



## Mrs. Krishnan's Party: accept this invitation

January 18, 2019 by Colin Thomas



I feel revived. So many things in the world these days are so depressing and alienating—the endless Trump news, for instance. Grounded, personal, and celebratory, Mrs. Krishnan's Party is the perfect antidote for all of that. I don't know when I've left the theatre feeling so refreshed and renewed.

The set-up is both simple and original. Mrs. Krishnan runs a small general store and her boarder, a young guy named James, has arranged for about a hundred guests, the audience, to celebrate the Hindu harvest festival of Onam in her stock room. James lets us in on all of this, Mrs. Krishnan arrives, and we all shout "Surprise!" Mrs. Krishnan is horrified and tries to get us to leave. But, of course, hospitality wins out and we launch into the collective effort of putting on a party.

The genius of this show is that it exploits so successfully the essence of theatre, which is communion. Even if we're just sitting in a dark room contemplating the behaviours onstage, it matters that we're meditating as a group: theatre is essentially social. It is also essentially live, unfolding in a unique flow of time.

Mrs. Krishnan's Party runs with all of that. Some audience members sit at the long table that's at the centre of the playing area. And we're all actively involved, dancing with James, who is an aspiring DJ, and helping Mrs. Krishnan by getting her garlic, onions, tomatoes, and rice.

The spontaneity of the performances keeps us firmly rooted in the present moment. There's a lot of improvising going on. I'm thinking of the vegetarian Mrs. Krishnan's interactions with a chatty kid in the audience on opening night, for instance—and the look of horror that crossed her face when he said his favourite Indian dish was butter chicken.

The physical experience of the show is crazy sensual. Garlands and garlands of fake red flowers hang from the high ceilings in the Culture Lab. As the food cooks, dizzying scents weave their way into your nostrils.

And the performers are insanely buoyant and charming. James (Justin Rogers) meets you at the door and takes you to your seat dressed as King Maveli, a major player in the story of Onam. He is resplendent in gold. Rogers is so ebullient—and, let's face it, so handsome—that I was soon fantasizing about how quickly he'd put everybody at ease at the reception that would follow our wedding.

Kalyani Nagarajan, who plays Mrs. Krishnan, is also ridiculously endearing. At one point, she was talking on a cell phone to a character we hadn't met. All she said was, "What is it? Tell me. No tell me!" and she was so hilariously coquettish that I was instantly hooked.

There is also substance in Mrs. Krishnan's Party—and pain. I won't give away the details, but I will say that this is where King Maveli comes to the fore. Throughout the evening, we hear bits of his story, how he was pushed into the underworld but allowed to return once a year, because of his goodness and his devotion to Vishnu.

Similarly, Mrs. Krishnan's Party is a story of rebirth or, perhaps more accurately, endurance. Family relationships are difficult. Making your way in the world is difficult. Both Mrs. Krishnan and James have suffered. But, through the rituals of Onam—and the rituals of theatre—they find a community of love.