

# Making an impact

MT Space theatre company's artistic director, Pam Patel, embraces new challenges – and isn't afraid to put her own story on stage

BY BARBARA AGGERHOLM

Should I marry this man I love or should I not?

It's an unusual question to pose to strangers, but Pam Patel, a trained singer, actor, director and artistic director of Kitchener's groundbreaking MT Space theatre company is far from ordinary.

In her one-woman show she performed in 2015 in New York and Kitchener, Patel showed the quandary she faced coming from a traditional East Indian family and falling in love with a man outside her culture.

In "The Art of Getting Married," she took the audience along on a roller-coaster ride while she looked at the relationship's pros and cons, described blind dates set up by relatives and family friends and talked about the success of her own parents' arranged marriage.

"It was more about negotiating that relationship between him and my parents who were hoping I'd marry someone Indian,"

says Patel, who was born and raised in Canada, primarily Cambridge.

Then there was the white man she'd fallen in love with, an engineer who grew up in a small town in a family whose social values she shared; a lover of travel who understood how important her culture was to her and what it meant to be an artist.

In her play, Patel danced to music from popular Bollywood movies that portrayed their meeting, falling in love, courting and proposing. The scene ended abruptly with a grandmother character shaking her finger and exclaiming: "Not acceptable."

A strict teacher character used a slide show to give a brief lecture on the history of her family. "For 3,000 years, your family has been in the state of Gujarat, India, and marrying other Patels" (a caste name), the character intones. "Are you going to screw it up?"

Finally, Patel sang a Puccini aria in which the daughter pleads with her father to allow her to be with the man she loves.



Pam Patel has big plans for the MT Space theatre company as it searches for a new home.

PHOTO BY ALISHA TOWNSEND



Earning the blessing of Pam Patel's parents didn't come easily but Colin Umbach eventually won them over. On their wedding day, he arrived in style, on horseback.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANDY WRIGHT  
OF DEADFLY MEDIA

Then "I raised the question: 'Should I be with this man or not?'"

Sounds tricky, doesn't it? But Patel doesn't shy away from tough questions, tough decisions; a chance to laugh at life, examine it in detail and persevere for what she wants. Neither does the man she loves, Colin Umbach.

"Colin came to the play. He thought it was great," Patel says. "He said, 'This is some of the best acting I've seen you do. You're so natural.'"

So how does a guy follow an act like that? Well, he stands up at the end of the play on Sept. 24, 2015, at IMPACT15, a biennial international theatre festival organized by MT Space. No one but his good friend Trevor Copp, an MT Space actor who had introduced him to Patel, knew what he was doing.

"People who know me, I'm an introvert

and don't do anything too outrageous. I don't put myself out there that much," Umbach says today.

But that night was something else entirely. "For those who don't know, I'm the white guy in the show," he told the audience. "We've grown to love each other."

And then the big surprise: "I went to see your parents and got their blessing," Umbach said to Patel. And then, getting down on one knee, he proposed to her. "I was so overwhelmed," Patel says today. "I realized I didn't answer and then I said, 'Yes, yes,' and I jumped up."

The blessing of her parents – Hasmukh and Madhu Patel – was important to the couple, Umbach says. He and Patel had been seeing each other for eight years before they married.

"They're great people, but they had expectations for Pam and I didn't really fit in," Umbach says. "I totally get it. They're in a country where they want to preserve their way of life. It's hard to do when kids



assimilate in the dominant culture."

"They're traditional parents in an Indian family," Patel says. "But they're also not so traditional that my brother couldn't be a police officer (in Toronto) and I couldn't be an artist."

Their wedding was a beautiful Hindu ceremony that went on for several days. On the wedding day, Sept. 3, 2016, Umbach was led in a procession on a big, white horse. He wasn't a horseback rider and this horse had never been in a wedding procession before.

"The horse was big and not used to an Indian wedding with loud music and a slow procession," Umbach says. Both groom and horse managed to stay on track.

"It was really fun for everyone. Some people thought it was like a Bollywood movie," Patel says.

"After we got married, I feel like Colin and I found our own. We create our own way of doing things, which does bring together both cultures, but more heavily mine," she says with a smile.

They celebrate Thanksgiving and Diwali

with their families. Umbach has learned some of the dances at cultural events. He has shown her his family cottage, built by his father and grandfather.

Patel is looking forward to a trip to India this winter where she will show her husband the part of the country where her family's small village and her parents' sugar cane farms are located.

"I feel there's something about land and having your feet on that earth," she says. "I thought if we have children, I'd like to have frequent trips to India. It will help them learn the language (Gujarati)."

She's also working on a second act for her "Art of Getting Married" play that she hopes to present in the 2018-19 season.

Patel, who turns 34 in January, is thinking about space.

"You know what I really want to do, what I think of every single day?" she asks, sitting in the living room of the couple's Kitchener home on a cool, fall day.

"I want to find a home for MT Space, not just for us but a home for a lot of other arts organizations that don't have a home."

It's a particularly urgent need for MT Space, a growing, professional, not-for-profit multicultural theatre – thus MT – company founded in 2004 by Majdi Bou-Matar, the gifted theatre director and performer who immigrated to Canada from Lebanon in 2003. The group, which creates, produces and offers performances and events reflecting Waterloo Region's cultural diversity, has performed in locations across Canada and in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon.

After 13 years in part of the repurposed Bonnie Stuart shoe factory on Whitney Place in Kitchener, the theatre company received a notice last summer to vacate.

"We'd been thinking of a permanent home and a long-term plan. This kind of lit the fire. Even if we don't have a studio, we need an office," Patel says.

Thanks to Joe Mancini, director of the



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Working Centre, the company was able to relocate to a spot in the Working Centre's newly opened space at 256 King St. E. in Kitchener, she says. MT Space has an office and a section of the shared workspace in the "Underground." Supportive housing units are upstairs.

Patel is grateful to the Working Centre for the interim home. "They're very generous."

But the need for rehearsal and performance space is acute for an accomplished theatre company that has seven streams of activity. It creates, produces and tours new Canadian works; presents biennial IMPACT festivals with artists from home and around the world; creates theatre for social change; and works with immigrant and refugee performers, offering more in-depth theatre training in the MT Space Young Company. It also acts as an incubator to help artists create their own works.

"MT Space is huge. We're like a beast.

When I tell people about our seven streams of activity and all the support and where we go, they say, 'You do that much?' We have our fingers everywhere," Patel says.

"It feels like we're physically shrinking while we're artistically growing. We are starting to get not just recognition but honourable mentions across the country."

Patel is anxious to see what transpires with the City of Kitchener's idea to establish a "creative hub."

"The City of Kitchener and Waterloo have been hearing from artists that there is a serious lack of affordable space here and we need a home for ourselves," she says.

"International guests are blown away by Kitchener and animated by the six days of IMPACT," Patel says. "We have to pull all the resources we have to make it happen. If we just had the valuable resource of space, imagine how animated Kitchener will be."

Patel, who took over as MT Space artistic

director in July 2016, is undaunted by the challenge.

"It really feels this is almost like a new beginning for MT Space," she says. "It's an exciting time to be an artistic director."

She feels fortunate that she had eight years of Bou-Matar's mentoring at MT Space.

After 12 years at the helm, it was time for a change, "to press the refresh button" so the organization stays fresh, new and bold, says Bou-Matar, who is now IMPACT festival's artistic director.

"For me and the board, she was an obvious choice," says Bou-Matar, who is concentrating on growing the IMPACT festival, which focuses on Indigenous and culturally diverse works from Canada and around the world. (IMPACT stands for International Multicultural Platform for Alternative Contemporary Theatre.) He's also taking on acting roles and other projects.

"It was very important to me to have

someone in the community, and who understood it. She was an excellent communicator and she was young and had a vision and she was associated with MT Space."

Not to mention the fact Patel is an extraordinary multi-tasker.

At the "best-yet" IMPACT festival in 2017, Patel acted, directed and co-ordinated conferences and the opening ceremony. "She has the power of six people all in one," Bou-Matar says.

Patel didn't always know she'd be an actor, let alone an artistic director of a cutting-edge theatre company.

In 2008, Patel, born in Niagara Falls and raised in Cambridge, graduated with a bachelor of music from Wilfrid Laurier University.

"I loved singing. I grew up always having Bollywood movies on in the background so I knew all the songs and the dance."

After graduation, "like most people, I was wondering what will I do with my life?"

In Waterloo, she continued private singing lessons and singing in the choir at St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Kitchener where she received a scholarship as one of the church's choral scholars.

She shone there too.

"She came to us through a high-school program and was obviously just bursting with talent," says Douglas Haas, church organist and director of music.

"The moment you meet Pam you are won over by her personality. And she could sing anything, very solemn sacred music up to gospel." She can improvise and has a "phenomenal" memory, he says.

Last May, Patel sang a spiritual at a concert honouring Haas's 50 years at St. Andrew's.

"At some point, she departed completely from the written page and went off on her own and did a magnificent improvisation of

the music," Haas says. "It brought the house down."

She will be among members of St. Andrew's choir who sing at a concert at the famous Carnegie Hall in New York City in June as part of a massed choir. Patel is an accomplished singer and has performed at the International Jazz Festival in Vancouver and the Stratford Summer Music Festival.

Today, she is board chair of NUMUS, a nationally known producer and presenter of new music based in Waterloo.

Patel studied improvisation and new music at university, a passion that later served her well at MT Space.

After graduation, she moved to Toronto, but returned to attend an MT Space performance at Centre in the Square in Kitchener as guest of a composer friend who worked with the theatre company. She saw "Seasons of Immigration," a production inspired by immigrants' stories.

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"I thought what a great show; look at this, someone is telling the story of my life and my parents' life. It was a beautiful show."

Afterward, she met Bou-Matar who learned she was a trained singer. "Can you act?" he asked her. "I can try," she replied. "I was impressed by her presence," Bou-Matar says. "Even before the time she came to the studio, the way she carried herself. She expresses herself very, very well. "There is something about her that was shining."

Bou-Matar offered Patel a part in a play in the Theatre for Social Change series. Then she took on two roles, the wife of a suicide bomber and the daughter of the filmmaker victim in the riveting play "The Last 15 Seconds," which premiered in September 2009.

"She did exemplarily well in this show. It also turned out to be one of our best hits. We toured all over the country and Mideast," Bou-Matar says.

The work revolves around an imagined dialogue between a famous Syrian-American filmmaker and the suicide bomber whose bomb, in real life, killed the filmmaker and his daughter in 2005 in Amman, Jordan.

The collaborative play received rave reviews. The Globe and Mail called it a "feast of innovation" and praised the "incredibly versatile" actors, including Patel whose performance was "stunning."

"It was a powerful experience," Patel says. The actors were different ages and backgrounds and had different experiences and perspectives. There was some friction among them at first, but later they jelled into a group that felt strongly this was a piece that must be seen.

"It taught me that without conflict and contradiction, you're not going to come out with a rich piece," Patel says. "We created it with blood, sweat and tears.

"It was more than a portrayal of a story by actors. It was clear this ensemble had changed in the process. . . . We created a very safe space for this very difficult



Pam Patel can often be found engaged in animated discussion at the Fresh Ground cafe on King Street in Kitchener.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALISHA TOWNSEND

conversation."

"The Last 15 Seconds" helped Patel decide her future. "This is the kind of art I want to do," she says. "It's socio-political, challenging, raises difficult questions."

Patel moved back to Kitchener where she felt the buzz of creative energy revolving around MT Space and the IMPACT international festival.

The artistic director of the Royal Manitoba Theatre Company was so impressed with her acting in "The Last 15 Seconds" that she was offered the lead role in "Romeo and Juliet" after an audition, performing alongside far more experienced actors.

"She was that good to be offered Juliet right away by one of the leading theatre companies in the country," Bou-Matar says.

It was an eye-opener for Patel to act in theatre with a much more top-down structure.

"MT Space is creative and everyone creates the piece together," Patel says. In Winnipeg, "actors were told what the director wants and we try to make it work. I can see why actors are very comfortable in that. It's the challenge of bringing the vision to life."

But it wasn't her. She wanted a part to play in the development of plays that advocate and "stir the pot and hold a mirror up to question. I feel that way as an artistic director."

Haas says the community needs MT Space and its vision and it needs Patel's dynamic leadership.

"For me, they're drawing attention to the problems, first of all of Indigenous people and second, at least as I see it, the problem of integration of immigrants in our community," Haas says.

They are issues "we should all be passionate about," he says.

"I plan to help her in any way I can to find space. I think her future is brilliant and I hope we can keep her here as long as possible. In order to keep her in this community, we have to give her full support." 

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