



## The Chord that Opens up the Subconscious: An interview with Maya Krishna Rao

### [00:00:19] INTRO

**Duška Radosavljević:** Hello, and welcome to the Gallery!

Maya Krishna Rao is an Indian performer whose versatility in skill and interest defies characterisation. Her impressive body of work includes street theatre, comedy, dance, political performance and activism as well as the European drama classics, and film and TV work. At the core of it is extraordinary charisma and virtuosity and an adventurousness of spirit reminiscent perhaps of some of the archetypal deities of the kathakali tradition in which she trained from a young age. In India she is best known for her works *Khol Do* (1993), a dance theatre adaptation of a short story about the Partition by Saadat Hasan Manto, *A Deep Fried Jam* (2002), a socio-political cabaret, and more recently – a protest performance about gang rape, *Walk* (2012), and a performative deconstruction of sexist derogatory language in *Loose Woman* (2018).

I encountered Maya Krishna Rao's work through her most recent creation – *Lockdown Stories* – her digital response to the Covid-19 pandemic. In this conversation, we explore some of the early roots of Rao's artistic idiom – the revolutionary spirit of 1968, her fascination with the British Theatre in Education tradition, the role of music, politics and technology in her creative process and how in the seventh decade of her life she discovered and deployed GarageBand and WhatsApp to invent a new form of performance.

This conversation took place between New Delhi and London on Zoom, on 2<sup>nd</sup> July 2020.

### [00:02:12] BEGINNINGS

**Duška Radosavljević:** I became aware of your work – the *Lockdown Stories* and some of the other works I've seen on the internet – and what I was struck by was the way in which your work incorporates and combines different kinds of lineages, you know, kathakali and political performance. You are described as an activist and as a stand-up comedian, as well as a kathakali practitioner and a theatre-maker and an actress, and you seem to have a very versatile and very rich practice that I'd like to try and contextualise within this particular paradigm of the dramaturgies of speech and sound, if that's possible. In the context of these conversations, we try and retrace your footsteps as an artist and go to the early beginnings and look at some of your formative influences and your training background, and a very rich career, probably in your case, that we might get some highlights of in this conversation. And maybe just end with how you are making the work you're making currently, under these conditions – so, how the *Lockdown Stories* were made. You were born in New York, and then you moved to India and then you came briefly to the UK at some point as well?

**Maya Krishna Rao:** Yes, yeah. Yeah, so New York was actually because my parents, my father was in the UN, in the United Nations, and he was an expert in international law. So he was working in the UN, my mother was a dancer in New York, and I happened to be born there. But when I was four years old, my father decided to return because this was a newly independent country and he wanted to serve in the Nehru government. So, he quit his job in the UN and he came back and then he was asked to join the government here as an international law expert. So then from four onwards, I really lived in Delhi all my life. But my parents originally belonged to two different states in the south, but they actually met in London. She was dancing with – I don't know if you've ever come across – there was this man called Ram Gopal who actually left from India and set up a group in London, possibly in the '40s. She happened to go there, about a year before our independence. My mother is a very independent-minded woman. She just got into a boat and floated off to London, and then she was in his dance group. And my father happened to see her and fall in love with her and so on.

**DR:** Was it kathakali as well, or some other form?

**MKR:** No, you've heard of uday shankar. Have you heard of uday shankar?



**DR:** Yes.

**MKR:** Yes. It's called modern Indian ballet. 'Modern' is a strange word, but that's what we call it. So, it was in that uday shankar tradition. Ram Gopal comes from that tradition. But my mother's own training was in bharatanatyam, and then kathakali as well.

**DR:** And, were you also trained from a very early age?

**MKR:** Yes, very early, from seven onwards. Two or three of them got together and created the first school of kathakali in Delhi, way back in the '60s. And we were five children, five girls, who were the first students. So, I was seven years old then. And strangely among the five girls, I was the only girl chosen by my guru to specialise in the male role.

**DR:** Ah, okay.

**MKR:** Yeah, I must have been very boisterous or boyish or something in the energy. He never, ever taught me female roles at all, and all the other four girls were taught female, so I was really lucky.

**DR:** Why was that lucky?

**MKR:** I'll tell you why. Because in the kathakali tradition, the range of characters, of situations, of emotions – it's a very male-driven form. It was created by men. It comes from a kingly tradition. You know, petty princes were the ones who were the patrons of kathakali. The poets were men. And it was very martial in its approach to form, it borrowed a lot from the martial arts. And the stories are from the Mahabharata. They picked up all the male-driven stories. So, the beautiful characters – are you familiar with Hanuman the monkey god?

**DR:** Oh, yes. Yes.

**MKR:** Yes, so he's a very beautiful character in kathakali. Or Ravana who is not noble, but he's more arrogant, he's more on the evil side. A lot of the evil characters are very interesting to play, like in many traditional forms. So in that sense, I was very lucky. And they say that once you learn the male and then get into female, that's an advantage. But for me, I remember when I was about 16 years old, there was some function and my mother said: 'Come on now it's going to be in a closed space', so she told the guru: 'Please teach her a female piece.' I still remember how difficult it was for me to play it, because it needed a completely different energy and I didn't know it. But gradually I asked him to teach me a few pieces and so on, and then I began to enjoy it only because it was very distanced from the energy that I was trained in.

## **[00:08:09] MIRANDA HOUSE IN THE 1970S**

**DR:** When you trained as an actor later on, was that to prepare you to work more broadly outside of the kathakali tradition, or what was the choice about studying as an actor?

**MKR:** My only training is in kathakali. I've never had any other training in contemporary acting traditions, none at all. All I have is kathakali training, but I think because of so many factors – I went to a school where the arts and performing arts were given a lot of attention and a lot of emphasis, so we were in what we call a lot of 'ballets'. Actually, they were dance dramas, or stories told through dance and that was again the uday shankar tradition. In school I did a lot of theatre, I did a lot of dance, music. By the time I came to college, which was 1970, you know, there was already 1968, the Sorbonne, the youth movement had happened – it wasn't called feminism then, it was called I think 'women's power', Marxism had come into the university campus, and so we were gaining a kind of a political point of view from college. Political and social. That was a time when more attention was being given to distinctly women's issues – of dowry. In my first year of college, I used to think that one should pick up plays from Broadway. But already in my second year, there was a shift. Even though I came from a home that spoke Malayalam, which is a language of the south, we dropped English completely. We took a political stand that we will only speak in Hindi, and Hindi is not a language that came to me easily – I don't think in Hindi – but we decided to do theatre only in Hindi. We were introduced to Brecht. For Founders Day in college, we would create collages, theatrical collages, with his poetry, with his short stories. And so, I think pretty early on, right from college days this thing about – theatre must express who you are, and how you think, and how you place yourself in the world, and that theatre must become



that expressive medium, so it was a very personalised entry into theatre. It wasn't from the point of view of 'I must train in this, this must be my profession'. I didn't have that sense. My mother was an actor in Malayalam theatre, so from a very early age, the living room was always theatre rehearsals. But it was so close to home, she never once told me you can pick this up as a profession. It was just something you did: you danced, you sang, you did theatre. So what I'm trying to say was for many years for me theatre was not something that happened separately. It just felt like it was an extension of yourself.

**DR:** And when you say you did Brecht at college, presumably, you were studying something else, you were—

**MKR:** I was studying Sociology.

**DR:** Sociology, was this in Delhi as well?

**MKR:** Yes, this is Miranda House. And Miranda House was already being known as – there were a whole bunch of women who were concretising their thoughts around social issues, around politics. I mean, I'll give you an example: when I entered college in my first year, there was an institution called the Miss Miranda, where they would have a beauty pageant, there was a lot of competition and tears and whatnot around it. By the second year, a whole bunch of girls got it banned. And I remember all the big drama around it – one set of women wanted it to happen – we didn't let them do it. And so, they had to go and hold it in someone's house outside the college, so they were all these new thoughts that were coming in. We changed the way we dressed, we would wear our trousers. I was most comfortable in my trousers. But then we started wearing the sari and the bindi and the silver earrings, and the Indian look came in. But the Indian look wasn't to do with feeling Indian, I think we were actually gaining a far more universal perspective in terms of ourselves as women. And theatre became a great platform for extending those thoughts and feelings and the expression. I think I just took to the arts from a very early age and because it was very much something that happened in the house, like you drink tea or like you call friends home, theatre just happened. It wasn't something separate.

### **[00:13:25] IN THE UK: DISCOVERING THEATRE IN EDUCATION**

**DR:** How did you end up coming to the UK, when you came to Leeds to study?

**MKR:** Oh, that was much, much later. So I did my sociology. I went off to JNU and did Political Studies and my MA. We had a theatre club and it was then the theatre became even more political. And then I finished my MA and I got a teaching job in a college, and I was so miserable because I was not cut out to teach politics in a college. And so after two years I took leave, and I came to England because I wanted to be able to make that mental shift, that I need to get out of this teaching political science, and I need to now firmly place myself in theatre. But it was difficult to do it here because it was still too informal, I needed to give myself a formal entry. And so I got admission in Leeds University in the Theatre Department and I chose the shortest course. It was ten months. So I came, and I did my MA and before I blinked the MA was over, and I told myself: 'I can't go home. I've not seen England.' And by that time I had friends in Leeds, and they said: 'Maya, you must apply to a community theatre company', and I applied to this all-white community theatre company in Nottingham called Perspectives Theatre Company and I was the first Black woman in that company. This was the time when the word multi-racial was gaining a lot of—

**DR:** What years are we talking about?

**MKR:** We are talking 1984. '83/ '84.

**DR:** What kind of work were you making with this company?

**MKR:** Now, because it was a community theatre group, we never picked up existing scripts. Everything was so new for me – company meetings, talking strategy, talking year planning. And because they wanted to take on a Black member in the company, the first show had to be some multi-racial issue. So the first play we created was a devised piece around what was called 'out- work'. A lot of Asian women, because they were not allowed by their husbands to go out and work in the factory, the middleman would give them work to do – finish – at home, and then he'd come and pick it up. And I



still remember, the stocking industry was a very big one for Asian women. And so, these women would have to set up a knitting machine in their homes. And the poster had me on the poster with a knitting machine. And all these shows were researched. It was called *Peace at Any Price*. And it was a story of a friendship between a white woman and an Asian woman. The white woman, of course, is a factory worker, and the Asian woman works at home. But they meet – and so again, it was talking about exploitation, talking about the factory system, talking about women and friendship. And we took that play around. Then I got this offer from the best company possible in those days, and that was the Leeds TIE company. Yeah, I don't know, you might have heard their very famous show/programme that they made for children called *Raj*?

**DR:** No, I haven't come across it.

**MKR:** In in my day, in '83, '84, '85, the TIE movement was very high in England. They were one of the best companies, the Leeds TIE company. I had met some of them when I was doing my MA, and they had brought their show to the department, and when I saw their programme I was head over heels in love with them. I mean, it was a completely new experience for me, this business of making theatre, particularly for an age group of children. And this particular show was made around British imperialism, the British in India. And I was also getting nostalgic because they were creating with very few props – the way they created colonial India, it was superb! Completely superb. And so, to get an invitation from them was a very big thing for me. And I went and joined them. And you know, when I look back, Duška, in terms strictly if I were to speak of job satisfaction, that has been the one for me, my time in Leeds, in the Leeds Playhouse TIE Company. Yeah, so that's how I happened to be in Leeds. Now here's the irony, we were devising programmes for children. A lot of improvising, talking, researching. We were three women who made the first programme and we were touring around in the toughest schools of Leeds. We are at the peak of racism. Every time we enter a school, we were two Black women and one white woman. You first get hurled with abuses. Then you have to go into a room, and you have to set up your programme. And remember that TIE theatre, they don't call them plays, they call them programmes. You must have heard of Dorothy Heathcote?

**DR:** Yes, yes.

**MKR:** Well, she was very much the reigning queen then, we were trying to put in place Dorothy's approach to drama. And so we had only five minutes of pre-rehearsed theatre, and the rest of the programme was devised with the children, with the students. After every programme, Duška, three of us would sit and cry, because it would take all our energy, emotions, and we would have to be prepared to play any character that they called for. And for me it was particularly stressful because I was not brought up in Britain, and so to play a believable character in front of teenage children – and they are rough kids – if you don't play believably they will just laugh at you, and that's the end of the programme. And you feel particularly responsible because you've got two other performers with you and you're a paid member of a company, you know, so it's carrying a lot of weight, but my god, it was such a learning experience. And I was working with some of the best in the field. But you see there came a point when I realised that this is such wonderful work, the only way I'm going to be able to do it fully is if I go back home. Because these are characters that you create from the devising process. You have to feed off your own culture. And so, ironically, even though I was really enjoying my time there, it had shifted my head, and it was time to come back home. I came back home in 1985, and even though my dream was to set up a TIE company, nothing quite happens the way you imagine it, and I got sucked into the drama school and became a reluctant teacher... [Laughter]. Very, very reluctant, but you know when you look back, you see it all as learning, very hard learning, full of suffering, but somewhere all of this has contributed to making me a solo performer.

**DR:** And at what point did your solo practice start to sort of take off and find shape?

**MKR:** So yeah, I kept telling myself: 'I've got to become a performer', but I had no way of knowing how to go about it. And then through a series of accidents, I created my first performance, and that's how I realised that I needed a particular process and it wasn't going to come from sitting at a desk and creating formats for a solo piece and then going into a room and trying out action, and trying out text. No, I needed another process. It's just through a series of accidents that I chanced upon it.





**[00:22:15] MAKING *KHOL DO* (1993)**

**DR:** And what was this first piece called?

**MKR:** This first piece was called *Khol Do*. I was actually invited by a seminar in the German Cultural Centre in Delhi: 'Come and join some dancers and show some of your work in progress.' So of course I felt very snooty, and I said: 'I'm not a dancer. I'm, I'm an actor', so they said: 'No, no, no, no. Doesn't matter, whatever you are, just come.' I said: 'But I don't have any work in progress.' 'No, no, no. Just come.' And so I had to pick up something and I had only about ten days. And you won't believe it, those were days when we never did a warm up. I never did a warm up. And so I started improvising. My friend said: 'What should we work around, Maya?', and I said: 'I don't know.' So she would come home and for a good four or five days she would turn on the camera and I just improvised, played some music and improvised, and not surprisingly, because I came from a kathakali tradition, I didn't think about this, but I never spoke through all those improvisations. It wasn't a decision I made, but I suppose that was the kind of imprint on the body, that the body was speaking and not the tongue. And suddenly the story came to my mind. Anyway, so I made a little work in progress, but you won't believe it, thanks to not doing a warm up, I was flat on my back three days before the meeting because I got a slipped disc.

**DR:** Oh!

**MKR:** So the improvisations were so stressful and there was no warm up. So here is the accident. I'm lying on a bed. I've got all the camera shootings that my friend has made. I'm watching them, lying down, and I'm making a note on a paper: 'Oh, I like the section between 3:62 minutes and 7:27 minutes' and I'm making a log. All this is lying down. And then I get my husband to – those were the days of cassette recorders – and I tell him: 'Please get me that cassette and this cassette.' I have no idea whether it will work or not. And then I start pulling out pieces of music that fit in with that time log. I don't rehearse it once, I somehow roll out of bed and the first time I'm actually doing the piece is at this closed-door workshop. And I somehow float through it all. And I actually think at the end of it: 'If they have tomatoes in their hands, they're going to throw it at me, because this doesn't make any sense.' But I was completely overwhelmed because they, all of them just stood up, all the dancers and then we had a long session about what is this language of expression. And I think then that became the way I worked. I would just play music, set up a camera and improvise.

**DR:** And what was that first piece about?

**MKR:** The first piece is a two-page short story and it is set in the post – the Partition rights, you know, when India was getting independence, we had communal rights in India and that's how the state of Pakistan got made. So that's where the story is set – set on a railway platform, which is completely crowded and a father, a Muslim father, is holding his teenage daughter's hand, and he's running through the crowds and somewhere her veil – you know the Indian salwar kameez – the veil, drops off her chest and he turns around to pick it up and the daughter is saying: 'Leave it, Abba', but he still turns around, because, you know, discovering the breast is something to do with women's dignity. So the father must pick it up, in that moment of picking it up, his hand slips from his daughter's hand, and he loses her to the crowd. And then the story moves to – the only thing he is doing after that is searching and searching and searching, and when he's not searching, he's just staring up at the dusty sky. And then some men come to him and they are the kind of men who help you look for your – they're meant to be – men who help you look for your lost ones, or help you to cross the border. And they say: 'Don't worry, we'll find your daughter for you.' But only the reader knows that the eight men, eight men have already found her, they have locked her in a room, and they are raping her, every day. And so, the story ends with, he is again walking through these tents – tents were set up for hospitals – and as he's searching, he comes upon his daughter lying on a bed, and the doctor says: 'Khol do.' Now 'khol do' in Hindi means 'open' and what he meant was he was telling the nurse: 'Open the window for this girl needs some air', because she's lying in a delirium, because she's been raped so many times. This girl hears the word 'khol do', and her hand immediately goes to the drawstring of her pyjama. Because she's only used to the men saying: 'Khol do', meaning 'take off your clothes'. So the last line of the story is that the doctor breaks out in a sweat. Because he realises that the girl has been raped, because the doctor said: 'Khol do', and her hand went to her waist to pull down her trousers. But the father leaps



to joy because he sees his girl who was lying so still, her hands are moving. So you know, it's a – yeah, it's a story in those days where any performer would think it's a great challenge to work with.

**DR:** And you performed it without any dialogue.

**MKR:** All through the body. And, strangely, Philip Glass music.

**DR:** Philip Glass. I was about to ask you what was your musical choice for that – so, Philip Glass.

**MKR:** There was no choice because that was the music I had improvised with, and you won't believe this many years later – you've heard of LIFT yeah, London International Festival Theatre?

**DR:** Yes, yeah.

**MKR:** Rose Fenton came to India and spent a whole day with me and said: 'What would you like to do?' I said: 'I'd like to have a real musician. I've always been working out of tapes and I'm fed up.' So she said: 'Okay, I'll send you someone from London, if it works out that's good, if it doesn't that's fine. And you see if you'd like to also rework your music of *Khol Do*, because you keep saying you don't want to use Philip Glass, you want to – you see if it works.' Now Gavin [O'Shea] came and we hit it off very well and we made another show for LIFT [*Departures* (1999)], but he told me: 'I can't get rid of this Philip Glass music because your movement is so connected with it.' So whenever I have done *Khol Do*, it's always been with that music. And it's interesting, even the very, the great pundits, the very puritanical pundits of India – and I'm talking way back in the 1990s – I mean apart from one person, nobody has ever said: 'Oh, why are you using this Western music?' Nobody's ever said that.

**DR:** What was the next step for you then?

**MKR:** So the next step after doing *Khol Do* was because I had no director, I had to set my challenges to myself, and my routine. Now the next challenge for me was: I must talk non-stop because *Khol Do* I had not opened my mouth, and I can tell you it was very, very hard for me. I had done a lot of theatre. I have worked with other directors, you know, I've done Shakespeare in Hindi, but all of it was very uncomfortable. When I finished *Khol Do*, I said I must speak now, but I hated my own voice. So I would have to go into a room, lock myself in, and I chose Brecht's story called *The Job*, and every day I would just read the story loudly in order to get used to my own voice and to get comfortable with it. And then I started improvising again with the camera and music. But I spoke non-stop, and the other challenge was: I must work with objects. In *Khol Do*, there was only two objects – one was the veil, and the other one was bangles, the girl's bangles. But in this one I just filled the room with household objects, and then I kept shooting all these improvisations. So that was the second. Then in the third, I invited a camera person, a film-maker, to come and see whether we should just experiment with a live camera and we told ourselves: 'We'll have no story, it will be just the experiments with this camera that will hopefully – a narrative will come out of our experiments and that will be the show.' By that time, people had got a little interested in my work, so I just happened to ring up a guitarist and said: 'Would you like to come and improvise?' He said: 'Yeah, why not.' So there was a camera person, a live musician and we made a show called *A Deep Fried Jam*. So you know, actually you know this, some part of me has really only wanted to be a singer in a rock band. [*Laughter.*] You know, like a diva. That's been the great dream, but I've never been a singer. I learned music as a child, but I'm not a singer. And so this wonderful guitarist, he would play music and 90% of the show got improvised in two meetings. Yeah. It was amazing.

**DR:** Which year are we in right now, roughly?

**MKR:** Now this show, I don't know whether sequentially it's the third show, but this is 2001/2002. You see, I grew up in college listening to a lot of rock music, a lot of Beatles, a lot of Rolling Stones, Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin. That music is very much a part of my subconscious. Now when he started playing those notes this was the first time I started really improvising text because he obviously struck a chord in me, and it was a chord that belonged to my college years. And somewhere that chord was opening up a subconscious, and a whole flood of material came out and they were all episodes. That was the time the Americans were flying over Afghanistan and dropping bombs, and I would go to these rehearsals with a blank mind. One rehearsal, one meeting, I can't call it rehearsal, one improvisation I went having read a recipe book, something about carrots having come from Afghanistan, purple carrots, and while I was improvising the purple carrots got mixed up with Jimi Hendrix's 'Purple Haze'



got mixed up with American planes. And so an episode around Afghanistan happened, different episodes, an episode around communalism, around Hindus and Muslims, but all in this very fun way, and that was when I was also improvising diva-like, but the material was all pretty political. It was the music, and this musician used to tell me: 'Maya, the moment I play a certain kind of chord, you are up and away.' And I said: 'What is this chord?' He said: 'It's something close to a Pink Floyd, or goes towards the Rolling Stones, you immediately start talking and moving.' And I hadn't realised that this was all sitting inside. Years later in 2018, I thought I was going to revive *A Deep Fried Jam*, but instead a whole new show got improvised. And that was *Loose Woman*. But I still took one or two episodes from *A Deep Fried Jam* and put them into *Loose Woman*.

**[00:36:01 to 00:37:27] Excerpt from *Loose Woman* (2018)**

**[00:37:28] WORKING WITH COMEDY AS A FORM**

**DR:** Your biography says that you've also done stand-up, has that kind of happened—

**MKR:** No, no, you see, that's the wrong word for me, I've never done stand-up, I do comedy. I do comedy, and I call it theatre. Because, it is set up like theatre. It's not about a microphone. I do think of a ridiculous situation. And again, I think I'm deeply influenced by my mother, but in her case, because she belongs to another era, it was all texted, there was already a text that was written, and she would get the playwright to write for her. In my case, I would improvise. And my major comedy show [*The Non Stop Feel Good Show*, 1997], I actually set up a green room onstage. I do this woman, Paru who you see now in the *Lockdown Stories*, she was actually a tiny seven-minute character in a comedy show. And so I come on stage as one character then I rush into that green room, and I quickly change clothes and I come out as another character, and they are all completely ridiculous, completely ridiculous. Like one of them is a jogger, she's just come from years in America, and all she can do is jog and feel good, and she jogs in her mind and she jogs in her body and that's how she thinks and lives. She can't even think till she jogs because there was this whole fitness thing going on in Delhi and in India, in the cities. So that comedy show became a big hit. In fact, many friends used to tell me: 'Maya, stop doing any serious work, only do comedy.' You know, in those days, I'm talking, my first comedy I made in 1997 there was hardly any solo comedy, no stand-up. So yeah, I'm not a stand-up person. I don't make, I don't do wordplay. Yeah, they are situations, and they are characters that come out, ridiculous characters who have a certain way of seeing the world, like Paru.

**DR:** Okay. And when you say you're more of an improviser than someone who works from text, is this something, do you think, that was a skill that you learned at any point in your journey, or is it just something that was a talent, if we may call it that?

**MKR:** I didn't learn it from anywhere. So you see, this is one bit that I forgot to tell you about, my actual theatre journey post-college was street theatre.

**DR:** Okay. Yes, yes. I read about that as well. Yes, that's interesting.

**MKR:** That's my entry into theatre. I can't say professionally, because I wasn't earning money from it. It was all completely free, but one had to improvise these street plays. And I have to say it came to me naturally – this just getting into a space and getting into another zone. I can't call it fantasy and I won't call it fictitious, it is simply another zone. Thank god I had it, because without a director there's no other way I could have made shows.

**DR:** Was there another kind of important step in between, before we get to *Lockdown Stories* which is more of a—?

**MKR:** Oh god, there's plenty. You see, each show has to be a completely new exercise, so you must get either another lot of people, or you work – I stopped working with stories, *Khol Do* and *The Job*. Oh, and then in between I was asked to make a show for Commonwealth Games, so they wanted me to pick up a Commonwealth story. So I found a very funny story by Chimamanda Adichie, who's a Nigerian writer. She's written a delightful story about a mother and daughter. That's the only time, only time where I have spoken – the entire text is the writer's text. But that was because it was commissioned and I had a very short time, so it got made like that. So each production had to be a new challenge. And then Rustom Bharucha asked me to pick up a story or a character from the



Mahabharata and my first reaction was: 'Thank you very much, I don't want to do it.' He said: 'No Maya, I'm not going to let go, you better do it.' And so that was a whole new exercise where I picked up a character who I'd only been used to in kathakali, but I had to find another way into that character. And so the whole form of the play became an actor in search of a character.

**DR:** Okay, okay. And what was the character?

**MKR:** The character is Ravana, who is a kind of evil – the opposite of the good man, in Ramayana, the epic Ramayana. I had no idea in the beginning, I'd again just improvised and improvised, but the whole show took the form of an actor in search of her [character]. You see, so what I've learned to do, Duška, is to trust the improvisation. They will get recorded and after about seven or eight improvisations, I just have to watch them and trust, go on trust that something will emerge. And that I will cut and paste, and a new through-line will emerge from pulling out sections and that's why some of my shows have started becoming episodic. But *Ravanama* is not episodic, it's through and through this actor in search of a character.

**DR:** That's really interesting, because of this pervasiveness of Mahabharata and Ramayana in the Indian culture that, you know, the idea is that everybody knows the stories, right?

**MKR:** Now this is interesting, it's interesting because when I was making the show, right-wing groups were beginning to get stronger in India and there was all this, you know, proprietorship of 'Ramayana is ours', and this whole group of Hindus already making themselves manifest in terms of: 'We will tell you what the epics are, we will tell you what they stand for.' And so by the time I started performing it, I was aware that there may be people who will come and disrupt the show. Because what this performance, what it was also – the way it got made was I just picked up several stories about Ravana, from the folk tradition, from music traditions, and each day I would improvise with a different story, and so all these stories got linked in a new way. Now, in one of those stories, you know, you've heard of Sita? Now, in the usual known story, Ravana is supposed to have kidnapped Sita. But in folk stories – it's a bit like Greek mythology, you get all sorts of variations – in one folk tradition, Sita is actually Ravana's daughter. Now, if you say this to the ultra-right, you get their back up, because they'll say: 'You're messing with our mythology', and for me this was the strong point of the whole piece – that Ravana discovers Sita is his daughter. And that's the way the show ends. It never actually did happen. That was one show that also went to dance festivals. So that was again another wonderful experience.

**[00:45:32 to 00:47:24] Excerpt from *Ravanama* (2000)**

#### **[00:47:25] RESPONDING TO LOCKDOWN**

**DR:** So shall we fast-forward to the *Lockdown Stories*?

**MKR:** Yes. Okay.

**DR:** Because obviously, this is a time when the audience engagement is impossible as a live event, as a live encounter. So you found an outlet through the Internet, and through creating this series of episodes, using a very sophisticated set of musical choices as well. I'd be interested to—

**MKR:** Oh, thank you – 'sophisticated'!

**DR:** [*Laughter.*] Well, I mean, I don't know, maybe that's a wrong word, but I couldn't place it, you know, as a genre, it's a very complex sound world of this piece, so do forgive me if I've misapplied a term. But—

**MKR:** No, no, I'm feeling, I'm looking at it as a compliment.

**DR:** Okay, good. [*Laughter.*] So yes, should we talk about how this came about?

**MKR:** Now I must give a little background to this. Two things: one is that I have since 1990 or something – you've heard of [artist] Safdar Hashmi, he is a man who was shot dead? So January 1 is always marked [as] the day he was shot. For many years, I read the morning newspapers of January 1, and by four o'clock I put myself on stage, doing comedy. I did that for about a good six, seven years, and people started looking forward to it. And it was impromptu comedy. And usually, on January 1, you have a hangover, because you've been drinking and partying all of 31<sup>st</sup>, and you wake up in the morning and





it's in that delirium that you create this comedy. And I always told myself by 4pm I've got to be onstage. So that was one trend, if you like. And 2014 onwards, because of the coming into power of the right wing, I have been periodically invited with very little notice, maybe a day or two days maximum: 'Please come on stage, and this is our theme, this is what we are protesting for.' And so, I had got into this way of simply downloading some music and listening to it and going into a zone and creating text and then just getting on stage. So I think, now when I look back on it, when the lockdown happened, for us it was the 22<sup>nd</sup> of March or something like that, the first few days were extremely restless for all of us, yeah. And I told myself: 'How am I going to live through this?' You're locked in a house – and yes, I had been before the lockdown telling myself: 'Maya, you have become extremely grave, you have lost your sense of humour, you have done so much political protest theatre, you've got no fun left in you because you're always just responding only to very horrible situations', and I had been telling myself: 'I'm going to stop doing this protest theatre, and I'm only going to do comedy now.' Ha! So when the lockdown happens, I kind of tell myself: 'Here's your opportunity, you want to do comedy theatre? Do it now.' But I'm thinking that I'm going to rehearse in the lockdown and I'm anticipating that I'm going to perform it after the lockdown lifts.

**DR:** I see.

**MKR:** And then I realised that this isn't going to happen. There's no place for rehearsing. But I knew that I had to do something with my restlessness, otherwise I'd go mad. So I told myself: 'Give yourself a routine Maya, wake up in the morning, go into your rehearsal room, everybody's still sleeping, turn on your–' I don't know where I got this idea – I realised that I don't like the business of putting up a camera and creating a show in front of it, because for me the camera has, for 35 years, been a kind of, what should I say, a co-actor to create a show! You don't make a show for the camera, and as far as I'm concerned, the camera is for live feed, it's a co-actor with you in the piece. Or else if you want to document a show, then you must set up two or three cameras. But to set up a single camera and imagine that you're performing for it, for me, it's too fake, I've never done it. But I don't know by what – it happened intuitively, because I said I don't want the camera, so I just turned on my mobile phone and this *Paru* just started.

**DR:** So it was it all recorded on your mobile?

**MKR:** Yeah.

**DR:** And then what–

**MKR:** And in the first take. No second take.

**DR:** Amazing. And then how did you put it together, with the music?

**MKR:** With *Paru* there's no music. There are 15 episodes of *Paru*, it's only her speaking, for either two minutes or three minutes, and then immediately I told myself: 'If I don't send it out now, if I listen to it, I won't like it and I'll junk it.' So I would instantly sit there and send it out to at least 200 people on WhatsApp, because then it's out of my system and I can't call it back.

**DR:** That was your audience.

**MKR:** That's my audience. And that's my practice. And it had to be done every other day, whether I had a good idea or not, I had to go into that room at 6am and record. And so something better be ready by, usually that same morning, or some idea the previous night you make some notes, but by the next morning you have to get it done. And something also told me that it has to be really short. I don't know where all this was coming from. It had to be short. And so I made about eight episodes like this, eight or nine, and then I felt I needed a break. So then *Paru* the character says: 'I'm off.' And oh, yes, you know, our migrant labour started walking – hundreds and thousands of workers started walking back home from the cities in India. Hundreds of miles. So then *Paru* the character also said: 'I'm also leaving my home.' And she started walking, and that's when I took a break. And then I shifted gear a bit, and I wanted to make music videos, and some of the lockdown events were so horrific. Actually, my challenge was: how do you create comedy out of horrific events? How can *Paru* look at – I don't know if you read about this incident where 16 workers were killed on the railway tracks? And my challenge was: can I make comedy with this scenario? Because something told me, and this is from past experience, that when you make comedy out of a very sharp event, it's far more effective than when



you make it seriously. Some of these events were so horrible, and I did want to respond to them, and this was the old habit of, you know, people calling you for protest theatre, and you respond, so that had become a practice for me also. So I had to keep responding. So I started recording my voice singing, and I started teaching myself GarageBand and layering my voice. Then I also rang up somebody who I knew who I had performed with, I said: 'Could you please record your voice?', and I gave some sort of little indicators, and he sent his voice – because nobody can meet – so he sent it via his phone, and I kept listening to it and I pulled out little chunks and I layered his voice. Sometimes I layered my voice, sometimes he's just plucking an instrument – because he doesn't play an instrument – he's plucking a chord, and I layer my voice over it, and then over it I lay text. But it's all just this very primitive way of working with GarageBand.

**[00:56:57 to 00:58:14] Excerpt from *Lockdown Stories* (2020)**

**MKR:** And it became obsessive. I started getting really bad headaches, because you were spending something like 12-13 hours on the screen, putting on these earplugs and listening to that music, and giving it volume, and giving it reverb, and giving – it's all very new, it's like children playing, you know, children going into a fantasy world. I had not the foggiest how to work with this, but there is something about the Mac, that it is fairly friendly, and because I know that I have nobody to consult, you just make it and you post it. But you know what, for me, I have not been so aware of an audience [as] in these lockdown days, not in my entire theatre career has the audience been as alive as it has been in these lockdown days. And but for them, *Paru* would have done two or three episodes maximum. It is only the audience that kept it going. Already, people are inviting *Paru* to be on their platform. So *Paru* has already given an autobiographical session on Zoom.

**DR:** Oh great, okay, excellent! [*Laughter.*]

**MKR:** And I was being interviewed by this guy, I created his character also, that he really wants to write a biography of *Paru*, and that Hollywood is very interested in doing a film. It's going to be a Hollywood-cum-Bollywood collaboration.

**DR:** Great, great.

**MKR:** She is in that much demand, *Paru*. And now I've been invited again by a feminist group. And they want to do their launch and they said: 'We would like *Paru* to do the launch.'

**DR:** She's a lockdown celebrity.

**MKR:** She's a lockdown celebrity.

**DR:** So in a way, what you've just described is the way in which GarageBand and WhatsApp, and Zoom have become collaborators in the way in which the camera used to be your collaborator in making work.

**MKR:** That's right. There's something about the Zoom, and because it is Zoom, and there's only this frame and there's 'share screen'. So when they first said: 'Will you do a *Paru* show?' I didn't like the idea, I said: 'Paru will do a PPT, share screen', but it came from what Zoom provides, because Zoom provides a share screen, I said: 'She will do an autobiography with her slides.' And in the backdrop, I put some of my old theatre costumes, and I kept turning to them, and *Paru* was a performer at some point. And she would pick up these little objects and show them on the screen. Now I do want to create, but I have to get more disciplined, It's damn hot in Delhi right now – it's really hot. But I want to create a show that is only hands and these objects. But you need, you need a good, something that really inspires you, I need a kickstart.

**DR:** Yes, a commission.

**MKR:** No, I need to kick myself.

**DR:** Okay, okay. I am sure it will come. I'm absolutely sure that this will come about. [*Laughter.*] Maya thank you so much, this has been amazing. It's been really, really interesting, and funny, and insightful and, evocative of so many things.

**MKR:** Many things left out, but it doesn't matter—

**DR:** Oh, yes, I know, I know, inevitably, you know, with such a rich career, this is just highlights, edited



highlights. But, thank you so much. This has definitely enhanced my lockdown.

**MKR:** Thank you.

Transcription by Samantha McAtear

### **Clips Summary**

[00:36:01 to 00:37:27] *Loose Woman* (2018)

[00:45:32 to 00:47:24] *Ravanama* (2000)

[00:56:57 to 00:58:14] *Lockdown Stories* (2020)

Audio available at [www.auralia.space/gallery1-mayakrishnarao/](http://www.auralia.space/gallery1-mayakrishnarao/).

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