



Photographs courtesy: abox

Wired Connections

By VIBHUTI PATEL

Indian American actor Rizwan Mirza (in spotlight above), and Caroline O'Neill and Harry Sinclair (in photo at right) perform in *Continuous City*.



Marianne Weems' trilogy looks at how media and technology have changed our lives.

In 2003, just when the outsourcing of jobs was making political waves in America, the Brooklyn Academy of Music in New York, known for presenting innovative works of performing arts, staged *Alladeen*. This large-scale multimedia piece by Marianne Weems, artistic director of The Builders Association, a New York-based experimental theater

company, explored the phenomenon of international call centers where Indian operators are trained to pass off as Americans. In a stunning production characterized by a trademark cinematic technique, video images and numerous computer screens onstage, it highlighted the issues of media and technology impacting global culture. The play won an Obie



Photographs by KEN WALCZACK

award for outstanding production, toured internationally and inspired Weems to create a successful sequel, *Super Vision*, which also used technology and dealt with contemporary concerns.

Now, *Continuous City* completes Weems' trilogy of technology-centered works. This play was recently performed at the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Next Wave Festival, which presents groundbreaking contemporary works, before touring nationally and internationally this summer. The Builders' Web site describes it as "a meditation on how contemporary experiences of location and dislocation stretch us to the maximum as our 'networked selves' occupy multiple locations." Its fast-paced plot features a globe-trotting salesman who maintains virtual contact with his 11-year-old daughter as they chat via computer webcams. Her nanny, a newcomer to New York, blogs about the city. A transnational businessman promotes Xubu, his social networking Web site, and chats online with his farflung relatives and girlfriends. Every relationship in the play is wired.

Weems says she got the idea for the play from her own regular webcam conversations with her goddaughter who lives in Indiana. "We've done this since Lola was

born. Now she's seven, she has learned to text [message] and orders, 'Get on the computer!'" It is a connection that is better than no communication but, since the participants cannot hug or hold each other, it has its limitations and the play expresses that ambivalence.

"Technology can provide the illusion of bringing us closer even while driving us further apart," says Weems. The play's father-daughter story is sad: the girl is by turns bored, lonely and sulky at having to

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communicate virtually with a distant father who misses her terribly. But the story is real, too. Many Americans talk to their far-away grandchildren by videocam. And we know that this is how President Barack Obama kept in nightly touch with his young daughters as he moved from place to place, through two long years of campaigning.

Indeed, place has become a precious idea for Weems. "*Continuous City* grapples with the idea that we're in a network that stretches everywhere; it doesn't need a location. The father is lost in the confusion of cities, his point of connection is with his daughter who is far away, at home. But it's a failed connection," she says.

On the other hand, the father's boss, an Indian American played by Rizwan Mirza, has a positive family connection because in real life, Mirza chats online with his cousin and his nephew every night. That is a testimonial to the positive power of technology and connection. In the play, as he ichats with his relatives, live, we get the immediacy of watching people onstage kick ideas around. With one in London, another in Virginia, and Mirza wherever the show is that night, they are not "acting," they're in three places, yet not separated. So, "the idea of connection, disconnection, and how

we remain intimate is at the heart of the play." Tellingly, Mirza's character, fearing intimacy and commitment, connects with his numerous girlfriends only online—he refuses to encounter them in his real city.

Weems and writer Harry Sinclair, who hails from New Zealand, traveled all over the world to shoot for this show. Their videos are projected onstage—and on the daughter's computer screen—to physically locate the father. "The imitation of one city by another fascinated me—Shanghai has an Eiffel Tower!" Weems laughs. "It's global displacement. Identities shift, they're borrowed and adapted as the world becomes more connected." And that is another idea that links the plays in this trilogy.

Alladeen focused on displacement by bridging three continents via technology: the play's action shifts back and forth between New York, London and Bangalore.

For more information:

The Builders Association

[http://www.thebuildersassociation.org/Grandma's on the Computer Screen](http://www.thebuildersassociation.org/Grandma's%20on%20the%20Computer%20Screen)

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/27/us/27minicam.html?em=&pagewanted=all>

Curry recipes

<http://www.motiroti.com/play/food/recipes/index.php>
Rizwan Mirza

<http://www.aaezine.org/articles/vol21/21N4KoranicFatiq.html>

It showed how we get caught up in technology as our voices and images travel across the world. For this project, Weems collaborated with motiroti, a London-based company led by Keith Khan and Ali Zaidi. These two young talents also maintain a whimsical Web site replete with recipes for curry in homage to their chosen name, motiroti, meaning fat bread.

"I saw their work in London and was taken by their optimism and charm—no one in American experimental theater does song and dance!" Weems recalls. The admiration was mutual: Khan and Zaidi said they were envious of what Weems had done in *Jet Lag*, which they had seen in London. *Jet Lag* is based on the true story of a grandmother who flew across the Atlantic more than 125 times until she suffered a heart attack and died in an Amsterdam hotel. The play was about constant motion and the compression of geography that happens through technology.

That exchange led to an intense cross-national collaboration: "We had to raise money just to see each other," says Weems. After 18 months of trans-Atlantic back-and-forthing, the threesome acquired the material for their play. "Our output is slow because my product is layered, large-scale and ambitious," Weems explains.

Scenes from Alladeen.

Asked why her plays focus on new technology, Weems replies, "The impetus for me is not the technology but the human story and, in the 21st century, stories are inevitably bound up with some kind of network. Technology comes as part of the story-telling package because people's lives are complicated by it, and because those are the tools we use. It's a way of holding a mirror up to our society to express something that's part of the contemporary moment."

"These plays are melancholic and critical but they're also celebratory. I love the spectacle we can create in them, which is very elaborate for a nonprofit theater company. Technology has come to stay—certainly in my theater."

And what would she like to do next? Not surprisingly, Weems muses, "India plays a huge role in the global network that my project is about so it would be a milestone for me to take *Alladeen* there. It's a question of finding a theater that would intersect with this kind of technological project."



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