

IRIS A_{per}TO



UNIVERSITÀ
DEGLI STUDI
DI TORINO

This is the author's final version of the contribution published as:

Antonio Pizzo; Ali Zaidi. Identity, Transformation, and Digital Languages: a conversation with Ali Zaidi. NOEMA.LAB. None pp: 1-8.

When citing, please refer to the published version.

Link to this full text:

<http://hdl.handle.net/2318/63055>

This full text was downloaded from iris - AperTO: <https://iris.unito.it/>

iris - AperTO

University of Turin's Institutional Research Information System and Open Access Institutional Repository

Identity, Transformation, and Digital Languages: a conversation with Ali Zaidi

Antonio Pizzo

pizzo.antonio@fastwebnet.it

Motiroti is a London based international arts organisation founded by Ali Zaidi and Keith Khan in 1996. Zaidi describes himself as Indian by birth, Pakistani by migration and British by chance. Together with his art companion, he has been working with traditional art craft and new digital media in public events and performance. They have grown steadily during the years, and they were commissioned the Commonwealth Section of the Queen's Jubilee Parade in London in 2002. Now they are a well known art organization and, after Khan left, Ali Zaidi is the only artistic director. His work has always been about identity and cultural displacement, confronting a world that struggles against globalisation and homogenisation. The way he approaches art blurs the boundaries between films, theatre, performance, and it rather focuses on the communality of the experience. Most of the time he makes a heavy use of digital technology, bringing out what one could call digital communal performance. I meet him on the 15th August 2006 in his studio, in central London. The conversation concerns two main projects (*Aladdin* and *Priceless*). More details are available in the playful website www.motiroti.com.

Antonio. The first time I saw your work was in 2003 at the Barbican with Aladdin. Although I was first interested by the digital multimedia involved, soon after I realized that I was captured by the story, the strong bond between past and future. How did you end up with the idea of that show?

Ali. *Aladdin* was a joint project between **motiroti** and The Builders Association, and it stemmed from mutual respect and fascination for each other's works. The Builders Association works with digital technologies, they often use real stories, and then they dramatise them. Usually they tend to work with a combination of recorded and live media. There were naturally things hidden but you could see the wires, the trailing cameras and you could see what the camera saw. What makes me more connected to their work, rather than the "new technologies", is that the audience are often able to see things from at least two different perspectives: one that was staged out and performed, and another from the point of view of the live cameras on stage. My personal work and the projects for **motiroti**, since 1991, have mainly been using the familiar form, but then interweaving the new and exciting and the unexpected.

Antonio. What was the work that brought you to join the Builders Association?

Ali. *Moti Roti Puttli Chunni*, our first theatrical Bollywood musical venture in 1993 was the trigger for it all. It was a lush, populist bi-lingual production part film part live performance on stage. Marianne Weems (the founder of the Builders Association) saw it whilst she was a dramaturge with the Wooster Group. Later she formed her own company, and while visiting New York, we saw *Faust* directed by

her, and later saw *Jet lag* at the Barbican in 2000, and we really liked it. A mutual friend & dramaturge, Norman Frisch, brought us together. We came up with the idea of collaboration. Then the question was what would be the ground of our collaboration? There, we strongly stressed our interest for cultural hybridism. Myself and Keith (co-founder of **motiroti**), were often seen as an “Indian” or “Asian” company and having played within and beyond those cultural genres we felt it was time to play out ‘cultural fluidity’ on an international stage.

We were excited by stories of transformation. Moreover, which story to look at for transformation better than Aladdin... because the story is a complete mix and match. It was never a part of *1001 Nights*. We were interested how the stories travelled different continents via the silk-route. There emerged a parallel ‘new technology’ route flowing from India through the UK into the Silicon Valley.

While we were considering all these options and trying to find a through line to interweave the historical and the contemporary, New York Times published an article about Call Centres in Bangalore. Typical of American media, it scandalised the idea that the person on the other end of the phone, “this is Rachael how may I help you...” is not Rachael at all. We were seeking that hook. The article highlighted the plight of detachment/displacement that media can create. What is the identity of a person speaking on the phone? How we deal with the different identities and its concealment through displacement? The voice becomes the signifier! We were excited and challenged by the possibilities this contemporary phenomenon presented. How could we begin to tell the story from the other side? Therefore, why booked our flights and flew to Bangalore on the 19th September 2001.

Antonio. *For how long have you been in Bangalore?*

Ali. The first research trip lasted 8 days, where lots of visits and meetings were organised before hand. There were two distinct kinds of services provided by these call centres... A medical transcription service, sent across mp3 files down the line; doctors in US talking into the Dictaphone, call centre staff listened to, transcribed, and sent back immediately. The other service was what was mentioned in New York Times. We met two big companies, one that had clients like hotels, car rentals, banks, telesales, mobile phone networks, where as the other specialised in IT support. IT support team could be themselves and use their own names – ‘Indians are clever people and they know how computers work’!

However, in the other case, people had to have names that were popular American names. They went through extensive training of ‘idioms and annotations’ to neuter their mother tongue. The training manuals were amazing. It was all about presenting American cultural stereotypes in bite sized chunks. Like a tourist guide for India would state... an Indian does bla bla bla... these training manuals differences between East Coast and Mid West to how Baby Boomers were different to Gen X as opposed to Gen Y ... all based on stereotypes!

Antonio. *Definitely... when I have seen Aladdin and the documentary you were screening during the show, my attention was grabbed by those stereotypes, where the audience could get an insight on the American clichés in Indian culture. It was witty because we are not used to that, watching the clichés of what is being an American through an Indian point of view, and it rather happens in the other way around, where the Western culture is fed with stereotypes about Asian culture.*

Ali. We began our trip thinking, “Oh my God... the poor Indians are being really exploited! Isn’t this terrible?” Upon meeting and talking to the different people, it was not so straightforward after all. A far more complex consideration emerged about cultural “trading”. It seemed more like the staff were actually learning something about another culture in a very remote, and yet direct way. After 3

months training period of believing in over simplified culture learnt via training manuals and TV Soaps, their personal values developed talking to the “real” Americans in America. They realised what they had been taught and what they were experiencing, were two different things. This was a beautiful notion that we had to interweave back into the actual live performance.

Antonio. *Could you be more precise on what is the performance about? Could you outline briefly the synopsis of the live performance?*

Ali. The performance mainly related both to the story of Aladdin, the rags to riches story where “anything can happen”. There are two protagonists: a young woman, a parallel of Scheherazade. A global soul, she belongs to the cosmopolitan world. On stage, she first appears in New York... then in London, and she speaks Mandarin, Spanish, Tamil, Bangla, English, and French. You cannot really place her culturally and she looks like she could be from anywhere. She is hardly ever talking face to face. She is leaving messages even to her boyfriend. In a way she represents everyday experience of distance whether emotional or physical, just that much ‘removed’ and distant by the virtual tools of communication.

The second protagonist, a young man, an operator we follow through from a call centre in Bangalore; his days of training, to the time he get successful, to the point when he moves to London and has become a manager. The show ends in a very of surreal way; in London, in a Karaoke bar, and nothing is “real” because everyone is acting out something. The singers are miming to songs sung by somebody else. Dancers dancing to the flashing lights of a dance pad. Instead of joy, they are scoring themselves whilst dancing: the guy from Bangalore sits at the bar detached and is on a long distance call to his mother back home. Everything is about displacement.

Antonio. *In other word, the displacement they were experiencing in Bangalore is still there, strong in London too.*

Ali. Exactly. Because everything is about remote access, or (and it is the same) displacement.

Antonio. *Let us go back to the parallel you have made with the story of Aladdin. The girl is linked to Scheherazade because she is the “starting point” of the plot. In fact, the first time we saw her she is talking to the call centre and that is why we switch to Bangalore and the call centre stories. She is the main storyteller. You have articulated the plot in such a way that the “phone line” looks like the main and very medium for the contemporary storytelling. In other words, the way we share our stories, rather than through TV or films is more through telephone lines, through mobiles, etc. Beside this, there is one more thing that I would like to stress about the relation among the Arabian Nights, Sherazade and the show. It is related with the specific starting point of the show. There we see the girl in the street, outside a Virgin mega store in New York, and we watch the building appearing in front of us with a Flash animation, layer by layer. Exactly the idea of layers is very effective, both because remember the Baroque set design made with layers of wings and backdrops, and because it is deeply linked with the narrative structure of the Arabian Nights. The whole work is composed as a multi layer storytelling (Scheherazade, is telling a story about someone that tells a story about someone that..., and so on), to such an extent, that you cannot track back the line at all. Overall, the notion of layers is linked with the modern idea of identity. Layers, which is that we are made of. So, because Aladdin was about identity, do you reckon there is a direct relation between the use of digital technologies and the issues about identity?*

Ali. The digital technology became the vehicle through which to say it all. The piece was about transformation of people, whilst training, the practical experience

of taking calls, the impact of work on their lives and the future they aspired to. It was all together- past, present, and future meshed together. The digital technology allowed us to reveal all this swiftly and with openness. The script was devised from the real conversations we had recorded in Bangalore; it was built around the performers and the improvisation with them. Another aspect was the direct link with the audience. Through the web, we had been asking people to submit wishes to the worldwide genie of the web, and these wishes were incorporated through a dot matrix screen within the set design. Wherever we toured in the world, wishes related to those particular cities were used. It was a combination of different voices: the recorded ones, as well as the performer's own, as well as all the samples from the old Bollywood/Hollywood films. These provided a very rich matrix and web of many stories against which you can see the flux: you, as audience, only you, had to decide which part you wanted to believe in and what to reject.

Antonio. *I found the idea of showing together the fictional call centre operators (performed by actors) and the “real” one in the documentary footage very effective. It was a sort of “mirror effect”, made more complex by the fact that the “real” ones are actually “acting” (pretending to be someone else). In this mixed realities the audience has to take a position, the very structure of the show induces it. As audience, I had to make a decision about what was the reality I wanted to believe or, in other words, in which story I wanted to be. From this point of view – so far – I think that the show suggested a kind of new experience to the audience. Within a kind of traditional theatre show framework, my experience was – let us say – augmented. More important, I had the impression that what I was watching was only a single part of the whole problem, of a far more complex issue.*

Ali. I am fascinated by multiple of point of views and most of my work provides just that. To me it is very important not only to frame an issue, a particular situation, but also to look at what is outside the frame.

Antonio. *Moreover, there are such issue as the cultural identity, which you can handle better if you try to define what it is not rather than what it is.*

Ali. Culture to me it is something that is in continuous flux, ever evolving. I often puzzle over as to how best one can define a culture. Describing it in the past tense creates a singular view. To me, that notion is very Eurocentric, a fossilised view and a stereotype. Identity is a difficult subject. In my own experience, I have been culturally displaced. I am half Indian and half Pakistani, two countries in war. When I go to India, they say I have become Pakistani, and vice versa. However, one does not have be scared of change... we always change. If you look at culture of emigrants, the fear of changing, has created such peculiar situations where, take the Italian community in some foreign countries as example, they live out of stereotypes stopped the time. There people have become attached to the “idea” of their culture, so that they become “more” than that idea.

Antonio. *The cultural cliché is usually produced by the dominant and powerful culture over someone else. Talking about you – and even me as Italian and Neapolitan, could our point of view be possibly different from one of somebody who has lived in a dominant culture (as the English or the American)? Would you believe that UK culture is more self-centred that what we are? Do we have a different awareness of our culture as different? Does identity have a deeper sense in our conscience?*

Ali. It does and it does not. I am not completely sure. I personally think that the question of identity arises in different ways. If you arrive in a room full of strangers, you would probably think at yourself as “an Italian”. You wouldn't do that if you were among Italians, even tough you probably would say “I am Neapolitan”... and so on. It is like looking at the big picture and then finding where you belong. That is

what is interesting to me. In *Cut out*, that was filmed in six different cities and was about urban civilization. Global cities, where cultures are so mixed that the brands become the most visible, brands of 'corporate civilisation'. How do you begin to break away from that? How do you begin to see underneath it all? I do believe that only in the vernacular you begin to see really where you are. Back to your question, about being in the centre and being peripheral, I would like to think that when there is a lot of similarity we try to pick up a difference that defines us, and we always find the way to create that difference, that uniqueness. We can be English, Indian, or Italian, and sure enough, there are generalisations. In Bangalore as part of the training to understand "Americans", they had a detailed manual outlining the various designated regional, cultural, and social categories.

Antonio. *At the very same moment, I may say that the only way we perceive the word is through categorization. We need it at the first place, even if we – hopefully – go deeper and deeper in our knowledge. Anyway, the idea of how do we perceive reality, brings us back to the digital culture. Is it a medium? Does it bring a new aesthetic? Literature on digital culture acknowledges two seminal notions: transformation and displacement. Everything that is digital is always on the edge of transformation, being digital means being a stream of numbers processed by some sort of algorithm. Furthermore, digital is also another way on being as virtual, being detached by the material things, being a flux of data. I believe that in Aladdin those two issues were deeply bounded both in the story and in the form you used. In other words, the content and the language in your show mixed perfectly together.*

Ali. The use of technology for the sake of it doesn't appeal to me, it doesn't transcend. The bottom line is that technology is a tool to communicate. Look what is happening on the blogs (video blogs, audio blogs). People want to share stories they want communicate. If this is missing, then it is gimmickry. Even if the web is full of porn, business, ads, what is overriding it is the blog phenomenon. Moreover, mostly we do spend a lot of time, talking.

Antonio. *Let us try to bring back the issue to art and performing, leaving aside the sociological questions. For example, do you believe that digital technology has brought anything good and better to your art?*

Ali. Yes, it has. Like I have got used I got used to my mobile phone, to my refrigerator, I just take it as a way of life. Similarly, digital technology is taking over the analogue. It has its own problems too especially when you take it for granted. While working on *Priceless* electricity failed, suddenly everything was gone. Scary! If a satellite isn't working you are fucked. Yet, the flexibility it offers, the fact that we can communicate with every one in many ways, is marvellous. With flexibility I mean that, for video for instance, if you want to change something you can do that, if you want to transmit it, you do, and you can send it directly in someone's house, or you can podcast it, you can burn a DVD and post it. In other words, there are a lot of different ways of allowing the dissemination of those stories. Nevertheless, what is important is the intimacy that happens: the intimacy of process, of working with people. So, whether it is digital technology or not, I do like to get my "hands dirty". That really gratifies me.

Antonio. *You have stressed the idea of process. This is a core concept for digital culture. The way we can now process the data induced Negroponte to say that medium is no longer the message. That is a sort of sociological point of view. From the artistic point of view, could you say that the digital format, its elasticity, made you capable of recording not only the fixed data but also the whole process, the very nature of the process? I am not talking about recording a video, catching the memories of the process in a clip. You have stressed that your job is not sitting in front of the computer, or writing a text, but rather being with people, engaging people*

in doing things together. To you, it counts a great deal all the work that is done before the actual final presentation. Then, it is true that the fluidity of digital technology is a core feature to highlight the fact that there is a project – a process – behind it?

Ali. It is possible but is not easy. It is a major concern that drives me to work with the digital.

Antonio. *This was the specific case of Priceless. First, give me an outline of the overall project.*

Ali. Serpentine Gallery commissioned **motiroti**, to use as “canvas” the entire Exhibition Road, a principal north-south street in the ‘Albertopolis’. Home to major museums: Natural History Museum, Victoria and Albert Museum, the Science Museum, and other Royal institutions. Even though it was dream of Prince Albert to bring applied sciences and arts together, over the time they have become so specialised that they don’t talk to each other. They are so specialised in the same institution, different departments don’t talk to each other. This is “categorization” gone to the extreme. People, things, jobs, and lives are slotted into such neat and tidy boxes. I wonder where the bridges are. Where is the cross over? I wanted to make visible the ‘barely’ visible and make audible the ‘barely’ audible. So, the phenomenon that interested me most were, Migration, Categorization, and Representation. Not only how the Museums categorise and label their exhibits but also how did they get those exhibits and objects in the first place. *Priceless* created multiple perspectives from curatorial and personal point of views. Curators selected objects/ideas priceless to their institutions that were used as triggers for “road shows”/live events, by inviting people into these institutions.

Antonio. *What do you mean with “live events”?*

Ali. I wanted to invite people and create road shows, where we (the museums and **motiroti**), brought experts/artists as facilitators to animate the invited people. I wanted to use the object (jade monkey given by the V&A) as a trigger that brought us in the same space together and to talk about and share things priceless to them and us. People brought their priceless objects and stories to share with all. It was during these events that we collated our “raw material”, the video and sound portraits. Royal Geographical Society had a list of the provisions that were purchased by Captain Scott for his last expedition to the Artic. Therefore, we used that shopping list as an example and asked people what items/things they would take for their journeys away from home. We mixed those lists together. The hierarchy of Scott’s champagne glasses, jute rugs to Axminster carpets, were placed together with i-pods, sketchpads, compass, or photographs of family that the participants choose to include in their list. Almost giving an insight into why those things are precious to them. There is almost a bigger perspective; you begin to see beyond that showcase where the exhibit sits in the museum. It was about breaking those boundaries and having a bigger dialogue going on. My role was primarily to be able to create a space for the people to share their objects, stories, and values.

Antonio. *The way you talked about it sounds like all the major things happened before the actually opening of the event.*

Ali. Exactly. What people see as an exhibition now is only a residue. It is about displacement and this is really all we have in our live. We have memories, and they are displaced: it was all about this discontinuous flux of residues, and the digital is able to capture these residues, and this is really beautiful. You can then put it together in a flexible way, so that you cannot only bring people back into an event that happen sometimes ago, but you are presenting something else that is mixed with so many other voices. So what you get is a kaleidoscope, is a multiple perspective, rather than thinking of it as the only possible final thing.

Antonio. *In fact, the notion of kaleidoscope it is seminal within the digital culture, as Janet Murray stressed. The fact that we don't live any longer in a world with a single point of view. The very nature of our contemporary experience is kaleidoscopic. Nevertheless, within the word "performance" usually we see the notion of living time based event. Now, mostly, when we see a digital performance, we end up watching a video clip. Where is the live event? Even in Priceless, we don't see any live event going on, even if it was centred around the life of people. So how do you joint the lifeless of the digital video clip with the live that we want to picture through it. This strikes me because one thing that has been said about digital media is that in its very nature it is always a live event. In other word, as Brenda Laurel stressed, what happen on the screen is always a live event that happen in front of our eyes. A picture on the screen is a stream of number rendered by specific software in real time.*

Ali. Theoretically, yes. However, in practice I don't see it always like it, because even if it is processed, the nature of what is recorded is not changing. Yes, there is a process involved, as well as in the 35mm camera, where there are such a numbers of cogs moving the films. Indeed, digital has the power to be changed: that is what triggers my interest. I remember that when we were doing *Aladdin*, we met up with an IT specialist from Tata (a big company in India) one of the main provider of software engineers to Silicon Valley. He had a very interesting observation to make, even if it is very kind of "culturally reductive". He said, "China is a great manufacturing nation in the world because they are happy to repeat a task again and again. Indian music is not written; it is orally transmitted and hence is more fluid. They like to do things, but never in the same way. That's why they are great at developing software much better than any of other cultures". It can be seen as rather simplistic but I think that there is something truth in it. I hate to do the same thing over and over again. I try to look at them in another ways. Presenting the same idea with different refrains is exciting and that relates to layers.

Antonio. *So, your perfect performance would be the one that will change every time you do it.*

Ali. Absolutely. In fact, one of my favourite ever-evolving pieces is *Fresh Asian* (originally created for Fresh Masaala presented in 2000). The morphed image of a quintessential Asian is continuously challenged by its juxtaposition with the faces from which it was developed. The digitally composed face using a software called *morph*, sits larger that life in the middle, and then you have changing self portraits of the real people. It is an ever-changing piece. It's going to Lille this year and I know it will be a different piece in its presentation as well as the fact that always new faces are added into it.

Antonio. *Let me going back to your personal career. You usually present yourself as an Artist or an Art Director. So, say that you are lecturing in a college and someone among the students asks you «How do you become an Artist in those digital fields? What do you do in your job? How did you get there? »*

Ali. Being an artist it is very straightforward because it is about your heart and your passion. Being an Artistic Director it is different because it is about having a vision as a starting point and then building the right team around. Not getting people who literally follow your vision, it means getting people that are really passionate about what they do. If you get the right passion around where people really believe in what they do, and then all comes together beautifully.

Antonio. *Could we bring the subject down to heart? What are the skilled involved?*

Ali. In *Priceless*, most the works were conceived as digital interventions going back into the museum spaces. The two key collaborators were Daniel Saul directing

the video, and Poulomi Desai working with sounds and creating music. I particularly chose to work with them because they are passionate about what they do; they know their material and tools and are open for dialogue.

Antonio. *I think that in order to be a theatre director, in order to work with actors, beside all the hart and passion we have named before, you must understand drama, be able to read a text properly in its dramatic features. This is a particular skill that you have to develop even if you don't have to be a writer, a dramatist. The same is with the actors' side. You don't have to be an actors but you have to have an insight within the actors techniques, because if you do not know what they are doing how you may possibly discuss, guide them. All those things are – according to me – craftsmanship, technique. So, at this level, being an artistic director in such a complex project as a digital multimedia event, where you deal with so many different skills involved, what is your must-have skill? What you must know to get the best out of them?*

Ali. You may not have an entire knowledge to be a director, but I find very useful just have some idea of your tools. I know very basic editing software, but I would not edit by myself. Particularly with *Priceless*, my role as artistic director was to bring an overview and allow the core team the space to explore. All happened in different stages: we had rough cuts and there was a point where I had completely distanced myself and let Dan do his job, let Poloumi do her bit, but quietly direct and guide. Without losing the integrity that guides you, creating space for the collaborators to own their aspects to the full.

Antonio. *Would you call yourself a storyteller?*

Ali. Totally, and I am a terrible storyteller... I am Sherazade; I go from one story to another. Somehow, all those stories are connected. I digress very often in thoughts and conversations and that is just how I am. This digression is the essence of my kaleidoscope. Different perspectives of people/artists brought together bring out the best. Getting out what it is important to them, so collectively it becomes a richer experience. Like with *Priceless*, even though we had all the separate things going on in the different worlds of the museums, what was on the streets as mobile units, told the story collectively, where four video screens almost became a stylised person - the top screen as the head, two side screens spread as welcoming arms and the torso. The head showing portraits of all participants, the arms showed all the different words of wisdom, anecdotes, and priceless values, and the base monitor held the priceless objects. As a director working in close collaboration (when it works well!) one has to play micro macro continuously. For example, Dan said, at one point, he would have liked to make holes into the building, so that we could see from the outside inside. As director, I was able to do that by large-scale projections, embedding the work we created into the very fabric of the bricks. So conceptually it works.

Back to the skills, you asked me, I do not know how to acquire them other than practising and learning. You do a job and then you ask what was right and what was not. In this sense, evaluation becomes crucial. It is also important to be able to detach yourself by what you are doing, and get a sort of overview in order to evaluate. One has to think beyond one's ego and you think of the whole process, and what impact the final work is having too.

Antonio. *There would be any kind of specific education to help being part of a group as yours?*

Ali. You could become from very different fields: editing, filming, computer graphic, web design, and art... virtually anything involving some sort of creativity. Having a storyteller in you helps!

Antonio. *Would you say that your particular role has been better codified in the last decade? I mean that calling yourself an artist you will join a very large category, while, for example, if you call yourself a film director you are addressing a much narrower notion and artisanship. There is such a more precise notion you can see yourself in as art director in digital performance.*

Ali. It sounds quite elite to be part of such a special breed. I think all of us we have that capacity. Each of us does several things together. We are the directors of our own lives. However, we can train to develop the discipline of over viewing, a sense of orchestration in your vision, and to know your own capacity. In *Priceless*, for instance, all the mobile units were my own work; and I had my “hands on” with the graphics in the pedestrian tunnel from the underground. Overall, the most exciting moment is when I can engage directly with people.

Antonio. *So far, you have stressed the link between being a storyteller and the communal experience. These two concepts are so bounded together that seems that for you being a storyteller mean gathering people together. It does remember the Peter Brook’s point of view: more he has moved toward the storytelling experience (with his “magic carpet”) more he defined the theatre as communal experience. Also in your approach, you do not focus on the “ego experience” as storyteller, but rather on the fact that the storyteller is a mean to bring people together: it is not the end but the starting point of the communal experience. Again, the digital experience allows you be a storyteller through people. Your “magic carpet” is the digital environment where all this happen, where you can gather different experiences together. It is a quite peculiar feature even if it is quite blurred, vague.*

Ali. One of the toughest challenges on working on *Priceless* had been the different partners, different institutions. It took a long time for them to understand what **motiroti** is, because they were seeing us either as a film company, or as a teaching organization.

Antonio. *I can understand their point of view because they were approaching you in the same way I did when I asked you about your “professional identity”. Opposite, you were dismantling, undoing, the very idea of professional identity, the categorization of being artist of a precise breed.*

Ali. Only now, they have started to e-mail us saying that they understand what we were doing; now it is clear that aspects of education and learning, as well as art, as well as community work were inextricably linked together. There was a gulf of difference in our interpretation of the word “community”. There are thousands of communities. community of people working in the museum; within the museum there is the community of chefs, on the Exhibition Road there is the community of cleaners, etc. I do not reckon there is any sense in selecting people with dark skins and calling them “a community”, or saying that I do community work because I gather together people with dark faces of non-EU origins. Why don’t we often re-define, question, and refresh the old definitions? My litmus test is that I always imagine if my mother would be able to experience my projects and get something out of it, as well as my 20-year friends and my peer group. Audience matter a huge deal to me as my work is made out of “people”.

Antonio. *There has been or there will be a time for you to be a lonely storyteller?*

Ali. I cannot tell story on my own. I remember a performance, back in 1995, *Wigs of Wonderment*, in which we were five performers but the audience met only one performer at time. I wasn’t really the performer, I used perfumes and smells to cajole my audience to become the storyteller. I let them smell and talk about what that smells meant to them: we have such a great stories. My solo performance *Cooked with love* (2004) was created to celebrate 45th wedding anniversary of my parents. There were 45 dishes, 45 ingredients, and 45 guests. Over a slide show, I

retold the story of my mother and father, bit of my own, as well as the story of my partner. I was playing the Scheherazade again and again. Once I had done that, then the food was presented and so the people became the performers. I really like the saying, «Let hundreds of flowers bloom». Why there should be only one point of view? If there aren't different points of view then it is a monoculture, and it is boring.