

The ~~lake~~ effect

By Rajiv Joseph

Directed by Pirronne Yousefzadeh

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During a fierce winter storm, estranged siblings reunite in their family's restaurant amid pungent memories of tandoors and tikka masala. When a regular customer claims to know more of their family history than they do, Vijay and Priya are forced to consider the future of the business. Pulitzer Prize-nominee Rajiv Joseph serves up a spicy menu of family secrets, sibling rivalry and unlikely friendship.

"The Lake Effect" at Silk Road Rising ★★½

May 01, 2013 | Chris Jones | Theater critic Chicago Tribune

Rajiv Joseph is best known for "Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo," a formatively ambitious Pulitzer Prize finalist that starred Robin Williams on Broadway. By contrast with a work that ranges across Iraq and features the narration of a tiger, "The Lake Effect," the new Joseph drama at Silk Road Rising in Chicago is a one-set, three-character, conventionally structured, I-never-knew-my-father drama that never leaves a little Indian restaurant in Cleveland.

Nonetheless, Joseph's rich storytelling **abilities** — under the direction of Timothy Douglas — are enough to pull you into the story.

The set-up is intriguing. One frigid night by Lake Erie, a genial African-American gentleman, Bernard (played by Mark Smith) enters the restaurant in search of his regular meal and some conversation with his close friend, the longtime owner. But he finds instead Vijay (Adam Poss), the owner's son, who is as oblivious to his dad's relationship with this Bernard, as Bernard is to the existence of this son. The patriarch remains upstairs, unseen throughout the play, as the two men try to figure out **the game** being played by the other — not to mention their respective benevolence, or lack thereof. It's quickly revealed that Bernard has been placing bets on the Cleveland Browns for Vijay's dad. But that's not necessarily why the restaurant is in trouble, since the old man seems to be **winning**. Just as the son is puzzling over that matter, Vijay's sister, Priya (Minita Gandhi) shows up at her dad's sickbed. So what's her deal? Before long, it starts to feel like this play is exploring one of the more emotional of the traumas and questions that often surround parents with estranged (or merely absent) kids. Who has their best interests at heart? Their kith and kin — or their longtime friends whom their kids often dislike?

Joseph, though, has other fish to fry in his Cleveland curry house. Not the least of those issues is the struggle of the well-educated children of immigrants, who might reject the careful, small-business ways of their parents, and surely do not share their accents, but who inevitably remain tied to their family in ways they struggle to fully process. When they have to sort out the affairs of the ailing parents, all of this comes, crashingly, into play. There long have been dramas about the struggles of the American-born children of a nation of immigrants, but these matters now are moving to the second generation of a different population of immigrants.

You're never ahead of this prismatic play, which reminds me in places of Tracy Letts' "Superior Donuts," but nonetheless manages to be very distinctive. It's especially admirable in its sense of balance — Joseph is

no mere sentimentalist taking down ungrateful yuppies who don't respect their roots (although he lands a few punches), he's also chronicling some of the more paranoid and understandably closed-off tendencies of that first generation of immigrants and arguing, I think, that some separation is better for all concerned.

Frankly, this premiere Silk Road production of "Lake Effect," although intriguing, is not up to the high quality of the script.

It starts out well enough, with Smith evoking some of the necessary air of mystery and Poss evoking his character's understandable confusion. But as things progress, this 90-minute show becomes very cool to the touch and there are great swaths of dialogue here that feel flat, repetitive, remote and lacking in nuance. At times, the actors seem to stand there and unleash their lines. At other moments, they wander without sufficient purpose around the prosaic physical environment designed by Dan Stratton. These are all deeply vulnerable characters, and the issues in play are not only complex in their exploration of race, [class](#) and [education](#), they're also intensely personal. That last quality is what one misses the most. Love and loss scramble everything.

Rajiv Joseph's 'The Lake Effect' at Lucie Sterne Theatre, Palo Alto through March 29

By Melissa McKenzie, Correspondent

As a family struggles to connect and navigate through its dysfunctional dynamic, three characters embark on a journey of discovery in TheatreWorks Silicon Valley's newest production, "The Lake Effect."

Penned by Pulitzer Prize finalist Rajiv Joseph ("Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo"), "The Lake Effect," named after a meteorological phenomenon that results in a deluge of snow or icy rain, pulls back the layers of its characters-- Vijay and his sister Priya, played by Adam Poss and Nilanjana Bose, and Bernard, a family friend, portrayed by Jason Bowen, with whom the siblings clash-- to reveal their inner turmoil as they attempt to mend their fragmented relationships.

"I think it's this beautiful look at watching this family wrestle with that," said TheatreWorks Director of New Works Giovanna Sardelli. "In most of Rajiv's plays, you watch characters struggle with anger, resentment, entitlement--whatever they wrestle with, but there's always the hope and possibility that they're seeking salvation of some sort."

The characters in "The Lake Effect," which won the Joseph Jefferson Award for Best New Play, are stuck inside their shuttered Indian restaurant, where they wrestle with the past and ponder the legacy of their family business.

"The fun of the play comes from watching the characters interact," said Sardelli. "It's just three fantastic actors, which I love because it feels to me that you get to know these people and you get to know them just like anyone else in your life. You see many facets of their characters, so it's harder to make judgment. Just when you think you get this person, they surprise you, and that's how most people are. It takes the entire play to understand them, and it ends very clearly. There is no ambiguity as to who they are."

Joseph's drama tackles complicated issues including race, sibling rivalry and parental expectations while showing Vijay and Priya strive to see their parents as more than just their parents and come to the realization that their father is much more complicated than they previously believed.

The siblings are mourning the death of their mother, their difficulties with grief and reconciling with each other while maneuvering through the societal pressures of the characters' native Indian culture and societal norms of America.

Despite the challenges faced by its characters, "The Lake Effect" has a hopeful tone.

Joseph "has a very strong spiritual belief, so his plays always feel as if they're deeper and larger and celebrating the human spirit, but you're never being preached to," Sardelli said. "There is always a character whose moral compass is tuned. There is attention to that and I find that really interesting. ... I love the gentle tenderness of very simple gestures that are extensions of love or kindness, and I think the play, on a very basic level, really celebrates that."

She adds, "I hope that the audience takes that away from the play. I can't wait to share this with the audience. I think that they're going to enjoy it."

Director: Pirronne Yousefzadeh



At the risk of embarrassing her, I'll say that I've had the distinct pleasure of knowing and collaborating with [Pirronne Yousefzadeh](#) over the past eight years. She is always busy working inventively, specifically and even better, always hungry for ways to deepen communication between audience and artform. She is a rare gem- a true actor and playwright's director, a listener in every way. But don't take my word for it- read on and catch her work currently in *The Tenant*, and coming up at the 2011 *New York Musical Theater Festival*.

JODY: *Why do you make theater?*

PIRRONNE: Wow, you're not holding back on the tough questions! For so many reasons. At the end of the day, I think I make theatre because every time I work on a play I learn something new about being a human being. Which is really, really hard, by the way. We all know that. There's something in the creation of a world, and the unpacking of a character's intentions with an actor that seems to open up my brain and heart to a new, unique and specific facet of the human experience. In short, it opens up my capacity for empathy, and that can't be a bad thing in this day and age. Particularly given the fact that even on a good day, it's pretty hard to be human.

JODY: *What stories and methods of storytelling interest you?*

PIRRONNE: Gosh, so many stories, and so many methods. *The Tenant* is pretty present in my mind these days, and I think it rekindled my love for site specific work. I can't say that I'm interested in a particular kind of story, or just one kind of theatricality. As long as the form and content feel connected and the work is pushing into some uncharted and important territory, I'm down. I'm interested in the music and rhythm of language-based plays (but aren't all plays language-based?) as much as I love the visceral physicality of plays like *Big Love*. At the end of the day, I want to be engaged (and engage audiences) from the head, heart and gut. However a playwright or a piece of theatre does that, as long as there's something there that I find meaningful, emotional, and human, I'm usually deeply interested.

JODY: Let's talk about some of your recent work. Tell us about the show you took to the Berkshire Fringe that was also part of [Ars Nova's 2010 Ant Fest last year: What Happened to Bill Viola?](#) by Cory Hinkle, and [Jack Perry is Alive \(and Dating\)](#) premiering in the [New York Musical Theater Festival?](#)

PIRRONNE: Two very different projects, for starters! *Bill Viola* is, within the reality of the play, the creation of Violet Foster, a video/performance artist who has been on a long search for Bill Viola. But really, it is about her search for her own sense of artistic identity. The show is very, very funny and tongue-in-cheek, and both pokes fun at and takes its hat off to many performance mediums and genres. It's a packed hour of full-on entertainment with a very touching and relevant message at the heart of it, about the difficult and sometimes painful nature of finding meaning through one's art.

Jack Perry Is Alive (And Dating) is the story of its title character, as he finds himself down and out when it comes to finding love in New York City. After his coupled-up pals repeatedly attempt to match him up with someone special, in this one-day-in-the-life musical, we bar-hop, cab-stop, and heart-flop with Jack as he pursues the mysterious source of a romantic text message. Also an amazingly funny and entertaining show (with whip-smart and witty book and lyrics by Harrison David Rivers & Daniella Shoshan, and fantastic music by Julia Meinwald), *Jack Perry* also has something very human and relevant at its core: that finding love is all about opening oneself up to the possibility of it, however terrifying that may be.

JODY: I LOVED attending? seeing? participating? in [Woodshed Collective's The Tenant](#). What was it like directing a giant site specific piece like this? (Congratulations on the sold out run!)

PIRRONNE: Working on *The Tenant* has been an amazing experience. I hadn't had a chance to do any site-specific work since graduate school, and I really enjoyed that part of my training, so I was glad to draw upon it in this project. The process was really unique, in that I spent several weeks of rehearsal deeply immersed in the one plot track I was directing (written by the fantastic Sarah Burgess). In tech, I needed to expand my point of view to include a much bigger picture, and the other plays/tracks taking place all over the building. As a director, I'm usually working on all of it all of the time, so this was an unusual transition in that way. It served to highlight the importance of collaboration with directors Teddy Bergman and Stephen Brackett, as well as the other two associate directors, Mia Rovegno and Andrew Scoville. And as we had to troubleshoot and work out kinks across two, three, or even four different tracks, I learned just how great it is to get directors together on one project: The more brains the better, you know? I think it should happen more often.

JODY: Mentors, inspirations, anything that fuels your work:

PIRRONNE: The most obvious mentors are my teachers from grad school: Anne Bogart, Brian Kulick, and Robert Woodruff. Andrea Urice, a professor at Washington University in St. Louis, was the first teacher to ever believe in me as a director, and she taught me much more than I can say in this interview. Some of my very favorite collaborators (and greatest inspirations) include some pretty brilliant writers: Lauren Feldman, Cory Hinkle, the amazing writing team of *Jack Perry is Alive (And Dating)*, and Rachel Bonds. The Rude Mech's *The Method Gun* has been churning in my brain ever since I saw it last winter. I learn something new about directing every time I see something directed by Annie Kauffman, Tina Landau, Les Waters, and Leigh Silverman, among so many others. Oh, and of course Charles Mee: I can't get enough of his work, either.

JODY: Thing you would make if you could make anything:

PIRRONNE: If I had my druthers, I would work in an ensemble-based process pretty much all the time, or as Deb Stein put it, "true collaborative creation." I think she hit the nail on the head with her article on Howlround

- I won't try to reiterate that here, because she said it much more eloquently than I ever could. Oh, and you can add her to the list of inspirations, too!

JODY: *What advice would you give to aspiring directors?*

PIRRONNE: Here's the advice I've been given that's stuck with me most:

Make work wherever you can, whenever you can. Find collaborators you believe in, and cherish those relationships. And with every project, find some aspect of it you're really passionate about; you can't direct without feeling that passion, zeal, excitement.

Read plays. See as much theatre, dance, performance art, etc. as you can.

And when it comes to fellowships and internships (if you like that sort of thing): if at first you don't succeed, apply, apply again. Some of the most fulfilling fellowships and experiences I've ever had came after two, three, even five attempts, so I truly believe that you can't have an ego about reapplying.

But most of all, don't wait for someone to give you a directing job. Create opportunities for yourself, and the rest will follow.

Pirronne Yousefzadeh is a New York based theatre director. Recent projects include *What Happened to Bill Viola?* by Cory Hinkle, *They Call Him Young Lou* by Daniella Shoshan, and *Grace, or the Art of Climbing* by Lauren Feldman (Barrymore Nomination, Outstanding New Play).

Her work has been seen at The Public/Joe's Pub, Soho Rep, Playwrights Horizons (Sam French Festival), Ars Nova (ANT Fest '09 and '10), Ensemble Studio Theatre, The Cherry Pit, Atlantic Theater School, Bowery Poetry Club, Collective: Unconscious, Emerging Artists Theatre, Williamstown Theatre Festival, Actors Theatre of Louisville, Milwaukee Rep, Power Plant Productions, Walnut Street Theatre, Philadelphia Shakespeare Theatre, and Hangar Theatre, where she was a 2006 Drama League Directing Fellow.

Pirronne has assisted Anne Bogart, both on *Who Do You Think You Are* (SITI Company), and at the 2007 Training Intensive in Saratoga Springs, where she trained extensively in Suzuki and Viewpoints. She has also assisted Leigh Silverman (world premiere of *Coraline*), Tina Landau (world premiere of Paula Vogel's *A Civil War Christmas*), Anne Kauffman, Kip Fagan, Aaron Posner, Eleanor Holdridge, and Joseph Hardy, among others.

Pirronne received her M.F.A. in Directing from Columbia University, where she was a Shubert Presidential Fellow and Matthews Fellowship recipient. She studied with Anne Bogart, Robert Woodruff, and Brian Kulick, and directed *Big Love* by Charles L. Mee, *Fool for Love* by Sam Shepard, and several devised pieces.

Pirronne trained at Shakespeare's Globe in London, and graduated summa cum laude with a B.A. in Theatre and English Literature from Washington University. She is an Emerging Artist of Color Fellow at New York Theatre Workshop, 2010-11 Resident Director at Ensemble Studio Theatre, New Georges Affiliated Artist and member of The Jam, member of the Old Vic/New Voices Network, and an alumna of the 2009-10 Soho Rep Writer/Director Lab and Drama League Directors Project. Pirronne has been a guest artist at the UCSB Summer Theater Lab, led by Naomi Iizuka, and has taught for education programs at McCarter Theatre, Two River Theater Company and Play Group Theatre. She recently joined the faculty at Bard High School Early College, and continues to train in Suzuki and Viewpoints with SITI Company.