

## Conviviality and identity in Sameena Hussain's *Baabul*

It feels a little odd to be analysing a performance so soon after it's finished, especially one as intimate, personal and involving as *Baabul*. But although we are all still enjoying the affective influence of the show, I do want to offer some thoughts on how it constructs and presents Sameena's relationship with her father, because it seems to me that beneath its apparent simplicity, there are some very specific performance choices that establish a particular kind of relationship with the audience. This relationship is a convivial one, and it is the nurturing and significance of such conviviality that I want to talk about in this paper. For me, the politics – and particularly the identity politics – of *Baabul* emerge from these convivial relations, in which the influence of Sameena's father, on both her and us, only comes into being through the act of storytelling: who Sameena is and who we are in relation to this story, and each other, is not presupposed by the performance text but comes out of our experience in the show itself.

It has become something of a truism to suggest that theatre and performance only really finds its meaning when it is put before an audience, but conviviality is a very specific type of meeting between performers and audience. The etymology of convivial means to 'live with' and it is fundamentally concerned with the ways in which relationships and societies emerge from the real, everyday interactions between people. Ivan Illich was, as far as I know, the first political philosopher to discuss conviviality and, in his 1973 book *Tools for Conviviality*, defines it as 'autonomous and creative intercourse among persons, and the intercourse of persons with their environment; ... individual freedom realized in personal interdependence and, as such, an intrinsic ethical value'.

In many ways, the relationship between Sameena and her dad as described in the show epitomizes this sense of conviviality. There is a consistent sense that it is deeply interpersonal and independent of any external factors, it is a very particular relationship that has evolved through their attentive engagement with, and understanding of, each other over many years. This is both its creativity and autonomy: creative in that it develops its own language and inflections, its own sense of cultural, but exclusive, reference points, that belong uniquely to father and daughter; it is autonomous in the way that each of them, encouraged by the other, resists any externally imposed ideas and chooses their own paths or patterns of behaviour, such as the father who carefully plaits his daughter's hair regardless of cultural gender conventions about masculinity or paternity, and the daughter who from an early age is resistant to the tradition of Rukhsati.

This is also the source of the individual freedom that Illich includes in his definition, though to be convivial this cannot be absolute freedom but is qualified in two ways. First, it is interdependent and so must always take into consideration the desires or needs of, and implications for, the others involved. This is an interesting one for the father-daughter relationship, which is often perceived as one-way, rather than mutual, dependency in which the child is dependent on the parent. This seems to be borne out in Sameena's tribute to her father, where the stories often explore the ways in which he provides personal, emotional and material support to his daughter at moments of vulnerability, while also refusing offers of help when facing his own difficulties. Of course, it is important to remember that we only hear one side of this relationship and, don't get to hear from the father in terms of any dependence on his daughters, though his insistence that they are a blessing certainly implies that they bring something much needed to the relationship. But I would also argue that he is dependent on his daughters in a very fundamental way. As

already mentioned, he makes autonomous choices as a father that are free from any imposed or external expectations of what a father should be: instead, he judges these choices in response to the needs, desires and consequences for his daughters and, in doing so, relies on them for his sense of himself *as a father*. It is through these interpersonal, interdependent judgements that our identities come into force.

Similarly, Sameena writes in the blurb for the show that her father has instilled in her ‘the belief that she can be whoever she wants’. At the same time, in her moment of personal crisis following racist experiences in education, he advises that there are only two kinds of people in the world, those who choose to be good and those who choose not to. Again, this is about autonomous choice, rather than abiding by a fixed moral code: judgements must be made convivially in particular situations, and based on an open understanding of particular interactions and environments. It is in this way that the father also invokes Illich’s second qualification of individual freedom, that – because it is interdependent – it carries intrinsic ethical value, and our understanding of ourselves, our identities, as good or bad people emerge and develop from the judgements we make in these convivial situations.

So *Baabul* celebrates a relationship which is emphatically convivial, exploring the ways in which father and daughter live with each other in an autonomous, interdependent and ethical way. Yet I would suggest that this is not the most significant focus of the show. Rather, the conviviality suggested by the autobiographical stories is not simply described but is embodied in the show itself, which sets up an encounter between the performer and audience that is substantively convivial in allowing for the same autonomy, interdependence, creativity and ethical engagement that Illich describes, and which ultimately determines who is speaking to whom in this performance.

These convivial relations are partly invoked by the influence of the father in the stories, whose own convivial attitude inspires and frames the experience of the show. But the show's own structures and aesthetics are themselves designed to foster conviviality in the space. The simplicity of the show's staging might mask the careful theatrical choices Sameena is making: but at the same time, this simplicity itself is a key element in establishing conviviality. Illich's book *Tools for Conviviality* does not simply advocate that we should all be more convivial, but that in order to be so we need the correct equipment – or tools – to be so. By the word 'tools' he means anything that society uses to bring itself into being, from the actual technological tools found in factories and mills to the systems that shape our experiences, such as the health and education systems. Sameena's description of racist experiences at college, for example, evoke a sense of education as a tool that is not working convivially.

Illich argues that the tools developed in the industrial era were not themselves conducive to conviviality because they were also designed for production; that is they worked to produce a specific end product. As such, they did not allow for the autonomy, creativity or freedom of conviviality, being concerned with the mass production of identical objects rather than remaining open to the ebb and flow of interpersonal relationships. Thus, an education system that seeks to produce a particular type of citizen represses conviviality by necessarily closing off the options for free and autonomous interplay which could lead anywhere.

Illich further divides tools into two types: power tools and hand tools. Power tools are those which are predominantly driven by external forces rather than the person operating the tool: staying with the school example, a school whose work is dictated by a nationally established curriculum, and whose funding from central and / or local government comes

with irrefutable conditions attached is just such a power tool. Hand tools, on the other hand, are predominantly driven by the users themselves, and so allow for the kind of autonomy that makes conviviality possible. An independent school that has the autonomy to determine its own structure, curriculum, allocation of resources would be a hand tool of this kind. Similarly, the operation of a loom in a factory is more driven by the forces of capitalist corporations, the health and safety executive, the scheduling of the export system and so on than by the actual operator, while the operator of the same equipment in a cottage industry setting has more autonomy over it.

This same consideration around power tools and hand tools can equally be applied to the theatre. We might say that a large West End production such as *The Lion King* deploys theatre as a Power Tool: the performers who deliver the show have relatively little control over the performance itself, which is determined by a huge range of factors: the extensive production team including designers, directors, and choreographers who have shaped and fixed the stage action; all of the complex technical elements of the staging; the need for a degree of fidelity to the original film along with all of the creative forces behind that; the demands and limitations of the venue itself; and behind it all, the Disney corporation's aesthetic and financial demands. The combination of these external forces leave the performers extremely little opportunity for autonomy in performance.

*Baabul*, alternatively, deploys theatre as a hand tool, with Sameena herself scripting, directing and performing the performance. The show was developed without funding, and so was not obligated to any external political or institutional pressures. This in itself may be one reason for the simplicity of the show's design, with the single body of the performer being complemented only by occasional lighting and music cues, which, like the poetry of

the text, help to elevate the show beyond conversation and into performance, and the homespun projection which is presented on whatever equipment can be provided. Here we have used the department's touch screen equipment, where previous performances have projected on to a standard screen or a back wall. This simplicity reinforces the deployment of theatre as a hand tool, with much of the operation in performance being directly under Sameena's control, supported by our two operators (thanks to them). This, then, allows Sameena the autonomy in performance to engage convivially with the audience.

This invitation to convivial engagement is marked from the outset of the show, with Sameena on stage acknowledging and connecting – or living with – the spectators as they enter. Perhaps more invisibly, Sameena's autonomy extends to the performance material even during the show. There are certain set pieces which give the show its core structure, such as the opening projection, the physical movement sequence, the story of the bus journey. Other episodes, however, are optional and Sameena makes judgements about whether to include them or not at specific performances, such that no two performances necessarily contain the same elements in the same order. These judgements are also made convivially, as part of Sameena's intercourse with the audience. Whether consciously or intuitively, she makes choices about which elements to include and which to omit, and these choices reflect the interdependent relationships necessary for conviviality: Sameena decides in the here and now of each performance which stories she herself would wish to share with her audience, and / or which stories would be most appropriate for these spectators. At stake in these judgements is the identity of both the performer and spectators within the performance encounter. Who Sameena is and who we are in relation to her and the material is arrived at convivially, all is shaped by the stories that are told and heard, and so emerges from our encounter. In that sense, it makes *Baabul* convivial in

Illich's broader sense: the performance is not the presentation of a finished end product, but the negotiation of a work in process that is open and contingent on interpersonal engagements. This also makes the show a live instance of conviviality which must therefore make ethical judgements: in this encounter with each other, Sameena and we must decide which kind of person we want to be in this context, good or not.

Jasbir K. Puar has also picked up on the concept of conviviality as a means of defining and understanding human relationships and determining identities, and this, I'd like to suggest, is where the politics and ethics of *Baabul* come into play. Conviviality, Puar says 'foregrounds categories such as race, gender, and sexuality as events – encounters – rather than as entities or attributes of the subject'. The autonomy that is essential to conviviality suggests that even these identity categories are not fixed and permanent, they are not externally imposed, but only come to have definition and be understood through the encounters people have with each other.

This perhaps has its most obvious – but significantly not its only – relevance in the exploration of race and ethnicity in *Baabul* as Sameena recounts several negative encounters related to her Pakistani heritage. Crucially, these encounters are not presented as convivial ones: the responses to Sameena's brown skin are neither autonomous nor interdependent but driven by external forces in a wider context, whether the Islamophobic aftermath of 9/11 or the anti-immigration spirit incited by the EU referendum. It is in this context that her father's advice effectively advocates conviviality as the most effective and ethical response, staying open to other possibilities in the ways we encounter other people, or what Puar calls 'the futurity enabled through the open materiality of bodies as a Place to Meet'.

Such possibilities are the driving force of *Baabul* then, and Sameena is careful in allowing the performance itself to be open to them. Noticeably, she never uses the words Muslim or Islam in outlining her experience, since such framing would automatically invite the same kinds of presupposition and assumptions that work against conviviality: if we are to meet Sameena here in full interdependence, such labels have to be abandoned. Instead, there is reference to 'our culture' and this phrasing is convivial in several ways: it remains open as to who 'our' refers to so does not fix who is included or excluded; 'our' also implies that culture is both shared and possessed by those involved, allowing autonomy rather than being imposed on them; and accordingly, *Baabul* focuses on this culture as something that exists only in the ways in which people live with it – it is not some kind of transcendent fixed way of life that everyone must abide by, but the shifting outcome of everyday interactions, whether that's a conversation about the birth of a daughter, the plaiting of hair, the cooking of roti, or the response to a film. Culture in *Baabul* is presented as fluid and convivial rather than static and imposed, it is bottom-up not top-down.

Paul Gilroy, writing in the aftermath of 9/11, has also advocated convivial culture as a positive way forward for multicultural Britain, in contrast to what he sees as a more dominant postcolonial melancholia. Race categories, he argues, were only produced by colonialism and result in what he calls 'ethnic absolutism', race being (mistakenly) understood as a particular and unshakeable attribute of the subject. Any insistence on maintaining those categories is a counter-productive refusal to reckon with the colonial past and recognise the reality of contemporary race relations.

Ethnic absolutism is a fashionable feature of the identity politics that makes the practice of substantive politics impossible. Instead, we are all sealed up inside our frozen cultural habits, and there seems to be no workable precedent for adopting a

more generous and creative view of how human beings might communicate or act in concert across racial, ethnic, or civilizational divisions.

(2004, p.70)

Conviviality is an antidote to such frozen cultural habits, and operates at the level of everyday negotiations discussed in *Baabul* rather than at the systematic level. Puar's idea that conviviality opens up identity categories coincides with Gilroy's thinking here, and takes it beyond race and ethnicity into questions of gender, disability and sexuality. For Puar, as for Gilroy, conviviality allows us to breach the given boundaries of these categories and form connections on other grounds.

And this is where the ethical and political power of *Baabul* resides, in its capacity to reach across these boundaries and form interpersonal connections. The conviviality around race extends to other identity categories too: gender is opened up, as both Sameena and her Dad defy conventional gender norms; age too is left open as the text and Sameena's own physical performance draw connections between her younger and current self that open up fixed ideas of maturity and immaturity. Class, family and geography as sources of identity are also rendered convivial, as fluid and interdependent, and in doing so the encounter between performers and spectators becomes a Place to Meet and evolve new relationships, rather than a witnessing of the specific autobiography of another. I can't speak on behalf of the whole audience, but I suspect I was not alone in reflecting on my own relationship with my father while watching the show, and Sameena has told me that following earlier performances she has received emails from similarly middle-aged white men also reflecting on their relationships with their fathers. This in itself, then, is conviviality in action, that in the relationships fostered by the performance our identification was with the young brown daughter, reaching across identity categories, rather than the more obvious older male

father figure, and those important meeting points, along with many others, are ethical and political and are built in to the aesthetics and structures of *Baabul*.