



By **Chaminda Jayanetti**

Can a play really change someone's life? Luqman Ali, chief executive of the Khayaal Theatre, which performs Muslim world literature and drama, thinks so.

“In our very first production we had an individual who came to see the play, who was very much going down the extremist route, angry with the West, had fallen into despair. He didn't want to see the play – he thought the play was a forbidden innovation. And somehow one of his friends got him to come and see the play, and it changed his life, because he left the path he was going down, a path of fanatical extremism, and he became an artist.

“We didn’t know this until several years later – we ran into this individual, and he told us this story. He was under the mistaken belief that you could not reconcile east and west, that you could not reconcile tradition and modernity, that you could not reconcile being Muslim in a ‘non-Muslim’ society.

“So a play like that, which involved mainly non-Muslims, which involved a very famous piece of Muslim literature, which attracted Muslims and non-Muslims who were enjoying the production together in one space, is a very powerful medium.”

Luqman is not a political activist or crusader – he is a man with a love of theatre and an interest in Muslim world literature, who wants to bring these stories to a wider audience. It’s just that in the current climate, even that simple mission takes on social and political connotations of its own.

“Of course I can’t say that the play is going to change thousands of people’s minds. But what I know from experience is that there are young people whose worldview will be changed by this play.”

Luqman’s passion for the theatre started at high school in his native US when he was cast in a central role in a play about addiction to video games. He then came to Britain in 1986 to study,

before learning Urdu in Pakistan and Farsi in Iran, where he wrote a play as part of his course. He studied languages of the Muslim world, and became fascinated by Muslim world literature.

Putting this study of literature together with his love of theatre, the idea sprouted to form a theatre company – but it was 1997 before he could make this a reality, founding the Khayaal Theatre.

The theatre company germinated during the summer of '97 around Luqman's circle of friends and acquaintances. He met his wife-to-be around six months before he founded the company – both she and the mutual friend who introduced them were acting in the BBC drama *Dangerfield*. They had other mutual friends who were designers and so forth, allowing the formative theatre company to take shape.

Luqman was keen to allow Western audiences to access Muslim world drama, but he was also aware that many Muslim audiences did not know about this kind of literature either.

“Within the Muslim community it was a huge thing to bring theatre and literature together because for a large segment of the Muslim community the two were seen to be diametrically opposed,” says Luqman.

In December 1998, the company produced its first performance – *The Conference of the Birds*, a play by the 13th

century Persian Sufi sage Attar. It was a work that influenced Western medieval writers such as Chaucer – “There was an east-west thing to it,” says Luqman. The show ran for two weeks at the Tabernacle in Notting Hill Gate, London, in December 1998.

Since then the Khayaal Theatre, which is made up of both Muslim and non-Muslim artists, has held two productions at Shakespeare’s Globe in London and performed twice at the Islam Expo event, in 2006 and 2008.

But over the last three years, the company has focused on educational work, holding national tours of productions for secondary school audiences across the country and reaching 20,000 young people. The schools encompass a wide spectrum, from Muslim faith schools, to state schools with a large Muslim intake, to schools with very few Muslim pupils.

“We work with white English audiences who have had very little exposure to Muslim culture and literature,” says Luqman. “That’s probably one of our most rewarding areas of work, because we find that a lot of non-Muslims in high schools and even in primary schools, their view of Islam has been so shaped by the media that they presume that Muslims are devoid of humour and have no stories.

“We always get white English teachers in schools saying to us that they had no experience of anything like the sort of work that we produce, and that as far as they were concerned Muslims were only interested in taking over the world.”



A few weeks ago, the theatre ran an activity at a school in Harlington in Bedfordshire, whose intake was overwhelmingly white English. “The response of the young people was definitely, ‘we never realised that Muslims had fun and had funny stories’. They could see how it was a shared enjoyment of tales which have morals and wisdom and humour. That’s been a common thread

throughout our work.”

Then there are those Muslims who believe it is against their religion to take part in theatre. “We’ve found in Muslim schools a great deal of suspicion around theatre, around drama. The schools themselves, the teachers, the kids. But what we’ve found is that once they’ve had an experience of Muslim literature, they appreciate the value of the form of drama to express what they believe is most important to them.

“Sometimes [Muslim schools] take some persuasion, but eventually they always come around simply because they are faced with a situation where their kids are exposed to television and films.”

Luqman says those Muslims who see theatre as being against their religion are in a small minority. “We’ve had communication with individuals who believe that acting is forbidden under Islam, but on the whole we’ve had quite a positive experience.

“There are some ultra-conservative Muslims who have misconceptions about Islam themselves that lead them to believe that acting is forbidden. They’re a very small minority now.

“I think more and more the very closed-minded, dogmatic Muslims who can only shout ‘forbid’ and ‘forbid’, ‘haram’ and ‘haram’, the writing’s on the wall really, because they won’t be able to sustain that very long.”

Indeed, Luqman says the Khayaal Theatre is receiving lots of demand from Muslim parents to run summer drama camps to work with their children. “There is a realisation now, especially within the educated Muslim families, that they’ve got to do something about confidence and self-expression. They are seen more and more as indispensable skills for the kids to progress in life.

In the last year the company has been touring *Hearts and Minds* and *Sun and Wind*, theatre-in-education productions for secondary schools about identity, citizenship and extremism. “From our point of view extremism is not something that you can isolate from everything else,” says Luqman. “You have to deal with it holistically. So

Hearts and Minds

also deals with racism, prejudice, educational underachievement, drugs, crime, socio-economic deprivation and foreign policy. It deals with a lot of issues.”

Like most arts projects, the Khayaal Theatre has to deal with continuous concerns over funding. Luqman is currently trying to put the company on a more stable financial footing in order to realise longer running, large scale projects.

But Luqman says that the company has faced additional hurdles when dealing with the arts funding establishment, including the Arts Council, which has given it £40k over 13 years.

“We had great difficulties, because at that time you either had to be black or Asian or Chinese,” says Luqman. “The whole arts funding setup was not very flexible, and didn’t really acknowledge the needs of the cross-cultural audiences we were serving.

“The problem for me was that it was not audience-oriented, it was provider-oriented, race-oriented and so forth. Whereas from our point of view it should really have been acknowledging the needs of audiences and established socio-cultural trends and interests. So we found very little receptivity to anything like that within the arts sector as a whole.”

This lack of support from the arts establishment forced Luqman to seek funding from an altogether more controversial source – the government’s Prevent anti-extremism programme.

The Khayaal Theatre was part of the first round of recipients of Prevent money in 2005, because it was one of the few organisations with a track record of working with the Muslim community in the arts.

Luqman was under no illusions about the problems with Prevent, even back in 2005. “We thought it was very poorly devised as a policy and a strategy. We approached it with a great deal of reservation and suspicion, because we felt the way this policy was being devised and delivered failed to understand the realities on the ground.

“Essentially it was approaching Muslims almost with a presumption of complicity if not guilt. We knew that was a very dangerous thing and we made it very clear – and even in our play *Hearts and Minds*

, we state very clearly what our position is on Prevent, through a character in the play who critiques the policy.

“But we were faced with a choice that, given that we had experienced discrimination and prejudice within the arts funding system here, just for doing the work that we were doing, despite the fact that our work had nothing to do with anything but trying to share Muslim literature – from our point of view, we weren’t being given a fair run. So we had to make a decision that if we’re going to expand our company, we need to the type of support that was only available through this [Prevent] programme.”

After initial Prevent funding from 2005-07, the company was granted £270k from 2008-11 to deliver seasonal tours of 200-250 performances of *Hearts and Minds* and *Sun and Wind* around the country over the three-year term and capacity building. The final year’s funding is likely to be curtailed given the expected scaling back of the Prevent programme under the new government.



“I’m ambivalent about Prevent. On the one hand, it gave us an opportunity that no-one else would give us. But on the other hand, we’re aware of the damage that Prevent has done in certain parts of this community and the ill way in which it was conceived.”

The company hasn’t toured a production in theatres for the last two or three years due to funding issues, with the Prevent money directed very much towards work in schools.

But Luqman is working on a return to theatre performances. The Khayaal Theatre has been approached by sources in the Gulf to develop a play based on the life of the Prophet, and they are also fundraising and scriptwriting for *Coffee*, a play looking at how the beverage originally came to Britain in the 16th century.

“Initially it was seen by a large section of society as being a conspiracy by Muslims to change the colour and creed of Britain through the substance,” says Luqman. Like the Khayaal

Theatre's mission, the resonance is clear.