

ROYSTEN ABEL

Roysten Abel was born in Kerala, South India. He started his schooling at the Good Shepherd International School in Ooty, and it was here that he started writing and directing plays. Later, when studying commerce at college, he realised that he could not forget his true passion. He quit commerce and enrolled at the National School of Drama, informing his parents after he had taken admission. Roysten graduated from drama school in 1994, and was accepted as an apprentice with the Royal Shakespeare Company, UK, in the same year. He returned to India in 1995 and founded the Indian Shakespeare Company. In 1999, he devised and directed *Othello: A Play in Black and White*, his first original work and a major turning point in his life. Roysten received national and international recognition, with his play winning the Scotsman Fringe First Award and then touring extensively around the world.

He then conceived and directed a spate of original works; some of these plays were produced in India and some in Europe. He also began to collaborate with out-of-work street performers (magicians, jugglers, impersonators, snake charmers, acrobats, musicians, puppeteers etc.). His other works during this period include, directing a play on the Italian filmmaker Federico Fellini in Rimini, Italy; *The Spirit of Anne Frank*, which starred the biggest female stars in the country; and his first feature film, *In Othello*.

Roysten then discovered the joy of creating theatre with musicians, which he considers a most pivotal moment in his career, creating *The Manganiyar Seduction* and *A Hundred Charmers* and *The Kitchen*, which toured Europe and Asia last year. His most recent production is *The Manganiyar Classroom*, which he has created as a step to setting up a unique alternative school for the Manganiyar Children.



Love Sydney Festival, love The Star

Celebrate Sydney Festival in style at Sky Terrace, Sydney's most luxe rooftop bar. Sky Terrace is open every night throughout the Festival, 8 to 26 January 2015.

For more information visit star.com.au/sydneyfestival

THE | STAR
SYDNEY | PRINCIPAL
PARTNER

80 PYRMONT STREET, PYRMONT | STAR.COM.AU
[f /THESTAR](https://www.facebook.com/thestar) [@THESTARSYDNEY](https://twitter.com/thestarsydney) [@THESTARSYDNEY](https://www.instagram.com/thestarsydney)

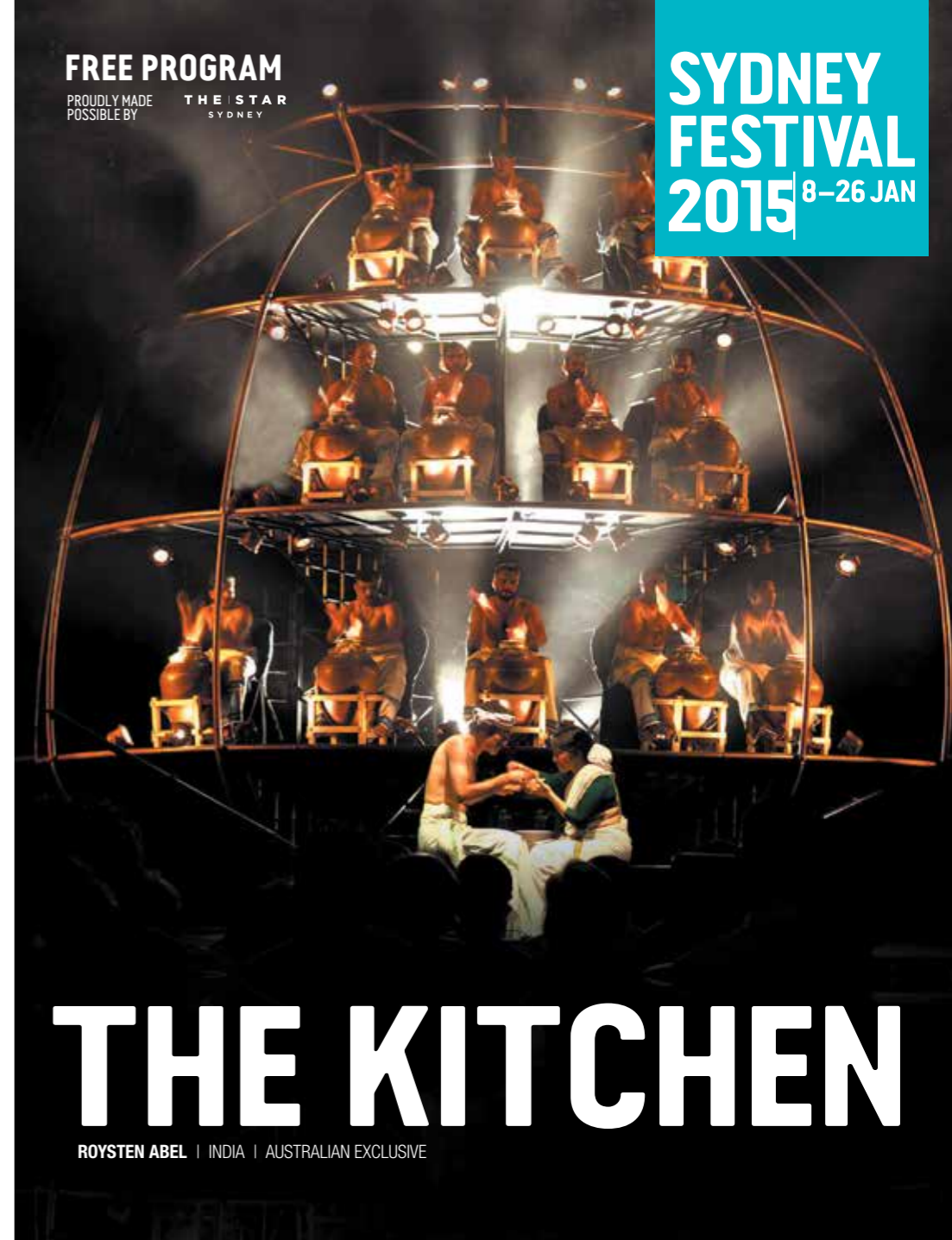
The Star practises the responsible service of alcohol.

FREE PROGRAM

PROUDLY MADE
POSSIBLE BY

THE | STAR
SYDNEY

**SYDNEY
FESTIVAL
2015** 8-26 JAN



THE KITCHEN

ROYSTEN ABEL | INDIA | AUSTRALIAN EXCLUSIVE

THE KITCHEN

ROYSTEN ABEL | INDIA | AUSTRALIAN EXCLUSIVE

**YORK THEATRE
SEYMOUR CENTRE**
22–25 JANUARY
75MINS NO INTERVAL

DIRECTOR

Roysten Abel

THE COOKS

Mandakini Goswami
Dilip Shankar

THE MIZHAV PLAYERS

Kalamandalam Rajeev
Kalamandalam Hari Haran
Kalamandalam Narayanan Nambiar
Kalamandalam Dhanaraj
Kalamandalam Ratheesh Bhas
Kalamandalam Ammannoor Ravikumar
Kalamandalam Vineesh
Kalamandalam Jayaraj
Kalamandalam Ezhikode Vineeth
Namboodhiri
Kalamandalam Sajith Vijayan
Kalamandalam Manikandan
Kalamandalam Saji Kumar

*Commissioned by Sydney Festival,
Auckland Festival and Holland Festival.*

SYDNEY FESTIVAL

sydneyfestival.org.au



PRINCIPAL GOVERNMENT PARTNER



PRINCIPAL PARTNER

Photos: KR Vinayan

ROYSTEN ABEL ON THE KITCHEN

INTERVIEWED BY JOEP STAPEL

Where did you get the idea for *The Kitchen*?

When I visited the grave of Rumi, the 13th century Persian Sufi mystic and poet, I was inspired by the look of his kitchen. There, the kitchen staff would cook for Rumi and his disciples, who gathered on a higher plateau. Further on was the place where the novices waited without being allowed to eat and drink until the moment when they could enter the community – they were also being ‘cooked’, in a certain sense, spiritually prepared. And then there was the ‘cosmic cooking’ of Rumi and the other dervishes, seated on their platform and meditating. Thus, the cooking took place on three physically separated levels. I came home with that image and knew I had to do something with it. For me, it was the ultimate kitchen.

The second source of inspiration was the drum on which the percussionists play in the performance, the mizhav. They say that the mizhav is the oldest percussion instrument in the history of man. It was a gift from the gods: according to the myth, the drum came rolling down from a gigantic anthill in the mountains. The status of the mizhav is exceptional; it is treated as a person – for instance, when it is worn out, it is given a dignified burial. The sound of the drums is unique and is the acoustic equivalent of the food being cooked. When they are played at the highest volume, they produce what we in India call Om, the sound heard when the universe is in motion – an immense sound.

What’s more, the mizhav is a drum that resembles a copper kettle – a wonderful similarity. The drums are placed on stage in a construction that in turn also resembles a kettle. In Hindu mythology, the human body is likewise considered a pot or kettle that holds the soul. The way that you ‘cook’ in your body determines how you develop as a person. It’s not for nothing that cooking is a very important theme in Sufi literature. We investigate the kitchen as a metaphor for the development of human life.

Was it immediately clear to you that there would be cooking on stage?

It’s a crazy idea, of course, but I really wanted cooking to be done for all of the visitors. It also has a ritual significance. In India, and certainly in the region I come from, a lot of cooking is done in the temples. The food is first offered to the gods and then to the temple goers. Something like that also happens in *The Kitchen*. It’s not about conveying a literal meaning, but about creating a purer experience by appealing to other senses: hearing, sight, smell, taste.

The cooks on stage are actors?

Yes, indeed! Even though they don’t act in the usual sense, they make an emotional journey during the performance. There is no real plot, but you get to see pieces of their story, the manner in which their relationship develops. You are given a peep into their kitchen, which is a very intimate place. But even though the performance is about their journey, it offers plenty of room for other interpretations.

THE MIZHAV

Mizhav or mizhavu is one of the oldest percussion instruments and an integral part of the Hindu temple performing arts of Kerala, South India, such as the Koothu, Kootiyattam and Nangiar Koothu ritual dances.

A large pot-shaped vessel made of copper or clay, with its mouth covered in stretched hide, this unique instrument produces a vibrant tone enriched with classical rhythm and purity. The mizhav is treated as a Brahmachari (a Sanskrit word meaning one who observes the vow of Brahmacharya, which includes virtues such as chastity and fidelity) and considered as sacred; it was originally only played by a person from the Ambalavasi Nambiar Community. It was a central part of all the solemn ceremonies like Annaprasanam (first feeding of the baby), Namakaranam (naming ceremony), and other customary Hindu rites.



It was also used in rituals such as the Upanayanam (sacred thread ceremony), which introduced male children into their formal education, and cremation of the dead, both part of the Brahmin culture. There is a traditional decree that if the mizhav became dented or damaged after some period then some solemn rites had to be observed. Repair and reusing this sacred instrument was not allowed.

Traditionally, the mizhav was made out of clay but it is now mostly made of copper. Its narrow mouth is covered tightly with leather and it is usually placed inside a wooden frame called mizhavana.

PAYASAM

(per show)

7 kilos of basmati rice

50 litres of milk

4 kilos of ghee

10 kilos of sugar

750 grams of almonds

750 grams of cashew nuts

700 grams of raisins

200 grams of cardamom