

## East Is East: How the comic Khans are still going strong after 25 years

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The play about the British Pakistani experience has become a stage mainstay and is now being revived by Birmingham Rep. Ayub Khan Din tells **Nick Smurthwaite** how it began as an exercise in memory – and a way to write himself a leading role

The way he tells it, Ayub Khan Din never set out to write one of the most successful plays of the past 25 years. It was a way to record precious memories from his own upbringing before it was too late.

“I started writing East Is East in [www.thestage.co.uk/news/production-news/birmingham-rep-reveals-50th-anniversary-season](http://www.thestage.co.uk/news/production-news/birmingham-rep-reveals-50th-anniversary-season) 1982 while I was at drama school, studying to be an actor,” he says. “My mum had been diagnosed with Alzheimer’s in her mid-50s, and it seemed, at the time, as if whole sections of our lives were disappearing with her memory loss. I wanted to capture something of my growing up in an Anglo-Pakistani family in Salford in the 1970s.”

So in between acting classes, the young Khan Din would “do some writing”. A big ulterior motive was to write himself a leading role as the bolshiest of seven siblings.

*The play has endured because people recognise the generational problems of the Khan family regardless of the racial element*

In true Pakistani tradition, Khan Din's father George, a chip-shop owner and the fictionalised linchpin of *East Is East*, asserted his position as head of the family at every turn. His mother was a white, chain-smoking, long-suffering Roman Catholic. So the writer and his nine siblings (reduced to six in the play) grew up mixed race and mixed faith.

What surprised Khan Din was how many people of all backgrounds came up to him after seeing the play and said: "That's my father." He says now: "One of the reasons the play has endured is that people recognise the generational problems of the Khan family regardless of the racial element."

*Continues...*



Ayub Khan Din



Nadim Sawalha and Paul Bazeley in *East Is East* in 1996. Photo: Robert Day

It opened at Birmingham Rep in 1996 – [where it is now being revived](#) – to critical acclaim and transferred to the Royal Court in London. The Daily Telegraph’s then lead critic Charles Spencer called it “one of the best pieces of Asian drama I’ve ever seen” and “an exceptional first play”. It was filmed in 1999 and there have been numerous revivals worldwide ever since.

For [Iqbal Khan](#), who is directing the Birmingham Rep revival, *East Is East* resonated personally when he first saw it in the 1990s. He says: “It was one of the first plays I’d seen that dealt seriously with issues around identity and the Pakistani experience in this country, which was my experience too, growing up in Birmingham.

“Confusion around loyalties was something that resonated massively with me; the alienation from your heritage and the struggle to hold on

to it. The play presents many different attitudes to the ambivalence towards the community in which you were growing up, and the ways in which you were identified and valued.”

The director will not update the 1970s setting of the play because he feels it is “more relevant now than ever”, but he says he will seek to “frame it in a way that speaks to a 21st-century sensibility”.

*Continues...*



Linda Bassett in East Is East in 1996. Photo: Robert Day



Imran Ali in East Is East in 1996. Photo: Robert Day

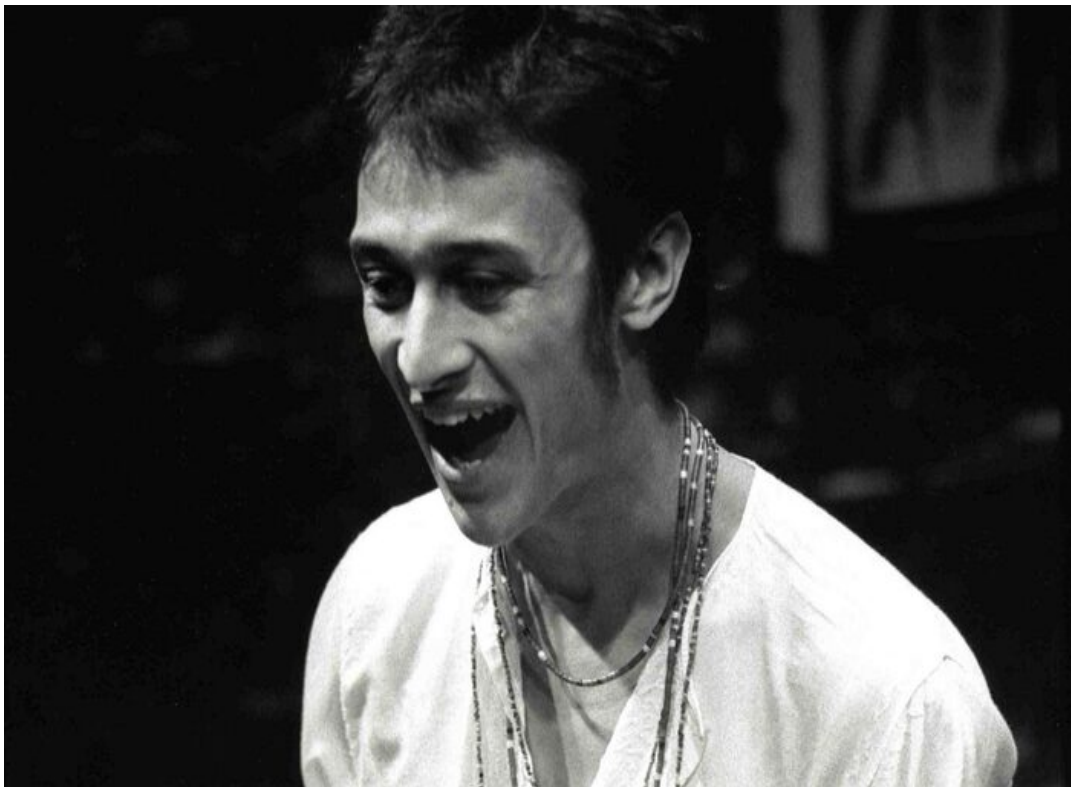
In the past Khan Din has railed against being categorised as a British-Asian writer. He says: “I never liked being labelled. It’s a constant battle to remind people who we are and what we can do. There has been some progress. There is a lot more diverse representation in EastEnders and Coronation Street now. Diversity has to be constantly monitored but, incrementally, it’s a lot different from when I started out.”

Khan Din left school with an O-level in art and went to work in his brother’s hairdressing salon. After reading David Niven’s inspirational autobiography *The Moon’s a Balloon*, he was emboldened to enrol in a foundation course at Salford Tech and then applied for drama school. “After that I wanted to be seen as an actor, and not be judged by my ethnic background. But, of course, I was only ever cast in Asian roles in soaps, long-running series and, occasionally, films.”

*Continues...*



Jimi Mistry in East Is East in 1996. Photo: Robert Day



Chris Bisson in *East Is East* in 1996. Photo: Robert Day

In 2007, he and his young family moved to Spain. His wife, British-Nigerian actor Buki Armstrong, was cast in the doomed TV soap *Eldorado* in the early 1990s. They liked the Spanish lifestyle, so they decided to emigrate to an area north-east of Granada.

My latest play is an Ortonesque murder mystery set in a curry factory. It discusses identity and self-censorship

On the phone from Spain, he says: “There are not so many distractions here, and I’ve done more writing than I ever would in London. I’ve written three films, a musical and two plays. I’ve been trying to get my play *The Welcoming Land* on for the past year, but I think people are afraid to produce it. It’s an Ortonesque murder mystery set in a curry factory. Its heightened reality enables me to discuss things you wouldn’t normally be able to discuss, such as identity and self-censorship. I didn’t think about who I was going to offend when I wrote it, so I’ve probably managed to offend everyone in the process.”

How has he coped with the linguistic challenges of living in Spain? “I’m not great at languages. I’ve done every course in the world but nothing ever sinks in. My teenage daughters, who are both bilingual, are embarrassed when I try to speak Spanish. I can make myself understood. Life has come full circle. I have become my father.”

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*East Is East* is at [Birmingham Rep](#) from September 3-25, then at the [National Theatre](#) from October 7-30

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## Birmingham

### East Is East

Ayub Khan-Din's bright gem of a comedy has been developed in a writers workshop held by Tamasha Theatre Company, in collaboration with the Royal Court, and premiered at Birmingham Rep studio.

Three cheers for this new voice on the theatrical scene, for Khan-Din observes what might be called the British/Asian experience with a clear eye and a delightful, sardonic wit.

He pulls no punches. Both the rigidity with which the first generation, Pakistani immigrant George Khan (beautifully realised by Nadim Sawalha) hangs on to his religious and cultural mores – often landing his adult and teenage children in bizarre situations – and the let-it-all-hang-out vulgarity and disaffection of much Western 'liberated' behaviour are the focus for his satirical pen.

The situation is complicated by the fact that George Khan married a tough, working class English wife (a strong portrait by Linda Bassett), so the cultural schism is brought very close to home. The struggle of their

teenage children, eagerly embracing the world of their school friends and tripped up at every stage by their father's expectations, is often hilarious as they treat the situation with the impudent irreverence of most teenagers.

Yet even as we laugh with them over their illicit bacon and sausage fry-ups and cigarettes, we sympathise with the emotional tug-of-war, and come to see that behind the sometimes ridiculous facade, their father's values of family and religious community hold something precious which is not easily shaken off.

But it is the quiet, gentle, eldest son Abdhul (Paul Bazeley), and surprisingly the English wife and mother, who bring us to recognise those values.

An excellent cast gives full weight to this sharp, lively script, and Kristine Landon-Smith directs with pace and vigour.

**Ann FitzGerald**

## Birmingham

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East Is East review in The Stage, October 31, 1996.jpg

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