundamental part of who we are and what we become – it's made me think about my own childhood and how I've ended up being me!

Have a go at making a solo show!

There is a trend for solo performers to create autobiographical work, so if you were to try this you would be reflecting a field of contemporary theatre practice.

There are practical reasons for single-performer shows: they are cheap(er) to make, they are easy(er) to tour and provide a really unique form of intimate engagement with an audience.

Solo-performer shows are highly theatrical, and they also follow an innate human connection to storytelling. Often the actor will need to play lots of other characters in order to keep the story moving and use either simple props, or no props. Either way the audience have to take an extra leap in suspending their disbelief.

A solo show is incredibly hard to perform. The actor must be able to carry the whole story, the whole weight of the show on their own: there is nobody else to feed off or to get support from, apart from the unknown factor of the audience. You need to have lots of energy and focus and sometimes need to be the stage manager too. And there is no-one else to warm-up with, so you have to prepare yourself physically and mentally, which is very challenging.

Examples of some British solo performer shows in the last five years:

- The Tiger and the Moustache by Saikat Ahamed
- Sammy and the Snow Leopard by Brad McCormick
- Only by Adam Peck
- 2, 4, 6, 8 by Craig Edwards
- You're Not My Friend Any More by Craig Edwards
- May Day May Day (also known as Frankenspine) by Tristan Sturrock
- I, Caliban by Tim Crouch
- Ivan and The Dogs by Hattie Naylor



Theatre is of course a great format for solo performances, but the camera captures it well - usually because there is only one person to focus on.

Stand-up comedians or magicians are also (usually) solo performers.

What happens when the formats meet though? Have a look online to see what you can find, but in popular culture:

- Eddie Izzard is a well-known comedian with an apparently improvised style. His sets are actually written with an incredible amount of detail and although they may originate through improvisation, they are then formed into scripts.
- In her early career Whoopi Goldberg created these different characters, designed to make you laugh and then to think, using comedy to great effect:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z5ml_rAaats
- American actress Anna Deavere-Smith participated in a TED talk by demonstrating several single characters all one after another:
http://www.ted.com/talks/anna_deavere_smith_s_american_character

So why not have a go yourself? It might be good practice for any other productions you have to be in, including any monologues and duologues, and also for your devising projects.

Here are some simple steps to start off with:

1. Consider who the audience is, and what you want them to gain from the show (i.e. for *Strictly Balti* it is an acceptance that we all have changing identities as we grow up)
2. Limit it to 25 pages
3. Use yourself, or a 'version' of yourself as the main character
4. Find a significant moment of your life – whether it actually happened or not – as the central storyline
5. Consider any other characters you might need
6. Instead of writing a description or simply a story, imagine that you are sharing a joke with a group of people and you are building towards the punch line



PSHE & Citizenship

One of the main overarching concepts in *Strictly Balti* is Identity.

Activity

To start, ask pupils to consider what best describes their identity and how they communicate their identity to others.

This could include: gender, age, background, culture, hobbies, religion, where they live, their clothes/look, their group of friends, the music they listen to.

DISCUSS AS A GROUP

- Are there some things you would change about your identity?
- Do you behave differently around different people? In what way?

Explain the concept of a 'multiple identity'.

DISCUSS AS A GROUP

- How does your identity differ around various people? Your parents? Your teachers? Your friends?

MAIN ACTIVITY

In *Strictly Balti*, Saikat talks about his twin life as Sid.

Ask pupils to individually come up with a "twin life" character.

They will need to think about:

- Who does this person appear in front of? Friends/teachers/family?
- What is their name?
- How do they differ from their other self?

This could be shared through drawing or hot-seating.

In small groups, ask pupils to create some short scenes showing the differences of their twin lives, in different situations. For example, a short scene of them with their friends and then with their teachers. You can discuss the artistic licence to exaggerate some of the characteristics.

Swap round so different people can have a go.

Key concepts and processes

PSHE

- Personal Identities
- Relationships
- Diversity
- Critical Reflection
- Developing Relationships and Working with Others

Citizenship

- Rights & Responsibilities
- Identities & Diversity
- Critical thinking and Enquiry

Key questions

What forms my identity?

What is meant by a 'multiple identity'?

How can our identity sometimes cause us problems?

Further links to explore include:

Self-esteem and Confidence, Immigration, Family, Discrimination, Cultural influences and expectations, Similarities/differences & diversity amongst race

Creative Team



Written and performed by Saikat Ahamed
Directed by Sally Cookson
Designed by Katie Sykes
Soundtrack by Pete Judge

Travelling Light

Artistic Producer	Jude Merrill
General Manager	Dienka Hines
Production Manager	Jo Woodcock
Participation Director	Georgina Trevor
Creative Learning Officer	Lizzy Cummins
Youth Theatre Coordinator	Giulia Bianchini
Office Manager	Alison Sully
Marketing & Development Intern	Lydia Woolley

Founded by two teachers in 1984 the company has gone from strength to strength bringing imagination, creativity and stories to two generations of children.

“Our success has come from our firm conviction that every child has the right to engage in creative activities. To create work that really engages children, we need to know our audience. We take time to research what we are going to do and who we are doing it for, firmly placing children at the heart of all our work.”

Travelling Light Theatre creates exciting and inspiring theatre for young people from its base in Bristol. Most performances are given in theatre venues to family audiences throughout UK, but the company also tours to local schools and community venues, and to festivals in Britain, Europe and beyond.

Travelling Light also works with young people through projects in schools as well as through its five thriving youth theatre groups. Central to the company’s core values is the importance of taking enough time to create high quality work through an extended period of research and development and trying out new ideas and inspirations.

Much of the company’s work is devised and includes a variety of art forms such as puppetry and dance. Music is integral to all productions and stories are told in visual, physical and inventive ways. The company collaborates regularly with other companies and artists to create new work in its beautiful rehearsal space. Recent big successes include **BOING!** with Bristol Old Vic, and **CINDERELLA: A FAIRYTALE** with Tobacco Factory Theatres (nominated for an Olivier Award 2013 and winner of the 2014 OFFIE for best production for young people).