

## Can culture help us belong?

Nakib Narat in conversation with María José Ramos Acevedo

00:00:00 Nakib Narat

We like to believe that ageing can be the best time of your life. And as you grow older you should be getting bolder. Try new things, enjoy the increased leisure by having more fun. We still want to live life, love life, love your family and, you know, learning new skills is part of that.

00:00:40 Lowell Wallbank, Manchester Museum

In this episode of the Manchester Museum Podcast, we're talking belonging and ageing with Manchester Culture Champion Nakib Narat. The Greater Manchester Culture Champions Programme is a cultural activism and leadership scheme which seeks to increase access to the arts and culture for people aged 50 and over.

Nakib and his fellow Champions act as ambassadors to cultural organisations like the Museum, attracting participants to take part in, advocate for and shape cultural activity. By focusing on co-production across the cultural sector and democratising arts and cultural activity, with and for older people, the programme aims to improve quality of life and make the city region a better place to grow older.

Nakib is in conversation with the Museum's Culture Champion Coordinator María José Ramos, discussing how culture in its many forms, boosts connection and a sense of belonging.

00:02:00 María José Ramos Acevedo, Culture Champion Coordinator, Manchester Museum

What does being a Culture Champion mean to you? And how do you champion culture in Manchester?

00:02:07 Nakib Narat

Well, I'm sure there are far more influential champions of culture in our city, but my personal drive is to increase access to the arts for older people, particularly drama,

which is my first love, I guess. That's why I started the free drama workshops in South Manchester with Helen Hibbert, the coordinator of Chorlton Good Neighbours charity three years ago. Helen's a lovely lady who was honoured with an MBE from the Queen for the Welfare and Friendship Services that she's run for over 30 years. I have a regular group of over 40 people, they're multicultural and from many parts of the city. Their ages range from 50s to 90, actually there's one lady, Enid Woods, who's 92 now. None of them had acted before.

But we've now been on their 450-seater stage of the Home Art Centre in Manchester twice in plays that I wrote and directed. We've also been part of the Festival of Manchester and performed at outdoor venues like Chorlton Green, as well as many performances in our St Ninian's Hall Chorlton for hundreds of local residents. We like to believe that ageing can be the best time of your life. And as you grow older you should be getting bolder. Try new things, enjoy the increased leisure by having more fun.

Actually, María José, I feel really blessed to have found this opportunity of working with all the people, and talking of belonging, creating the productions and sharing them with local audiences has given my group and myself a really wonderful sense of belonging, to each other, to our community and to the City of Manchester.

00:03:54 María José Ramos Acevedo

That sounds great Nakib, absolutely. 90! You don't have anyone 100 years old, maybe you do in the future.

00:04:04 Nakib Narat

I hope we will.

00:04:05 María José Ramos Acevedo

Ageing and older people do seem to be increasingly talked about. What do you think?

00:04:12 Nakib Narat

Well, yes, ageing is probably the greatest demographic challenge in human history, which is wonderful in a way that we are growing older and staying healthier because of the lower birth rate and the fast-ageing population, it has, though, been described as a time bomb. It's fantastic that people are living older, becoming older and living longer and generally in better health than ever, so I guess you really need more opportunities for growth, connections and belonging for everyone to feel fulfilled.

When we're all 100 hopefully we will be creating havoc with Street Theatre and learning skills like circus skills. You know, it's brilliant that Manchester leads the world in ageing creativity. You yourself in charge of the Culture Champions, and you've always been a compassionate, caring city, and I've loved that aspect of our city since the 80s when I first moved to work here.

And, you know, Manchester Museum's own Director, Esme Ward, is a national leading light in the promotion of opportunities for older people, people who are largely, I have to say sadly invisible, marginalised. They're like an afterthought or sometimes even an embarrassing adjunct to the busy and dynamic lives of the young.

Well, I hope my, and Helen's workshops help to tackle this ageism, and I do love the fact that Britain's first Director of the new Creative Ageing Development Agency, Dr Virginia Tandy is also hosted by your museum, just like us Culture Champions.

00:05:52 María José Ramos Acevedo

Was it difficult, Nakib, to set up this theatre for older people group? Have you been involved in other arts projects?

00:06:03 Nakib Narat

Well, it wasn't straight forward to start it up, but I loved doing it, and in my experience, any community initiative is always welcome and supported by Manchester people and by the Council. In 2017 with City Council help, I originated and co-produced the Manchester Passion which was performed live to nearly 5,000 people and watched by 6 million people on the nationally loved TV programme, Songs of Praise and it was all from Manchester's beautiful Cathedral gardens, and we found the city officers and the local residents were just incredibly helpful in realising the event. We had a 50 strong choir, nearly 100 actors on stage, and I played Pontius Pilate.

00:06:48 María José Ramos Acevedo

Interesting character indeed. Were you always a theatre producer? Have you been always involved with theatre and drama?

00:06:59 Nakib Narat

No, I started out as a journalist. I was making features and documentaries for Radio 4, the World Service, and then I was with BBC Breakfast and finally Granada News. And then I kind of followed my other dream of being an actor and writer.

00:07:18 María José Ramos Acevedo

Anything we may have seen you in?

00:07:21 Nakib Narat

I've had featured roles in Coronation Street and other telly. I'm also in the current advert for a national Pharmacy Company. I've done tours for the Royal Exchange Theatre, have played John Proctor in the Crucible for five nights. Before the lockdown, I was in my own play, Ellen's Longest Night about Ellen Wilkinson, the extraordinary woman politician from Manchester in the 1940s, she was known as Red Ellen, because of her red hair and fiery passion for justice.

Ellen was born in great poverty in Chorlton on Medlock, was only four foot nine because of poverty and illness, and despite pain all her life she became the most powerful woman in the world. It's a great Manchester story. She was our first education minister in the 1945 Labour government. She led the denazification of the German education system and she was a lifelong fighter for women's rights, anti-colonialism and even founded and launched UNESCO. In all that time she had this brilliant sense of humanity and fun.

I really enjoyed researching and developing the play about Ellen and I got great support, wonderful support from the Arts Council England. We put it on for the Peterloo Festival and in the Central Library and also in the National Museum of Democracy.

00:08:44 María José Ramos Acevedo

Why do you think drama is good for people Nakib?

00:08:49 Nakib Narat

Performance is wonderful for boosting confidence. You enhance communication skills and this really helps people to facilitate their sense of belonging. You know you really belong when you become part of the wider community, and I really feel that having the confidence to accept who you are and your personal worth is the firmest basis for reaching out and becoming part of the greater community. And I think it's especially important for older people to try new forms of expression, like drama. Elders are often dismissed as unimportant, irrelevant in wider society that is so much ageism, and that's totally wrong as they are the backbone of families and the communities they live in. And they are the repository of historic culture, and as I'm getting older myself, I would also love to see a brighter outlook for ageing.

Performance is also a way of strengthening your sense of place and belonging as you can explore, you can challenge, and you can have fun with the stereotypes like that I just

mentioned and it all takes place in a safe environment. Helen and I normally run 10-week workshops which lead to a performance in the beautiful airy St Ninian's Hall, the Church Hall, and everyone is welcome so I hope anybody who hears this will join us, and during those 10 weeks the group bonds with new friendships, mutual respect and they grow.

So yes, I think that really helps with belonging.

00:10:37 María José Ramos Acevedo

You are British Asian, does this affect your sense of belonging?

00:10:45 Nakib Narat

Yes, my heritage is Indian from the Western Indian state of Gujarat, which is famous for its entrepreneurial spirit and amazing personalities like Mahatma Gandhi and Muhammad Ali Jinnah, who was the founder of Pakistan. It also has the most wonderful arts, crafts, festivals and food. So yes, it contributes to my identity. And although I've lived my whole life in the UK, I think belonging is about accepting everything about you as equally valid and connecting from that level, so I'm proud of my heritage, and I'm also very proud to be British.

00:11:24 María José Ramos Acevedo

Have you always felt like you belong?

00:11:30 Nakib Narat

I do now. But no, for a long time, especially when I was growing up in Blackburn, Lancashire was a climate of very turbulent racism and fractured communities. And, I had a very scary, insecure childhood. It's funny, actually, children today are all growing up scared in, with their lives, and it's not necessarily with racism. There is a lot of awful kind of situations with childhood and insecurity, but mine was about racism and I did have terrible doubts about belonging. But the more I learn about this wonderful country of Britain, the very welcoming and decent character of the British and the surprising connections with my heritage, and more, I do feel like I do belong here. People are often astonished to know that Black and Asian and Chinese people have lived here since Tudor times.

Heathcliff in *Weathering Heights*, one of my favourite books, was a Lascar or Indian sailor's child. Queen Victoria's favourite courtier was an Indian called Abdul Karim. People are really surprised to learn that there were four mixed race and three Indian members of Parliament also with a Gujarati background like me before the 1930s.

Dadabhai Naoroji, a Liberal, Sir Mancherjee Bhownagree, a Conservative, were all elected to Britain's Parliament, and the third, an amazing chap called Shapurji Saklatvala, was a communist elected from Battersea in the 1940s. He first came to live in Manchester and work for the Tata Company before becoming quite political when he saw the terrible lives of working people. In the 20s he spoke to rallies of thousands of people and they would sing things like "vote, vote, vote for Saklatvala, the Sak is the man who gives us bread and jam and will go hungry nevermore." He was really amazingly popular and there was huge support for the Republicans in this country in the Spanish Civil War, because you know people didn't feel, they were quite political, and Saklatvala was such a popular man that a brigade, fighting brigade, was named after him that fought against Franco in the Spanish Civil War, so had kind of international kind of celebrity. Sak was imprisoned for inciting the workers to disobey the army during the General Strike of 1926, he was elected three times to parliament, and I wrote a Radio 4 play about him.

Also, Ben Kingsley, Dev Patel, fellow, also from Gujarat, and very interesting, a lot of people don't know this, but Princess Diana and her sons, Harry and William, have a Gujarati heritage, from a lady called Eliza Kewark.

00:14:29 María José Ramos Acevedo

Really?

00:14:30 Nakib Narat

Yes, she was the Indian housekeeper to Diana's ancestor Theodore Forbes in Surat, Gujarat, where my family is from, and obviously he had a bit of a relationship with her. But I like to say, you know, I'm Narat from Surat in Gujarat in *Bhārat*. They all end in AT.

00:14:56 María José Ramos Acevedo

It's amazing to realise how history, actually, as much as we know about history, we realise, I mean, we the global sense of humanity, we realise that is much more what connects us than what's dividing us. These are true, for humanity, to feel each other like sister and brothers. So could you tell me Nakib, maybe, about the times when you felt, maybe, unsure about belonging?

00:15:36 Nakib Narat

Well, yes, growing up in Audley Range, Blackburn that's kind of a buckle for my sense of identity. I went to a lovely little primary school and everyone played together. They were Christian teachers. They talked about love and had cosy harvest festivals, music

filled assemblies and then suddenly went to this secondary modern school and everyday was filled, I mean, these kids were the same kids they had just grown, and they'd learnt racism, or whatever, and it was just filled with vicious insults and assaults, physical assaults. And I don't know, but somehow kids learn racism as they grow older, they're more susceptible to bad guidance and it took me years to recover and discover that I could study and go to university and follow a normal, or I suppose, you should say middle class dream to become a journalist. But I went to school with kids who really didn't have as much as they do nowadays, and it's not really their fault and these children were cross-eyed, white children from malnutrition, hobbled by polio.

Blackburn was in rapid decline with factories closing, old industries collapsing, very poor and depressed, so breeding grounds for resentment and troublemakers accentuating racial differences. And, also the time for the National Front, Britain's most successful fascist party since Oswald Mosley, and you should, you could see the National Front marches everywhere and their name was all over the place, stuck up on walls, and you had the rabble rousing Enoch Powell, so that's where, how I grew up. You see with those, kind of horrible events and people.

And that's when I first heard the word 'Paki' and that's a real insult, it's like the 'N word' for Black people, and I'm shocked that people still use it and get away with it. You know even recently, Anton Du Beke, the dance presenter, he's thrived in the BBC even after insulting his co-dancers, the Asian Laila Rouass, by calling her 'Paki', and yet, you know he's still there.

00:17:44 María José Ramos Acevedo

What do you think could have helped you belong or feel like you belong as a child?

00:17:52 Nakib Narat

Well, I never really thought I did belong to any community as we lived in a predominantly white, working class part of town, and we were Asian, in our damp, two up, two down terrace, with outside loo. But because we lived there, and yet our social life in the mosque and so on, which I had to visit every day for lessons, was in the Asian part of town. I didn't really have any connections, particularly with either camp. Quite a big difference.

And it was only in secondary school where the racism was really horrifying. Not so much among community we lived in. Today, the racist differences are huge in Blackburn, and commentators say that community lives separate or parallel lives and their so-called white flight to white areas of Blackburn and Asians concentrated in, for security, in theirs. Even taxi drivers won't venture into each other's areas.

After the riots of 2001, the town was burnt, mobs fought each other, so probably where I grew up is probably the most segregated town in the UK, yet I don't, where I live, in

Manchester I don't see anything like that. I don't think anyone is naturally racist anyway. I mean only 30 or so years ago, Mahatma Gandhi was in Blackburn wearing his loin cloth, half naked, and he was cheered and greeted by thousands and thousands of welcoming local white people. And that was over, you know, well, it's more than 30 years now, of course, 30 years since I was in Blackburn.

The one kind of touchstone of shared humanity is education, and as you were saying, history, and I wasn't really learning about it in secondary school. It just, you know, the schools like that, they're just marking time and getting the kids off to factories eventually. So, I just read and read, about 5 books a week when I was a kid, and the library and Blackburn Museum and Art Gallery were like my second homes, that's where I really learned about common history. They're wonderful places for peace, solace, life affirming. In a maelstrom of fear and uncertainty for a kid, you know where, but you could actually lose yourself in the wonder, and find comfort in shared human experience and hope in museums like that, and that's real belonging, when you understand just how similar we are and how progress and survival is only through mutual respect and cooperation rather than false divisions from fear and ignorance, which is still going on like the Identitarians. Pretty big all over the world. You know one of them murdered 52 worshippers in a New Zealand mosque. Or the gunman who killed 22 Latinos in El Paso, Texas, because they felt their identity was threatened, it just never ends. But seem to be getting worse, so kids living in constant fear, mentally and physically diminished by racist attacks.

But you know, they can make you feel that you do not belong where you live, even where you were born. You feel alien, very lonely and it's now recognised that loneliness makes you physically and mentally ill, leading to shorter, unhappier lives. And the astonishing and sad thing is that such loneliness or longing to belong affects everyone, both the racist and the victim. And according to research today, the majority of us, incredibly, majority of us do not feel that we do belong. It's just really odd, isn't it?

It's been described as an epidemic of loneliness of the West, but only, I guess because it's the West where research is undertaken, it's probably true everywhere that there is a loneliness epidemic. And this epidemic has been followed by the horrible year of Coronavirus and that's made loneliness and disconnection worse because of lockdown and closing places to meet. It's even more important to address the problem, and I think that it's wonderful that the Culture Champions and, you know, people in Manchester make an effort to do that.

00:22:26 María José Ramos Acevedo

How do you think that can be done? Address, well, that is quite a big, big question. How do you think we could address loneliness?



00:22:39 Nakib Narat

See, I mean, I don't know really, but I hope if we continue to create the opportunities for connecting, especially older people who are definitely the most vulnerable to loneliness, it'll certainly help ease some of the pain. So, I do believe it's about connection, María José, it seems most people will do anything to avoid reaching out to make friends, because it might expose them to rejection. Do you know, I find it so odd that we will blast into space to find life beyond Earth, when most people spend their whole life never even getting to know their next-door neighbour.

I mean, this recent Mars Persistence [*s/c*] Rover mission, it is incredibly wonderful and a tribute to human ingenuity and vision. But going 300 million miles to the next planet at a cost of nearly £3 billion to make new friends, it's astonishing when he could just pop round to the neighbours for a chat, maybe for the first time that you've ever done in your life, you know, so belonging has to start with connecting, and that's the most difficult thing of all.

Most people do feel insecure about themselves and their self-worth, so the first step is to gain that confidence in yourself. And, I actually have seen it develop through the drama and the performance that we've been putting on as workshops. So, I think that's possibly one way to go.

00:24:10 María José Ramos Acevedo

That's great, and how do you think museums could tackle that loneliness and boost connection with people around you? This is another big question.

00:24:27 Nakib Narat

Yes, from my experience, actually I think they do that already. I think they provide a place which is safe, which is exceptionally high-quality experience, where you can understand about your past and know about the connections and, what I like about Manchester Museum, I'm not going to go on about Manchester, I just love Manchester Museum like most people do, who have grown up with things, the things they do go from earliest past and they even talk about the future in a lot of the exhibitions, and so just wandering through, and there's so many delightful things to look at, you know, things to do with the history of Manchester, like Maharajah the elephant or the tigon and you know it's just extraordinary little things but, I think museums already do it, I really do, that, you know, you can go there, you can spend the whole day and you can come out kind of refreshing your humanity and your belief that you matter as part of the whole, kind of, universal people.