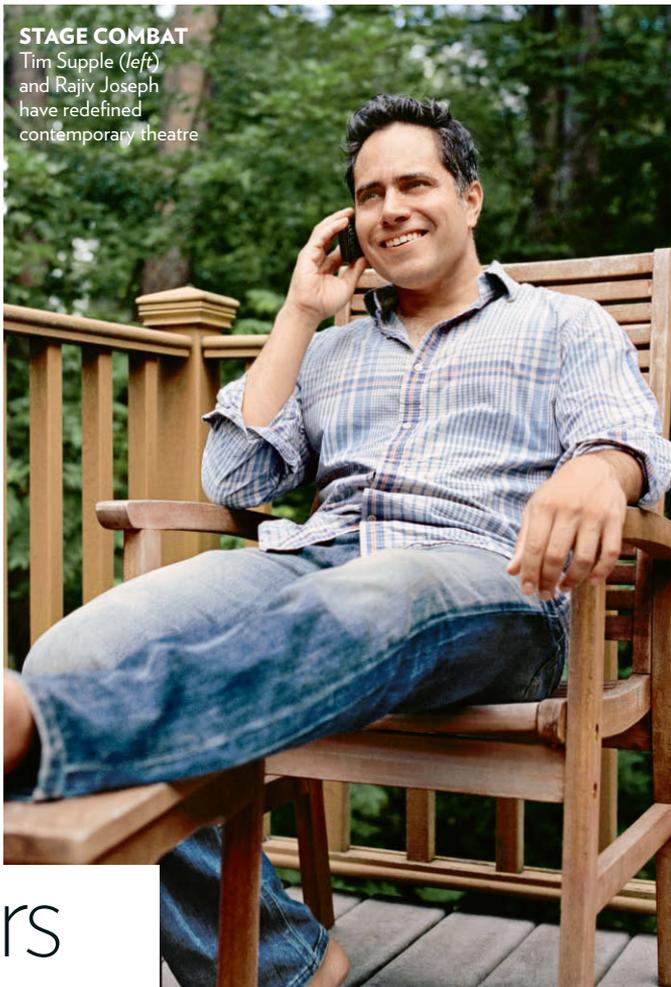




CONVERSATIONS



STAGE COMBAT
Tim Supple (left) and Rajiv Joseph have redefined contemporary theatre

The interpreters

For theatre stalwarts **RAJIV JOSEPH** and **TIM SUPPLE**, the stage is an infinite space, a cradle for the impossible. It is where the world as we know it is shattered, and then reimaged

Between them, they have tackled everything from war-torn Iraq to a valiant South Asian adaptation of a Shakespearean classic. Playwright Rajiv Joseph's awe-inducing debut, *Bengal Tiger At The Baghdad Zoo*, set at the height of the Iraq invasion, was a Pulitzer Prize finalist in 2010, and theatre director Tim Supple's star-studded career has included a Best Director award from England's Theatrical Management Association (TMA) and stints at the Royal National Theatre and Young Vic. (Supple's most recent project is an adaptation of *One Thousand And One Nights* with the celebrated Lebanese author Hanan Al-Shaykh).

But the similarities end at the multiple awards. Joseph, 38, was born to a Keralan father and American mother (of French and German descent) and raised in Ohio. Fifty-one-year-old Supple's grandparents were Jewish refugees from Russia who settled in the UK. What unites the young playwright and the seasoned director is a persistent desire to evolve.

Here, they discuss their work, the inevitable intersection of drama and politics, and why they recommend stepping out of comfort zones. Edited excerpts from their exchange:

UNCHARTED TERRITORY

Tim Supple: I usually start with the idea of a journey into a culture or a place that I don't know. When I started travelling in India in 2005, I didn't know what I was going to work on, though over time it became clear that it would be *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. That discovery process for me is even more significant than the piece I work on.

Rajiv Joseph: I love the idea of wandering without knowing where you're going. Usually, I begin with a concept that comes out of a news article or a conversation. I enjoy the process of rewriting and allowing discussions in the rehearsal room to expand what I've already started. When we were working on *Bengal Tiger At The Baghdad Zoo*, I think I rewrote that last >

Photographed by TOM PARKER and KEVIN TRAGESER

scene about 100 times between 2009 and 2010. It was exciting and frustrating.

TS: Yes, theatre has to be a process of collaboration. One of the main influencers of how well a piece of theatre works is how well the people have worked together. And even though you and I are on different paths in terms of mechanics, the process we go through is very similar.

RJ: Tim, are you a musician?

TS: No, I really have no skill [laughs]. I've never been a writer, musician or choreographer. But I suppose that is the essence of what a director is—someone who will harness the specific talents of people and put them together in a form that works.

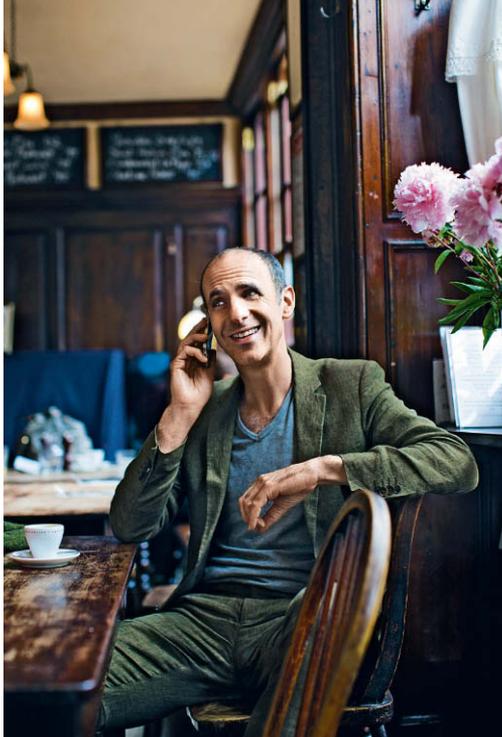
LEAPS OF FAITH

RJ: To think that a relatively unknown playwright could write a drama about the Iraq war and get it produced on Broadway seems unlikely. I first wrote *Bengal Tiger...* in graduate school [at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts] and entered it in a 10-minute-play contest, but no one appeared to respond to it. So it sat in a drawer for two years, and I thought, "I like this, I don't know why no one else does." Eventually, I decided to expand it, and I'm glad because it turned into one of the most creative experiences of my life. [In addition to being a Pulitzer Prize finalist, Joseph also received the Whiting Writers' Award in 2009, an honour annually bestowed on 10 emerging writers.]

TS: Any risk that works needs some amount of luck. If it doesn't, you don't tend to see it as a risk—you see it as 'that stupid mistake'. In my 27-year career, I've stepped away from a situation that was comfortable and successful several times.

POLITICS AND PROSE

TS: When I left university in the mid-'80s, I wanted to create work that was directly and confrontationally political. Now, the politics of what I do are complex and deeply infused in the process by which I make a work. For example, the politics of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was really the politics of working with people from different linguistic, cultural, religious and



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—TIM SUPPLE

caste backgrounds in India. When we put it on stage and brought it to audiences in the West, it was about the audience confronting different aspects of India than they previously knew—non-Bollywood, non-Gandhian. Additionally, we took Shakespeare away from a certain European-centric way of acting.

RJ: I like that you used the word 'infused'. Because it never is just about A and B. One of the hazards of tackling politically charged subjects is [writing] something that's trying to instruct a particular point of view.

TS: I would agree with that—maybe not 20 years ago [laughs], but now I do. My adaptation of *One Thousand And One Nights* was intensely political. I travelled to the Middle East intermittently between 2006 and 2009, visiting countries including Egypt, Syria, Jordan and Lebanon on a crest of the wave before the revolution. Our rehearsals (which began in 2011 in Fez, Morocco) started as soon as the revolution hit. I have a few encounters that stick deeply in the heart. One of them was working with an actor in Jordan, a Palestinian refugee, who was in tears because she knew I was travelling from Amman to Ramallah, and she was saying, "Isn't it amazing and ironic that you have the freedom to travel and tell our stories? Because we don't."

ARTISTIC EVOLUTION

RJ: I'm working on my first musical—I was hired to write an adaptation of *Peter Pan*. It's a gorgeous story, but a dark tale. I sometimes feel constrained because of the existing text—I'm used to having my own script. But I like working on stories that have a wide range of pace. I enjoy the challenge of trying to do a different type of play from what I've done before. To deny myself that becomes boring.

TS: Yes, that's also becoming essential for me. As soon as you become good at something—if you do something well once—you only get offered that.

There was a time when I created some exciting work for Christmas shows here in England, and before I knew it, that's all people offered me. It also happened with Shakespeare. So I had to run a mile.

RJ: I guess it's important to be doing things that you're not quite sure how to do. ■

—As told to
Aarti Virani

