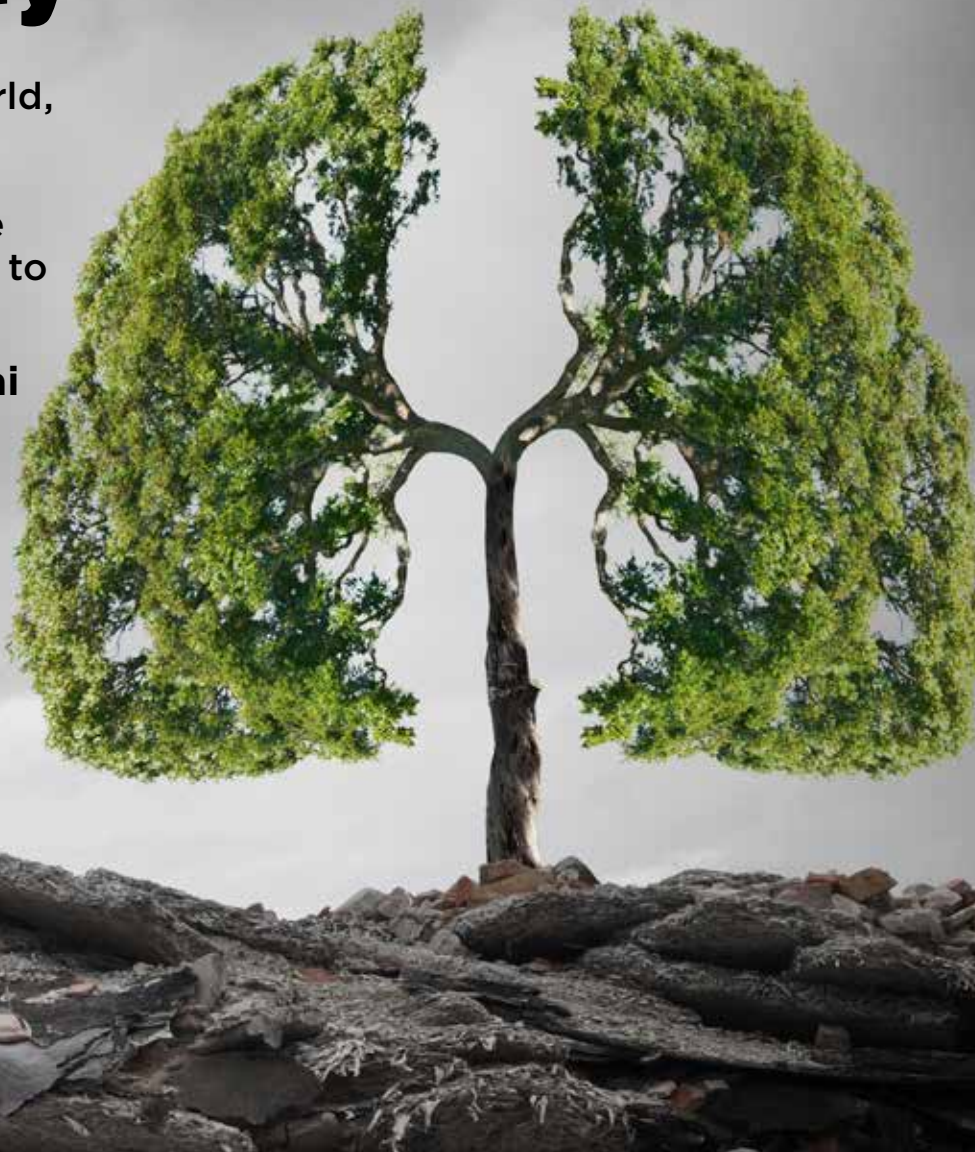


# The Alchemy of Anxiety

A play about imperfect love in an imperfect world, Duncan Macmillan's *Lungs*, with its searing honesty and slice-of-life humour, challenges one to think out of the box.

By Vipasha Aloukik Pai



One of the kinder things to encounter is a work that takes your assorted apprehensions, transforms them into art and leaves you feeling like you are not alone. In a nutshell, this is what Duncan Macmillan's tragicomic two-hander *Lungs* does. M and W are a couple shopping at Ikea when one of them brings up the subject of having a baby. What follows is a

conversation that spans a lifetime and encompasses, within its words, a story of love, betrayal, politics and the end of the world as we know it.

*Lungs*, though not autobiographical, is a child of its creator's anxiety. Macmillan wrote the first draft almost overnight as a way to wrangle with his own personal (he was about to turn 30) and public (the world was going bonkers) concerns. His characters talk about having a child in a world that seems

doomed to implode because of overpopulation and climate change. At one point, W says, "and they say... if you care about the future of mankind then don't have children." They wonder if they—the car-driving, avocado-importing, plastic-bag-using but also bike-riding, fair-trade-buying, documentary-watching kind—are good enough to have a child. They talk about everything from carbon footprint to a very real fear of commitment. The result of Macmillan's initial wrangling is a bare-bones—and structurally ingenious—version of a lifelong conversation between a couple.

## It's just talking

On the page, screen and stage, 'couples talking' is a genre unto itself. It is also one that is easiest to write but nearly impossible to write well. Compare and contrast the numerous fluffy, forgettable romantic comedies we have consumed with works that have imperfect humans, genuinely funny moments, visceral tension and introspection-inducing arcs. Perhaps it is the challenge of doing this well that

real, it does not suffer the weight of melodrama. "We have to remember that they are not deathly serious people who are constantly at each other's throats. They are genuine human beings who like to entertain each other, sometimes at each other's expense, sometimes at their own. The play is not a comedy, but it is very much filled with slice-of-life humour," he says.

Thakore Padamsee also points out a stunning degree of honesty between the two characters. "It is an incredibly intimate conversation...emotionally. Today, in rehearsal, we discovered something quite beautiful. No matter what, they do not lie to each other. Everything that is presented is true. That's what binds them together and, that is why when they are with each other, they're so magical. And when they're apart, they become different people that they don't actually like themselves."

## Crack of doom

Eco-anxiety is hardly new. Ray Davies of the British band The Kinks wrote the mildly satirical 'Apeman',

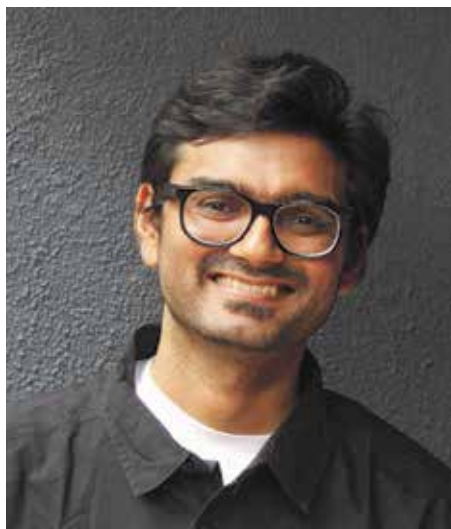
**"The two characters in *Lungs* never lie to each other; the truth binds them together and that is why, when they are with each other, they're so magical"**

has provoked some of the finest creative minds to put a-couple-talking front and centre in their work. Raymond Carver's short story 'What We Talk About When We Talk About Love', Edward Albee's play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, filmmaker Richard Linklater's *Before* trilogy, Ingmar Bergman's made-for-television series *Scenes From A Marriage* are just some luminous examples that command permanent space in our minds. It is tempting, even after only reading it on the page, to add *Lungs* to this list.

At first glance, the humour is palpable. Quasar Thakore Padamsee, who is directing *Lungs* for the NCPA, says, "When I first read the play, I found a lot of it hilarious. Even when we were doing some of the readings and auditions, lots of people were chuckling right through it." But because the entire premise is a conversation between two people in a serious relationship, in the script, like in life, layers creep in. "Since rehearsals began in April, we have dived the other way because we're trying to find the real meaning of these words," he says. What was funny in week one is suddenly something else in week two. But because the conversation is so

a song about wanting to leave the city because of overpopulation and inflation, more than 50 years ago. *Lungs* too—initially intended to be satirical and deliberately ridiculous—was written more than a decade ago when thinking about having a child was a private matter that had nothing to do with the end of the world. Before organisations like Conceivable Future and Population Connection proclaimed directly or indirectly that the climate crisis was 'a reproductive crisis'. Before anti-natalism—a philosophy that essentially says children should not be born—was something one could subscribe to.

Now, a couple of years into an unprecedented global pandemic and news cycles flooded with streams of catastrophic natural and political disasters, the concerns of M and W are understood, if not shared, by many. "I think playwrights," Thakore Padamsee says, "have a unique ability where they can almost predict the future. I have had this conversation often with playwright Ram Ganesh [Kamatham]. If you look at a particular section of life and you look at it carefully enough that you want to create a play



Director Quasar Thakore Padamsee



Dilnaz Irani plays W



Prashant Prakash plays M

out of it, you end up writing imaginary scenarios that turn out to be prophetic.”

Back then though, the script was ignored by all the theatres it was sent to. The radio silence convinced Macmillan to quit writing and start teaching. Since its premiere in 2011, which was possible because a friend of a friend (American playwright and director Aaron Posner) read it and loved it enough to stage it at the Studio Theatre in Washington, D.C., the play has been produced in multiple countries and languages around the world. Macmillan too, through works like *Every Brilliant Thing* and *People, Places and Things*, among others, has found a theatrical voice that is rooted in no-nonsense relevance.

## Challenge accepted

The elegance of *Lungs* lies in its simplicity, laid out by Macmillan at the beginning of the text. The play, he writes, must be performed on a bare stage. He continues: *There is no scenery, no furniture, no props and no mime. There are no costume changes. Light and sound should not be used to indicate a change in time or place.* Just a man and a woman, saying things. Abide by these conditions and the play becomes unconditionally adaptable. It can be performed in a coffee shop, a hotel lobby, a living room or a proscenium theatre. The Old Vic live streamed a socially-distanced version starring Claire Foy and Matt Smith during the pandemic. The Schaubühne, one of Berlin’s more renowned theatres, took the environmental concern voiced in the play a step further by presenting a version in which the actors pedalled on stationary bikes to produce the electricity needed to light the stage. At the NCPA, it will be presented on the Jamshed Bhabha Theatre stage, which has been transformed into a self-contained, versatile and cost-effective

black box theatre (see box below). According to Thakore Padamsee, “We haven’t quite figured out everything yet but we are leaning towards doing this thing called the traverse, which is where the audience is on two sides [on the stage] and the actors perform in the middle.” While a lot of things are still being worked out, everyone at the NCPA is excited about the process of doing something new and different. “It’s going to be fun,” he says.

At the end of our interview, I ask Thakore Padamsee something I wondered about when I first read the play: why is it called *Lungs*? He believes there are a couple of reasons. “First, obviously, because trees are a large part of the storyline. The concept of planting trees, of putting back oxygen into the atmosphere, offsetting your own carbon footprint...these are some of their preoccupations. Secondly, I think the play is relentless. At some point, you want to tell these actors: breathe. Lastly, when you have a child, you’re breathing life into it. And for me, ‘lungs’ kind of covers all these three things,” he says. “I was confused as to why it was called ‘Lungs’ at first. Now I can’t imagine it being called anything else.”

Thakore Padamsee holds a special place in his heart for Macmillan. In the past, he has directed the latter’s powerful monologue *Every Brilliant Thing*, which has also been presented at the NCPA. He says, “I used to be a director who used to think I know better than the writer. He’s trying this, he’s failing. Let me fix it. With Duncan Macmillan, I feel like boss, *yeh baap hain*, just follow what he’s written. This man knows his stuff.” ■

*Lungs will be presented at the NCPA from 16th to 19th June on the Jamshed Bhabha Theatre Stage.*