



## **“All the World’s a Stage”: Tackling Real-Life Issues through the Arts**

Ashram’s involvement in theatrical projects exemplifies key characteristics of the organisation: engagement, cultural sensitivity, innovation and partnership. These aren’t just buzzwords. They indicate what Ashram needs to do in order to connect with a diverse audience on challenging, indeed taboo, subjects. The productions address issues such as forced marriage, self-harm and so-called honour crimes. Ashram has worked with international and national bodies to produce several pieces: *Nandini*; *Breaking Silence*; *Land, Gold, Women*; *Moving Forward*.

In order to appeal widely, Ashram has recognised it needs to do more than just, say, publish a report on attitudes towards mental illness in South Asian communities. Many Ashram customers do not have high levels of literacy and the cinematic/street theatre formats were identified as an innovative way of portraying taboo issues. The production teams have often drawn upon real people’s experiences and insight in order to address how specific cultures often react to things like self-harm and depression. This approach is typical for Ashram, which does not cater exclusively for Asian communities but has a tradition of using knowledge and experience to provide culturally appropriate health and social care services.



*Breaking Silence* (which evolved from a monologue to a play to a short film in 2007) is focused on mental health and stars many Ashram employees. For Jean Tompkins, a senior manager at Ashram, it’s a personal favourite: she explains that it sparked a lot of debate and was managed by a fantastic team. It portrays a woman’s slow descent into depression and her ultimate breakdown and recovery. Shortly after getting fantastic A-Level results, Amy learns that her parents have arranged for her to marry a man she’s never

met. Her sister responds to her dismay bluntly: "You know that's the way of life." And so the viewer sees how Amy begins to lose control of her own life. The film details how, over several years, she descends into loneliness and depression. She can't bring herself to change her clothes or fix her hair. The voices in her head represent self-hatred and desperation. Her husband is confused and sometimes hostile, telling her she's "not right". Her breakdown in the bathroom of her home is followed by a stay in hospital and a full assessment. She's then referred to Ashram, and begins to recover due to her support from a provider with understanding of her cultural background. Her marriage survives.

Then there is 2009's *Land, Gold, Women* (directed by Avantika Hari) which does not have a happy ending. It's hard to see how it could, as it is about the grim, often ignored subject of honour crimes. It is a feature film produced by a Bollywood company which consulted extensively with Ashram due to the organisation's real-life knowledge: between April 2004 and March 2008 Ashram dealt with 457 honour crime cases. Ashram introduced survivors of honour crime to the production team. It also helped the production team find appropriate locations to shoot in Birmingham. *Land, Gold, Women* received local and national press and is the first Bollywood feature film about honour crimes. It centres on seventeen year old Saira, her relationship with her white boyfriend David, her parents and their concern that their daughter is straying from her roots.

The director told the *Guardian* she was particularly concerned with accurately portraying the cultural traditions that lie behind honour crimes: "We're trying to change the idea that honour killings are all about Islam. Anywhere you have a societal structure with a very strong social fabric where reputation is important in a community is where you find honour killings." Indeed, honour crimes have been recorded in Latin America and Italy. Ashram was a crucial player in bringing cultural understanding to the production. It facilitated the input from survivors themselves as well as bringing its knowledge and experience to the partnership.

One of Ashram's earlier pieces was *Nandini* which again starred Ashram employees, and was both a film and a play. The main character in *Nandini* begins to self-harm due to pressures at home; she is conflicting with her parents over the possibility of a forced marriage. Typically for Ashram, it covers more than one tough subject and the cultural attitudes surrounding that. For Jean Tompkins the live play in particular "really shows the emotions coming through."

The theme of second-generation South Asian women conflicting with their parents over matters of cultural contention is common in Ashram's arts work. As the main character in *Nandini* begins to feel alone and panicked, the family begins to talk



about “shame” and reputation. But as with *Breaking Silence*, the main character finds support after a hospital refers her to Ashram. These films raise awareness for the need for a culturally competent service provider – something which, sadly, so many BME people do not encounter in their dealings with mental health professionals.

Non-fiction pieces are also used to raise awareness. *Moving Forward* looked at the experiences of domestic survivors from different backgrounds: Chinese, South American, Black and Asian. Additionally, Jean Tompkins, head of the Health and Social Care Department, tells me about the DVD her team did addressing the core values of their work. Service users and staff talked about the legal aspects, the service standards and the key principles behind social care. It was an ideal resource for school pupils considering a career in the area, and was followed up by a visit to Ghulab Ashram, the scheme for elderly people. The teachers were very impressed with what Ashram put together.

Advocacy, awareness raising and campaigns through film and arts forms a crucial part of Ashram’s work. It’s appealing, it’s different and it can generate nationwide attention. And one hopes it can, indeed, break the silence around harmful practices and prejudices. Satveer Nijjar was the woman whose story informed the production of *Breaking Silence*. In background interviews on the DVD Satveer said that the production could help reduce stigmas and taboos around mental health in South Asian communities. And so, she said, “I hope to be able to change at least one person’s life.” As will, one hopes, future productions by Ashram.