

Ricardo Khan



DISCUSSION SUMMARY

Ricardo Khan is the co-founder of the Crossroads Theater in New Brunswick. His time in New Brunswick spans from his undergraduate years at Rutgers through his involvement with the Crossroads Theater. This interview offers valuable insight into the local theater scene prior to, during, and following redevelopment. Most of his relationship to New Brunswick is explained through the happenings of the Crossroads Theater.

Khan's parents met while studying at Howard University. Khan was born in Washington, D.C. and afterwards, the family moved around. For one or two years, the family lived in Norristown, Pennsylvania. Later the Khan family settled in Camden, New Jersey, where Ricardo spent most of his time growing up. [2] An influential part of his childhood was his involvement in the national organization, Jack and Jill, whose goal was to "provide a kind of cultural experience for African American youths that, um, they may not necessarily get otherwise...And the importance of us remembering our heritage, remembering our roots. But also playing a role in the American society," as Khan describes it. [3]

On a trip to Broadway, the group attended a "Hello Dolly" performance with an all-black cast in 1969. Khan recalls, "what it would mean to a kid to come to Broadway from a city like Camden, New Jersey and look out there and on the other side of the lights see people who looked like me for the first time. That is probably the thing that had the most impact for me, um, you know, when it came to wanting to get into theater, a certain theater." [3] After the show, before the group set out to return to Camden, a couple of the cast members boarded the bus to say thank you. "And that always stuck with me because I realized then that in doing your work there must always be a give and a give back," Khan said. [3]

In 1969, Khan enrolled as an undergraduate at Rutgers University in New Brunswick. He describes his freshman year as busy in the context of the current events, with Woodstock, the US invasion of Cambodia, Kent State, and the moon landing. [4] Khan was interested in architecture and theater, and for a period, considered transferring to a school that offered those subjects. [At the time, Rutgers had "a very small Drama

Department.”] Ultimately, he stayed at Rutgers, partly because of its proximity to New York. His undergraduate focus changed from architecture to pre-law and finally he settled on psychology. [5]

Khan recalls being told “if you’re going to go across to Douglas don’t go in town, don’t stop in town.” [7] He adds that Easton Avenue was not yet built up at the time, and that Rutgers was all men. [8] Khan stayed in New Brunswick after his undergraduate graduation, pursuing a double MFA in acting and directing at Mason Gross in that school’s first year. [9] Khan “loved directing because it connected me more organically to the visions that I want to put forth.” [10] He describes his time at Rutgers as very busy with classes and multiple rehearsals. He was involved in the student organization, “The Paul Robeson Black Arts Ensemble,” which would start rehearsals at eleven at night. [11]

After finishing his MFA, he had the eye-opening experience of finding that much of the roles he was auditioning for were to play pimps and prostitutes: “I was thinking that I went through four and a half years of post-graduate training and this is what I’m being asked to do.” Khan became involved in the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act program, which paid him a full year salary allowing him and his partner Lee Richardson to perform plays “all over the place.” [12] One of the plays they produced — “Sizwe Banzi is Dead,” a protest play concerned with Apartheid — fit into his attraction to progressive pieces, “part of the struggle.” [12] In the late 1970s, after the program came to an end, Khan and Richardson approached Eric Krebs — founder of the George Street Playhouse — looking for a way to continue building an audience. [12] Khan found out about another program similar to CETA and came up with the mission over lunch. [13] “We got the funds” and were able to hire 12 people, including actors, a house manager, a stage manager, and those fulfilling publicity and administrative roles. [13]

At this point, Khan and his crew still needed a location. While he was acting in a play in Springfield, Massachusetts he received a call from Lee Richardson: “Rick, I found the perfect place. I found the perfect place.” [15] The space was at 320 Memorial Parkway, an old sewing factory with very high ceilings. There were three floors in this loft building. Tony Nelessen [also interviewed in this series] lived on the third floor with his family. The owner of J. August Café, Rob Schneider, also lived on the third floor, in the back. The second floor was vacant, except for the very back, which was the home of Jim Black, the Frog and the Peach proprietor and the owner and landlord of the building. On the first floor was Rask Auto Parts Store. [16] Khan recalls that the space was “wonderful because not only did they let us do our thing, but they loved the thing we were doing. And so it was like one family is how I looked at it, just one big family.” [16] On the opening night of a play called “For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf,” Tony Nelessen volunteered his home to host the reception after discovering that Khan had planned to hold it in a much smaller space.

“By the time that show finished he and his wife had a whole spread set up for us. It was really amazing.” Nelessen even painted a garage door next to the entrance with part of the play’s title: “For Colored Girls.” [16] Despite some “low points,” it was “this kind of exuberance that kept us going.” [17]

For a while the theater did not have a name. Khan explains how the name was finally found:

Based on our mission, we wanted to make sure that we could break barriers down between the traditional theater audience which is white, and us as the non-traditional theater and the non-traditional theater-going audience which is primarily black and Latino, and Theater. So in order to do those things, before we even started our first show we all conducted workshops. We took it out into the streets just like we had learned to do the year before. We went to churches and senior citizens homes and synagogues and the schools just to say, “This is who we are, but also to help them. So we taught Tai Chi and we taught acting and we taught how to build a model, a set model, music, all sorts of stuff and trumpet. And one day, Dan Irving is on a ladder scraping a wall. He’s looking out the window and he sees all these streets coming together and being built, and it just hit him, “Crossroads.” And all of a sudden it just made total sense because on so many levels that was our mission. [17]

Khan realized that there was potential and decided that he wanted to make it an independent entity. He contacted Roy Epps and visited his office with Lee Richardson. Epps advised the pair that they needed a board and volunteered to “pull it together.” [18] Ronald Wright, working as an attorney at the time, incorporated the theater for free and counseled them to hire a good accountant. During the second project from CETA, the theater was working toward independence, encouraging patrons to get “in the habit of paying to come” and “[cultivating] interest from foundations, corporations.” [19] The goal was to “have our own everything” once CETA finished, “and that’s basically how it happened. [19]

As the redevelopment phase took off, the theater was in the area slated for renewal, and Khan disclosed that “we didn’t know quite what that meant.” [19] He looked to renovate the theater, “thinking that if it looks really good, that’s what they got to give us if they move us.” [19] Khan mentioned how Tony Nelessen proposed an alternative redevelopment plan and looked into landmark status as a form of protection from the wrecking ball. [21]

Looking back on Hiram neighborhood, the site of the original Crossroads Theater, Khan described it as a “pretty great neighborhood...There was so much diversity there.” [22]

Johnson & Johnson became involved. The theater worked “very closely under John Heldrich,” and Gary Gorran — former director of administrative financial services¹ — served as the treasurer. When Khan expressed an interest in getting more business people involved, Roy Epps suggested hosting a business night. Epps “convinced John Heldrich to do a night at Crossroads with a reception at the Hyatt next door.” [22] Khan said that Sellars “knew what he wanted and it was going to be that way.” [27] He described Heldrich as “the person to push so much of the redevelopment, actually became a good friend of Crossroads. And, in fact, there were times when he’s come up and offered to help me and mentor me with the business end and stuff. They were always concerned about the business end of Crossroads because I’m an artist.” [27]

Khan also found support in Rutgers. Ed Bloustein, former President, gave the first benefit for Crossroads at his house. [22] “Ed Bloustein and his wife were such incredible hosts, and told us the story about when Paul Robeson was there,” Khan recalled. “A lot of great support in those days coming from all over.” [23] Jack Bettenbender, founding dean of the Mason Gross School of the Arts, “was a lighting rod.” [23] The second benefit was held at Nicholas Music Center on Douglass Campus and the reception that followed was at the Eagleton center. [23]

When speaking about the role of the city government, Khan recounts an episode where the theater was having a severe parking problem. Patrons would have to find parking on the street as there was not yet an official Crossroads lot. The theatergoers were “getting towed every night.” Eventually Khan spoke with Mayor Lynch:

John says, “How can I help you?” And I said, “We got a problem with towing. People are towed and I don’t know what to do.” He said, “Seriously.” I said, “Yeah.” He picks up his phone and he calls somebody. He says, “When are we planning to demolish John’s? Okay, let’s do it now.” [24]

After demolishing John’s, the city paved the lot and “put up a really beautiful fence around it.” [24] Lynch attended performances and also started the New Brunswick Arts Commission, with the goal of organizing the various arts organizations in the city. [24] The commission included Eric Krebs, Jack Bettenbender, and Bill Wright [head of planning at Rutgers]. “The result of our study at the end of that year was that we should bring everybody together into a Cultural Center,” Khan recalls. “And he then started...Bill started developing the plans for it. And that’s how it started to happen.” [24]

When Crossroads moved from Memorial Parkway to its current home on Livingston Avenue, the size of the theater increased from 120 seats to 320. Moving to a bigger space presented some challenges: “We have a bigger house. Our audience, they were so

committed. They said, “Please don’t get rid of the intimacy; don’t get rid of the intimacy.” [27] Khan speaks about how the architectural design reflected the desired audience experience.

Khan recounts the experience of bringing Bill Cosby to New Brunswick. Cosby reached out to Khan after hearing about the theater, and offered to do a benefit show. Khan says Cosby was attracted to Crossroads because he heard that “we were not ones to complain. We didn’t focus on what we didn’t have; we focused on what he did have, and he liked that.” [29] After discussions, Cosby wound up performing five shows. The first show was at the new theater and there was a scramble to get everything together and working properly just before the show. [30] He commented on this when he took the stage: “The first thing that Cosby said was, “Man, it looks like Las Vegas out here, but it looks like Alabama back there.” [30]

Khan also spoke about how the theater changed by moving to a new space. There was a Y-beam in the middle of the old stage, which “caused you to find another way,” Khan recalls. “I believe that was part of our imagination and creativity at that time was finding the other way, finding a way to make it make [the obstacle] make sense. Well now here we are in the theater where there is no Y beam; there is no obstacle. And it was a very, very interesting set of lessons we learned to try to figure out how to do our work in a space that has no obstacles.” [31]

In 1999, the American Theatre Critics Association presented the 1999 Tony Award for Outstanding Regional Theatre to Crossroads. Khan reflects on how much hard work went into earning the award: “the Tony Award for me is not an award that comes when you don’t do your work; it’s the award that comes when you do your work and you believe that if you do your work good things will happen regardless of the color of your skin, regardless of your gender, regardless of your height, nationality, religion...It’s all about excellence.” [34]

Khan also goes on to speak about his relationship to New Brunswick and why he stayed after graduating from Rutgers: “there were so many things happening. I think at that time New Brunswick clearly was on the way up.” [38] To stay in New Brunswick was “a natural thing.” [38] Regarding redevelopment, Khan mentioned dislocation and positive memories of neighborhoods lost: “The neighborhood was made up of blacks and whites and Dominicans and straight and gay and you could walk in a two-block distance and in that walk you would pass at least five different types of music. I loved that.” [38] Still, Khan makes sure to show gratitude that the revitalization movement valued the arts.

KEY QUOTATIONS

[Quotations have been edited for grammar and alphabetized by topic]

Bill Cosby comes to New Brunswick

And all the years prior to that we had tried to get Bill Cosby or somebody to do our benefits. We never could, never could...But we could never get Cosby and then here he is calling me. Um, he said, "What can I do for you?" Now I thought maybe he could give us his name to a letter, a fundraising letter or something like that. He said, "No, I want to do a show for you cause I heard about this building." And he had also heard that we were not ones to complain. We didn't focus on what we didn't have; we focused on what we did have, and he liked that. And he said to the press many times that that's why he came cause that's how he looked at it. And so I said, "Well, you know, the theater's going to be built. We're expecting it to be open in the fall, but I don't know when cause they were supposed to open in this last fall." He said, "Well, I want to do a bet I think." Andre Robinson at the time was my managing director, general manager. So Cosby and I were finished talking, Cosby's manager started talking to Andre. Somehow it turned out we ended up with Cosby doing five shows, not one... [29-30]

So the very first show was the first show at the new theater. And once everybody knew that Cosby was coming, near that place you could not get a parking lot space because everything was taken up, like carpenters, electricians and plumbers. Everybody said, "We got to get this ready." And the "we" was, of course, the city and the Cultural Center. People wanted this ready. Cosby had never performed in New Jersey before outside of Atlantic City. And his show was the number one hit show at the time on TV. So everybody was scrambling to get this going...Nothing else was there. So Cosby's in his dressing room which amounted to like this little, you know, it was just nothing back then. And then we did the ribbon cutting, then the audience came in. I think they were laying down carpet in the theater while the audience was in the reception. So finally we were able to open the doors. They came in. Lights come up. And after Penelope Lattimer and I do our thing and welcome everybody here comes Cosby. And he comes out. We're so proud because, you know, everybody...it looked so beautiful. The first thing that Cosby said was, "Man, it looks like Las Vegas out here, but it looks like Alabama back there." [30]

The one thing Bill Cosby remembered most about New Brunswick was how good the hamburger was at Tumulty's, and so they would order from there." [33]

Crossroads

And I was up there in Springfield when Lee calls and says, "Rick, I found the perfect place. I found the perfect place." That was at 320 Memorial Parkway. And when I

saw it I saw why he said that. For one thing the ceilings were very high; it was an old sewing factory... And so it was wonderful because not only did they let us do our thing, but they loved the thing we were doing. And so it was like one family is how I looked at it, just one big family. When we would do shows... I remember one time we did a play called "For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf." And we opened that night, and I remember in the middle of it. Tony Nelessen saying to me, "Where's the reception going to be?" I said, "Well it's right here", in this little space about the size of this room. He said, "No, no, no. We could do it upstairs. Let's have everybody come upstairs." And there was a fire escape that took you upstairs in the back. So we said, "Okay." By the time that show finished he and his wife had a whole spread set up for us. It was really amazing. And so those were the kinds of things that would happen. And then the next day, came into work and thought...there was a garage door next to our entrance painted. Tony had painted it "For Colored Girls." He just wanted everybody to know. The street was painted. [15-16]

We wanted to make sure that we could break barriers down between the traditional theater audience which is white, and us as the non-traditional theater and the non-traditional theater-going audience which is primarily black and Latino, and Theater. So in order to do those things, before we even started our first show we all conducted workshops. We took it out into the streets just like we had learned to do the year before. We went to churches and senior citizens homes and synagogues and the schools just to say, "This is who we are, but also to help them. So we taught Tai Chi and we taught acting and we taught how to build a model, a set model, music, all sorts of stuff and trumpet. And one day, Dan Irving is on a ladder scraping a wall. He's looking out the window and he sees all these streets coming together and being built, and it just hit him, "Crossroads." And all of a sudden it just made total sense because on so many levels that was our mission. That's where our name came from. So by the time we got to our first play we'd already done about two months of workshops, this and that, all over the place. It was called, "First Breeze of Summer" by Leslie Lee. And we did not charge; we didn't charge anything for the plays back then. All you had to do was just sign up. [17]

I wanted to do it ourselves. It was evident to me that we had potential here. And rather than being a project, I wanted it to be a real thing. Rather than it being under George Street Playhouse, I wanted it to be ours. And so around the middle of that first year I contacted Roy Epps. And I remember Lee and I went to Roy's office, and Roy said, "Well if you're really serious about this, what you need is a Board." I said, "Okay." And then he said, "I'll pull it together for you, just a group of people who can meet as a committee." And that group came together. [18]

Crossroads had no protection. And in hindsight I wish we had created an endowment very early on. Crossroads also, as we developed our funding and I told you as everything was growing, the pattern we were growing into was such that we were getting a lot of contributed income. In the mainstream in the American Theater, most of the contributed income comes from individuals for a mainstream theater. Under that the next is corporations, then foundations, and then at the very lowest is government. Crossroads, by the time we moved into the new theater, developed a pattern that was the exact opposite. For us, individuals was very low. Government was the highest. Then foundations and then corporations. And it was all because they were rewarding us for what we did. But what we weren't doing at the same time was developing the type of individual support that could have made us stronger, enough to sustain problems that we would have, when Governments or when foundations would change their, you know what they wanted to do, their agenda.[37]

Dick Sellars

Well one thing I knew about Dick Sellars was that he knew what he wanted and it was going to be that way. [27]

John Heldrich

John Heldrich, who was really the person to push so much of the Redevelopment, actually became a good friend of Crossroads. And, in fact, there were times when he's come up and offered to help me and mentor me with the business end and stuff. They were always concerned about the business end of Crossroads because I'm an artist, I'm an artistic director, and we never, you know, I found a way to keep the place surviving for twenty years just like Eric Krebs does. But, you know, you don't necessarily do it the way people want you to do it.[27]

New Brunswick Cultural Center

Absolutely. He was there; he was there. He also started a Commission, a New Brunswick Arts Commission. And the goal of that was to try to figure out, you have all these Arts organizations, what are you going to do with them? And the Commission was made up of...Eric Krebs was put on the Commission. I was put on the Commission. Um, Jack Bettenbender was put on the Commission. Bill Wright, head of Planning, right, at Rutgers, was put on the Commission. There were a few others as well. And the result of our study at the end of that year was that we should bring everybody together into a Cultural Center. And he then started...Bill started developing the plans for it. And that's how it started to happen. After that, then they incorporated the New Brunswick Cultural Center. But even when they were looking for their first president, they contacted us, the Commission. We were able to interview the people that they liked. You know, so it was a really nice relationship. [24-25]

Parking problems

Here's the thing with the city. The city was always there for us. And mid eighties we were having a pretty severe problem with parking. Because what was happening was there was a lot and it was documented in the papers a lot. There was a lot there. By this time John's [Bargain Store] was closed down, but there was a very small lot across from John's, across that little street. And when people would come, our patrons, they'd have to find parking on the street wherever they could; there was not a Crossroads lot or anything. But then there was this little lot and no one was ever there at night. So they would park in that lot. There was a little sign about this big saying, "Don't park." That's big. They were getting towed; people were getting towed every night. And we couldn't figure out what was going on until what happened they had found out was that a guy who was a cousin or somebody of a policeman who would call the guy and say, "Look. There are this number of cars there." He would then tow and charge something like sixty dollars for the tow. And I mean that was back then. I was incredible, and it got to be a really big thing. So every now and then I would have a meeting with John Lynch in his office. John says, "How can I help you?" And I said, "We got a problem with towing. People are towed and I don't know what to do." He said, "Seriously." I said, "Yeah." He picks up his phone and he calls somebody. He says, "When are we planning to demolish John's? Okay, let's do it now."... They demolished John's, paved the lot, and put up a really beautiful fence around it. [23-24]

Perception of Downtown New Brunswick

I remember being told if you're going to go across to Douglas don't go in town, don't stop in town. They called the people who lived there "townies." And, um, I do remember going a couple of times, but...and I didn't see a problem. I just spent most of my time on the campus. It was also the first year of Livingston College... So that was an interesting time. I remember, you know, there were a couple x-rated movie theaters. [7]

Redevelopment

Yeah, I do remember very early on hearing plans, and those plans included the demolishing our building. Now that means that New Brunswick Tomorrow...they were the ones in charge of the plans...had already been established which means that J&J had made the decision to stay probably a few years before that. [19]

...Now getting back to the Dick Sellars meeting. Let me think. From what I understand when Tony Nelessen proposed an alternate plan, it was in order to keep the building standing, so we were all for that of course. But Dick Sellars I know had his own thoughts, and it was clear that it was going to be knocked down. That's why Tony then said, "Okay, we're going to have it declared a "landmark." So it was

declared a landmark, so they couldn't knock it down. So then it was like, "Well if we're not going to knock it down, we're going to force you to sell it." "Well you can't force us to sell it." "Well yeah, we condemn it." So it was all of that going on, you know, that we were hearing about. And the upshot of all of that was that there were settlements, and the result of the settlement with Jim Black was the Frog and the Peach or led to I should say the Frog and the Peach. The settlement after Hubbard left, it was J. August Café. [21]

It was natural. I mean coming out of school...I was four years at Rutgers and then four years at Mason Gross. All my friends were there. There was a theater there, professional theater. There was the State Theater where I saw, um, I saw the Alvin Ailey Company. You know, there were so many things happening. I think at that time New Brunswick clearly was on the way up...Because J&J had decided to stay, that was a big message sent to us. There was New Brunswick Tomorrow there, and there were people like Roy Epps who were trying to start things, and Penelope Lattimer trying to start things. John Heldrich trying to make things happen. There were visionaries and there was Eric Kreps and John Bettenbender and I was there, and we just felt like we could do this. So there was never a decision to stay in New Brunswick. It just was a natural thing. [38]

There was I think...with all redevelopment there's dislocation. And I saw that neighborhood I was describing earlier. I saw that go away. The neighborhood was made up of blacks and whites and Dominicans and straight and gay and you could walk in a two-block distance and in that walk you would pass at least five different types of music. I loved that. Um, it was not the nicest neighborhood to look at. So with the revitalization I'm very, very, you know, grateful for the fact that they saw the Arts as an important part of that. When restaurants came along of course it also caused rents to go up. Not just in New Brunswick but in other cities where theaters were, and then the rents went up because the restaurant moved in because of theater. This didn't happen so much in New Brunswick to us because we were part of the Cultural Center. But if you weren't part of the Cultural Center, I think it made it harder to become an Arts organization. [38]

Rutgers

But Rutgers was all men. I think later on we tried very hard to petition to get women there. And while that was going on we were, you know, we were doing things like going across town...Douglass and pulling the fire alarms, so eventually they would have to come. If they're going to get a good night's sleep, they're going to have to come to Rutgers. Those were the kinds of things I remember. [8]

Yeah. I mean certainly Jack Bettenbender was a lightning rod for that and he made the... But yeah, Ed Bloustein and his wife became Opening Night subscribers, and

they would come to all the shows. They did this benefit. The second benefit we did the following year. We decided to do "Robeson" and they gave us Nicholas Music Center. Nicholas or Nichols Music Center... And so we did "Robeson" there, and then for the reception walked over the Eagleton and did the reception there. So there was always a great deal of support from Rutgers. [23]

Tony Award

The Tony Award for me is not an award that comes when you don't do your work; it's the award that comes when you do your work and you believe that if you do your work good things will happen regardless of the color of your skin, regardless of your gender, regardless of your height, nationality, religion. You know, do the work, do the work. It's all about excellence. [34]