

Review

Work In Progress

Judged New Zealand's best book review pages in the 2005 Montana Book Awards



Taking The Mic **By Sarah Lang**

HEARD THE JOKE about the shy comedian? Despite performing high-energy comedy shows to full houses at home and abroad, Pakuranga funnyman Tarun Mohanbhai insists he's a shy guy. "I always hated speaking in front of people — I used to wag school on speech day. But when I pick up the microphone my shyness fades."

Eager and intense, the 34-year-old smooths over his bashfulness with quick-off-the-mark quips. And it's slightly startling when his voice turns into a squeak when he gets excited.

Nothing earns a higher squeak than the prospect of performing in his beloved New Zealand International Comedy Festival (May 12-June 4). He's starred at eight of its last nine outings and this year hopes to add to his tally of four festival awards.

2005 Best Local Act, *From India With Love*, his third Bollywood-style multimedia show, is back refreshed for a 2006 reprise in Auckland's

700-seat SkyCity Theatre (May 23-27) and Wellington's Downstage Theatre (May 30-June 3).

Plus he's crafting solo show *Corner Shop Confessions* for Auckland audiences (Herald Theatre, May 13, 16-20): budding DJ VJ tries to escape the family convenience store and make it in the music world, to his father's disapproval.

Mohanbhai's material is very close to home. His immigrant parents Mohan and Damyanti ran dairies for 40 years and, part-time from the age of 12 and fulltime from 20 to 27, the youngest Mohanbhai stacked shelves and counted change in Pakuranga's Bucklands Superette. His parents always wanted their five children to run a business and all three daughters graduated to their own shops.

But the baby of the family had a comic bent. By age 20 stories and skits were spilling out of bedroom drawers and he itched to share them somehow, somewhere. In 1995 a radio ad for a stand-up comedy evening at a central-city pub

prompted him to wander along. He sat in the audience on Wednesday nights for a year before plucking up courage to take the mic — whereupon the audience loved him and the MC demanded his return.

Since that watershed night "That Indian Guy" has been busy on our standup comedy circuit with unashamedly Indian-focused parody. "It's not taking the piss exactly. It's claiming the stereotype as our own, and telling our story." And audiences haven't laughed this hard at cultural stereotypes since Billy T. James.

For 2002's comedy festival Mohanbhai penned one-man play *D'Arranged Marriage*, roping in actor acquaintance Rajeep Varma as director. Employing Bollywood-style song and dance, Mohanbhai plays a medley of characters including protagonist Sanjay yielding to family nagging for an arranged marriage.

He's had his own narrow escape from a

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“semi-arranged” marriage. In 2000 when he started seeing a Fiji-Indian girl, family on both sides “got a little overexcited” and tried to hustle them into an engagement. The reluctant groom called off the relationship. “Everything was happening way too fast. But hell it made good material.”

In 2002 a Sydney producer saw *D’Arranged Marriage* on an Auckland visit and enjoyed it so much he offered Mohanbhai and Varma a three-year touring contract. The show sold out in Melbourne and Sydney — “and that was the point I thought, ‘Yup, I can make this a career,’” squeaks Mohanbhai, who’s since played Sanjay 200 times on both sides of the Tasman.

In 2004 the pair co-wrote and co-starred in *Indian Invaders* (which backgrounds the *D’Arranged Marriage* characters’ earlier lives). En route from India to New Zealand, newlyweds Manhur and Pushpa survive a shipwreck, poverty and racist attitudes to achieve their dream of establishing a Pukekohe fruit shop.

During background research interviews with Pukekohe immigrants, Mohanbhai heard grim stories of racism enduring into the 1950s: when some cinemas banned Indians from sitting in front-row seats and certain barbers refused to cut Indian hair.

“It was all this stuff I’d never known and wanted to put out there. Painful things can still be funny.” The 2004 International Comedy Festival show sold out and won Best Local Act.

In 2005 comedian Te Radar came on board as director helping rework *Invaders* into *From India With Love*. Meshing song and dance

with puppetry and film, it’s their boldest show yet.

Rave reviews spurred the pair to take *D’Arranged Marriage* and *From India With Love* overseas, and shows sold out in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, in June and Durban, South Africa, in October. In June they’re at the Artwallah Festival, a South Asian arts showcase in Los Angeles.

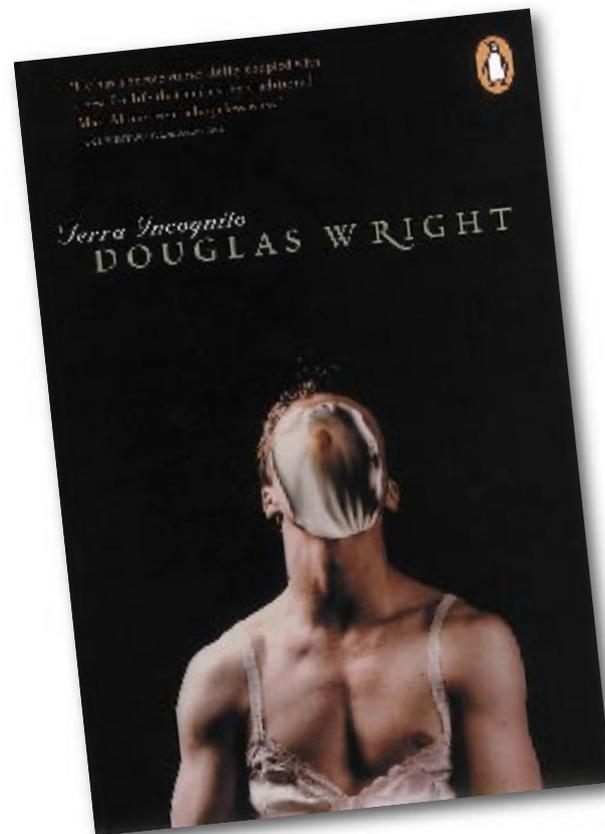
“Our themes aren’t lost in translation. Indians are sort of universal migrants: we’ve settled all over the world, often taking on quite public jobs like running dairies and driving taxis, so everyone’s had something to do with our culture.”

Fancying his future as a solo comedian, in November Mohanbhai is off to find a foothold on the UK stand-up ladder, but promises he’ll be back in time for next year’s comedy festival.

With frequent travelling he still beds down at his parents’ Pakuranga home. “They used to think, ‘This comedy thing is a phase, he’ll grow out of it’, but I actually grew into it. Nowadays they’d still like me to have a solid income, a business, preferably a dairy.”

He’s had several bouts of painful colitis in recent months, and steroid medication has packed on 12 unwanted kilos. Now he’s off to the gym to shed the weight and see off the stress that can cause attacks. “I need to change something in my life. But I’m sure not buying a dairy!”

Comedy’s far from lucrative. Mohanbhai has had to take out loans over the years to smooth over the slow comedy months. Currently the odd commercial, MC gig and TV appearance top up his income to a modest \$30,000 — “but that’s fine,” he says, “I adore what I do”. ■



The Best Of New Zealand Books

By Warwick Roger

Terra Incognita
Douglas Wright (Penguin, \$35)

This would have to be one of the longest suicide notes ever written as the HIV virus takes its toll on the author of last year’s *Ghost Dance*. It is at this point one should probably note that the book is also “a remarkable testament to the author’s courage” or somesuch, but I am reluctant to do that.

Dancer and choreographer Wright wallows in self-pity in what is a remarkably bad-tempered book. Here, for example, is his description of the nursing staff at Hallburn House, the Auckland refuge for the HIV-positive where he spent much of the time described in the book: “All I could see were the buttocks of the women who had taken it over: their bums — ample, well and ill-proportioned, displayed in tight pants like haunches of meat in a butcher’s window, prettified with nuances of power-mongering; flouncing, officiating, bossy, fartingly sympathetic, Goddess-parodying, strutting serene and outraged