

Mrs. Krishnan's Party brings huge amounts of fun, heart, and food to the stage

by Kathleen Oliver on January 18th, 2019



This is a party you won't want to miss.

The title is misleading: it's not Mrs. Krishnan's party—at least, not at first. It's her boarder, James, a student from New Zealand connected to Mrs. Krishnan through distant relatives and friends, who wants to celebrate the festival of Onam, which, in his words, is "like Christmas, Easter, and Diwali all in one".

He's dressed up in harem pants, a spangly vest, and a golden hat, like the legendary King Mahabali, whose sacrifice Onam honours in the Hindu celebration, and he's keen to practise his deejaying skills. We're all his guests, and we're instructed to surprise Mrs. Krishnan when she comes in.

She's surprised, all right, and flustered—she's planning to sell the shop and a buyer is coming tomorrow—but she reluctantly agrees to let us stay, with a grudging "They break, they buy." Her gruff persona gradually yields to her

natural hospitality, as she fills in the story of her family, flirts on the phone with a church friend, and prepares a feast for her guests.

A simple plot synopsis of Justin Lewis (who also directs) and Jacob Rajan's script can't adequately convey the enormous pleasures of being in the room with Mrs. Krishnan and James. Much of the show's success comes from the unvarnished charms of its performers, Kalyani Nagarajan as Mrs. Krishnan and Justin Rogers as James, whose openhearted, spontaneous engagement with the audience is the soul of the piece.

On opening night, Nagarajan asked the only kid in the audience about his favourite Indian food, and the look of contained offence on her vegetarian character's face when he announced that it was butter chicken was priceless. There was also an extended improvised comic scene when another audience volunteer, assisting in the preparation of the dahl, couldn't manage to work the can opener. Nagarajan seamlessly inhabits her character's contradictions; her story is both funny and poignant, and she even has a chance to show off her Indian classical-dance skills.

Rogers is just as charismatic: for all his character's mistakes—and James makes some whoppers—he's essentially playing the straight man in this comedic duo. He's also an amiable rabble-rouser, working the crowd from the show's opening moments to its conclusion.

John Verryt's set transforms the Vancity Culture Lab into the back room of a corner store, with overlapping patches of patterned wallpaper and crates of stock—but it's been decorated for the party, festooned with red flower garlands. It's fabulous.

And the dahl they make on-stage? You can have some after the show. It's delicious. Get yourself a ticket.