

INSIDE | TEA WITH CHACHAJI



By Gwen Orell

Tony Mirrcandani, Raja Burrows, and Stephanie Klemons will perform *Tea with Chachaji*

“People argue, even in war. It’s what *The Diary of Anne Frank* is about. Should I stay, should I go. I can tell you right now in Haiti there are people arguing trapped in the rubble,” says the director.

That’s pretty tough talk for a children’s musical rehearsal, but *Tea with Chachaji*, adapted from the book *Chachaji’s Cup* by Uma Krishnaswami, is no ordinary children’s show. It is the latest offering from Making Books Sing, playing at Stanford Lively Arts on February 28 following performances in the boroughs of New York.

Director Rajendra Ramoon Maharaj, who is also on the advisory board of the company, is working with the actors on a scene in which a mother and son are walking to the border of India out of the newly established Pakistan—the scene depicts the Partition of India in 1947. The division of the former British Republic of India into the Dominion of Pakistan and the Union of India uprooted 12 million

people as Muslims and Hindus traveled across borders in what was one of the largest population movements in history; hundreds of thousands died. Many Indians today still find Partition difficult to talk about.

Why must the mother carry the teacup, the young boy wants to know, when they could have brought more food or water. Stephanie Klemons, as Amma, the mother, sings in explanation: “If this cup can cross the border without breaking/then I can cross the border without breaking.”

“You’re trying to make it sweet and tender. It’s not,” says Maharaj, a large man in an embroidered shirt and vest in bright colors. He sounds friendly, but he’s demanding, too. He pushes Raja Burrows, an operatic tenor fresh out of Northwestern, all eager, coltish energy, to get really mad at his mother. He pushes Klemons, a dignified soprano, to teach her son with her stern reply. The third time she says loudly, “Home,” and then

pauses before singing the rest of the line, “is wherever we have tea together.” It is stunning, and the song is gorgeous. It’s one of the more heart-wrenching scenes in the lively one-hour musical, but the show does not center on the boy’s experience of Partition; it focuses on his great-nephew Neel Gupta’s struggle to be a modern New York kid who is 100 percent Indian and 100 percent American. Neel wants to be the first American star Bollywood dancer, but he also wants to play basketball with his Hispanic friend Daniel (cheeky José Sepulveda). The catchy score of the show mixes the sounds of Bollywood, traditional Indian music (a sitar and tabla are part of the band), hip-hop, and uplifting show tunes, as Neel (Burrows), the main character, ages from 7 to 13. Dance, choreographed by Maharaj, incorporates some *kathakali*, some Bollywood, and some street.

Though Neel has heard the story of the teacup his great-uncle Chachaji brought to America, after he accidentally breaks

it horsing around with Daniel, he dreams he is his uncle during Partition—and the story becomes real. But Chachaji is in the hospital with chest pains. In the following scene, Neel describes his dream to his widowed mother, played by Soneela Nankani. Afterwards, Nankani turns to Maharaj and says, “I grew up with just my mom and me—this is my story. It’s so jolting.”

While watching the scene, playwright and lyricist Gwynne Watkins comes up with a new line. After the mother hugs her son, she should say, “You look so much like your father.” It’s an invigorating mix of personal talk, free-flowing creativity, and painstaking discipline.

The Company

Maharaj’s drive for clear, strong emotion from the cast is par for the course for the 14-year-old company dedicated to creating fulfilling musicals by professional theater artists based on children’s literature. The musical team for *Tea with Chachaji*, Gwynne Watkins and Denver Casado, come from the BMI Lehman Engel Musical Theatre Workshop. Director Rajendra Ramoon Maharaj helms *Little Rock* on Broadway next autumn and is an active regional theater director as well as the artistic director of Rebel Theater, and the cast brings solid experience from Broadway to Bollywood.

Artistic Director Barbara Zinn Krieger, formerly executive director (and the founder) of the award-winning off-Broadway Vineyard Theatre, was inspired to found Making Books Sing by a childhood excursion to see *Madame Butterfly*. “I didn’t understand a word. I just sobbed through the whole thing, but I knew I’d had a life-changing experience. I wanted to give that kind of transcendent experience to kids today.” Making Books Sing originally was an educational program at Vineyard; it split off after five years to form an independent, nonprofit theater company as it began incorporating programs for teacher development, family resources, and in-school residencies

encouraging children to explore their own musical theater creativity. Krieger chooses all the books and has written eight librettos for the company herself. Composer Denver Casado has been a teaching artist with the company.

You can see *Madame Butterfly*’s influence in some of the themes of Making Books Sing’s projects: homelessness (*A Shelter in Our Car*, based on the book by Monica Gunning, in 2007, directed by Maharaj) and friendship against the backdrop of the Holocaust (*The Butterfly*, based on the book by Patricia Polacco, in 2008, libretto by Krieger). All Making Books Sing’s stories share a strong central character who goes on an emotional journey, explains Krieger.

The Show

Watkins and Casado heightened that emotional journey by, in theatrical parlance, “raising the stakes” of the story. The book, according to Watkins, is small, quiet, and beautiful. To turn it into a musical, she and Casado added the element of Indian dance as a strong dramatic representation of culture. It also demonstrates character—Chachaji, we learn, was a dancer when *he* was young. An ensemble dance is a joyous finale. She and Casado expanded cues in the book: Chachaji’s story of the monkey god Hanuman (brilliantly choreographed by Maharaj with other cast members doing monkey jumps) is one page in the book but a major theme of the play. “I loved the idea of a god who doesn’t know he has powers,” she says. The book is about storytelling, and the musical brings the stories to life.

The role of a storyteller in *Chachaji* was what appealed to Tony Mirrcandani. It’s the Bollywood performer’s first musical performance. He deeply connected with the material: his own father left Pakistan for Delhi during Partition, riding on the top of a train and arriving “without a bean.” Mirrcandani’s flexible face, cultured voice, and mischievous moves help the audience understand why his young



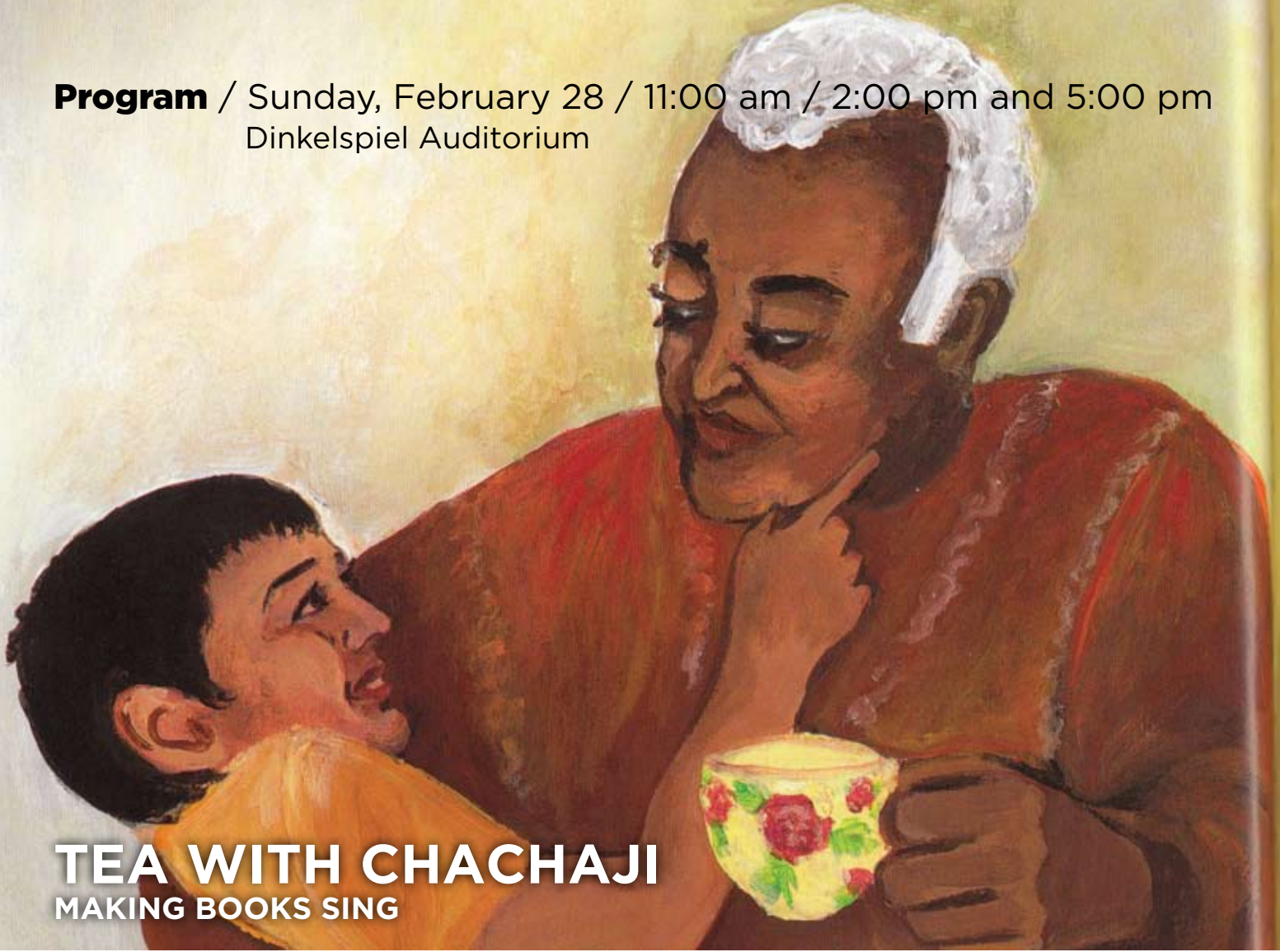
Director Rajendra Ramoon Maharaj in rehearsal.

nephew idolizes him. Burrows connected with the material, too—because like Neel, the character he plays, he is “just starting to find out about my Indian heritage and how that all fits together.” He was adopted by white parents at the age of eight months and grew up in Albuquerque, New Mexico. He has not been to India since then. Burrows is also putting together the pieces onstage—his training is largely in classical music, so Maharaj helps him hone his acting chops.

Maharaj’s own background connects closely to this show; his father is Indian and his mother is Caribbean. But, says Maharaj, “We all have stories about our moms, uncles, families...this is a story about America, about a family wrestling with many issues.” Watkins and Casado are both white, but Watkins connects through her Italian grandmother, who struggled to fit in as an immigrant child in America herself. For Krieger, *Tea with Chachaji* is an “immigrant story.” She adds, “When you’re specific, you reach people who have their own stories.” ■

Gwen Orell is a freelance writer in New York and a graduate of Stanford University. She contributes to Back Stage, The Wall Street Journal, The New York Times and many other publications.

Program / Sunday, February 28 / 11:00 am / 2:00 pm and 5:00 pm
Dinkelspiel Auditorium



TEA WITH CHACHAJI

MAKING BOOKS SING

PROGRAM

Barbara Zinn Krieger, artistic director, Making Books Sing
Tea with Chachaji

Book and lyrics by Gwynne Watkins
Music by Denver Casado

Based on the book *Chachaji's Cup* by Uma Krishnaswami, with illustrations by Soumya Sitaraman (2003, Children's Book Press)

Directed by Rajendra Ramoon Maharaj
Music direction by Tim Rosser

ARTISTS

Raja Burrows
Tony Mirrcandani
Soneela Nankani
José A. Sepulveda
Stephanie Klemons, *dance captain/
associate choreographer*
Elis Arroyo, *production stage manager*

We gratefully acknowledge the support of Jody Buckley and Mark Horowitz.

PROGRAM SUBJECT TO CHANGE. Please be considerate of others and turn off all phones, pagers, and watch alarms, and unwrap all lozenges prior to the performance. Photography and recording of any kind are not permitted. Thank you.

Program

Making Books Sing

BIOS

RAJA BURROWS (Neel) is thrilled to be making his New York City debut with

graduated from Rutgers University with a B.A. in modern dance and in genetics and microbio research. She appeared in the first national tour of *Bombay Dreams*. Since then she has been with *In the Heights*, first off-Broadway, winning a Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Ensemble Performance. Her journey

continued to Broadway, where she is currently serving as co-dance captain and understudy for the role of Carla. She has appeared as a featured dancer in a number of Bollywood hits, most notably *Jaaneman*, which featured her in the film's trailer! She is excited to be making books sing in this production with such talented and driven creative individuals. Stephanie Klemons is also proud to announce the recent creation of Katie's Art Project, a not-for-profit organization bringing art to kids in children's cancer wards.

Please visit www.KatiesArtProject.org to learn more.

TONY MIRRCANDANI (Chachaji) relocated to New York in 2007 after eight years in Bollywood, where he acted in blockbusters like *Gadar*, *Koi Mil Gaya*, *Virasat*, and *Market* and countless TV series, and after two years of touring

the United Kingdom, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand with the musical *Merchants of Bollywood*. In New York, he has been doing theater, feature films (*Today's Special*, *When Harry Tries to Marry*), and television (a re-enactment for *America's Most Wanted*). In March of this year, he begins work on his next play, Northern Stage's production of *Damascus*, which will run in White River, Vermont. Tony Mirrcandani loves the boundless energy of the fabulous city of New York and is grateful for the many opportunities the city and its people have given him.

SONEELA NANKANI (Anya) is absolutely thrilled to be working with the incredible Chachaji family! Her theater credits include *Archbishop Supreme Tartuffe* (Classical Theatre of Harlem, with André De Shields); *The Clay Cart*, *Comedy of Errors* (Oregon Shakespeare Festival); *Midsummer Night's Dream* (Classic Stage Company); Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (UC Riverside Department of Theatre); *Happy Days*, *The Cherry Orchard* (Schapiro Theatre); and *Seven Great Loves* (Sojourn Theatre). Her television work includes *As the World Turns* and *Child Brides* and she has appeared in the films *The Invisibles*, *Poonam Banarjee*, and *Nic and Marisa* and the webseries *May "Be" New York*. She received an M.F.A. in acting from Columbia University. Thank you, Walker, Gobind, Meena, and Helen, for your love and support.

JOSÉ SEPULVEDA (Daniel) is so excited to be joining the cast of *Tea with Chachaji* after going around the country and to Canada as Juan in the national tour of *Altar Boyz*. He just graduated from the University of Michigan with a B.F.A. in musical theater, where he was in *Rent*, *Tommy*, and *Carousel*. Favorite credits include Finch in *How to Succeed...*, Ritchie Valens in *Buddy*, and Mark in *A Chorus Line* (Wagon Wheel Theatre, Indiana). He wants to dedicate this show to his family in Puerto Rico because we all need to be reminded of how much where

continued on page 26

From the Artist

It is with great pride and pleasure that I introduce you to a talented new team of musical theater creators. Denver Casado has been a teaching artist/composer for Making Books Sing for many years, and I greatly admire his work in the classroom. Gwynne Watkins brings to their collaboration her expertise as a writer and editor and her sensitivity as a mom. Together, they have created a heartwarming and well-researched musical that I hope will stay with you long after you leave the theater.

The show that Gwynne and Denver have created is very, very exciting to me, and I know that our audiences will feel the same way.

—Barbara Zinn Krieger,
Making Books Sing

Making Books Sing! A recent graduate of Northwestern University, he performed in several operas and musicals, including *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Dialogues of the Carmelites*. He currently studies with Mark Oswald.

STEPHANIE KLEMONS (Amma) was raised in Colts Neck, New Jersey, and

Program Making Books Sing

continued from page 23 we came from is a part of who we are. So much love to Mami, Papi, Yari, Nelsito, all my family and friends, Pete and Jed at the Talent House, and the creative and production team for this amazing opportunity. Marriage Equality Now!

BARBARA ZINN KRIEGER (artistic director and founder of Making Books Sing) brings together her interests as an entrepreneur, arts administrator, educator, and librettist in her work for Making Books Sing. She is the founder and chair emerita of the major off-Broadway Vineyard Theatre, where she served as executive director from 1981 to 2002. During her tenure, the Vineyard and its productions earned more than 40 awards, including two Pulitzer Prizes and a Tony Award. In 1996, she launched Making Books Sing, for which she has written eight librettos. Barbara Zinn Krieger, who holds an M.A. in speech and theater from Columbia University's Teacher's College, was a drama teacher for over 20 years and is a recipient of the Opera America Distinguished Service Award.

GWYNNE WATKINS (book and lyrics) is a playwright and lyricist. Her previous work for children includes the original musical *Space Pirates!* (Garden Players, Forest Hills, New York), the three-play series *In Between Worlds* (Little Theater, Ridgewood, New Jersey), and *Wow! What Does That Mean?* an original Christmas pageant for Sunday schools. Gwynne Watkins is an alumna of the BMI Lehman Engel Musical Theatre Workshop and a member of the Dramatists Guild. A professional editor and writer, she lives in Brooklyn with her husband and one-year-old son.

DENVER CASADO (composer) is the composer of two full-length musicals (*Life on the Mississippi*, and *Just*

Like That) and five children's musicals (*America's Top Ensemble*, *Behind the Scenes*, *Space Pirates! Musicville*, and *The Big Leap*), all of which have had performances in New York. *Life on the Mississippi*, based on the Mark Twain novel, will be produced in 2010 at the Coterie Theatre in Kansas City and at the American Folklore Theatre in Wisconsin. His work has been featured at the Goodspeed Opera House, the York Theatre, the Flea Theater, and Symphony Space. Denver Casado is an alumnus of the BMI Lehman Engel Musical Theatre Workshop, holds a degree in music technology and composition from NYU, and is a member of the Dramatists Guild. He currently lives in the East Village and writes music freelance for TV commercials.

RAJENDRA RAMOON MAHARAJ is an Indo-Caribbean playwright, director, and choreographer. He is the Artistic Director of Rebel Theater. Regional credits include Syracuse Stage (*Godspell* and *Putting It Together with Tony Award recipient Lillias White and Chuck Cooper*), Freedom Theatre (the world premiere of *Walk Through Time*), Actors Theatre of Louisville (*Nightswim and Classyass*), St. Louis Black Rep (*Damn Yankees*), Arkansas Repertory Theatre (*Dreamgirls*, *Intimate Apparel*, *Little Rock*), Crossroads Theatre (*History of the Word*, *The Colored Museum*), Alabama Shakespeare Festival (*Sanctified*), Prince Musical Theatre (*From the Hip*), Theatre of the Stars (*Dreamgirls* with Tony Award winner Jennifer Holiday), The Goodman Theatre (*The Black Nativity*), and Portland Stage Company (*Master Harold...and the Boys*). New York City credits include The Public Theatre (*365 Days*, *Memphis Minnie workshop*), Classical Theatre of Harlem (*Marat Sade*), Lark Play Development Center (*Man Measures Man*, *Breathe*), New Federal Theatre (*Diss Diss and Diss Dat*), Rebel Theatre (*Ghosts*, world premiere adaptation), Making Books Sing (*Band of Angels*, *Shelter in my Car*, *Tea with Chachaji*), Amas Musical Theatre (*Bubbling Brown Sugar*, *Damn Yankees*,

Mamma I Want to Sing, *Magpie*), and HERE (*The Little Playhouse*). He has held artistic residencies with The Public Theatre, Freedom Theatre, Alliance Theatre, Kennedy Center, Crossroads Theatre, Lark Play Development Center, Arkansas Repertory Theatre, and Amas Musical Theatre. Written work includes *Little Rock*, *Mississippi Night*, *Diss Diss & Diss Dat*, *Twenty-Five*, *Gray*, *Children of the Dream*, and *BlackfootNotes*. He was the Assistant to the Director on the Tony Award-winning Broadway revival *A Raisin in the Sun*. Maharaj is a former director in training for the Emmy Award winning directing team at ABC's All My Children and has been featured in *American Theatre Magazine*, *Yale Review*, *New York Times*, *The Star Ledger*, *The NAACP Crisis News*, *Chicago Sun Times*, *Ebony*, *Arkansas Times*, *Uptown Magazine*, *Amsterdam News*, and *Variety* for his work in the American theatre.

TIM ROSSER (music director and keyboardist) is thrilled to be returning to Making Books Sing for his third year. He music directed *José Limón: The Making of an Artist* last year for Making Books Sing. He currently music directs for the Water Coolers (a corporate comedy act). Singers he has had the honor of accompanying in performance include Lisa Brescia, Jenn Colella, Liz Larson, Andrea McArdle, and Sarah Uriarte Berry. He also had the pleasure of working with the music team of *The Addams Family*, a new Broadway-bound musical, during rehearsals for its Chicago tryouts this past fall. He is the accompanist for the Blue Hill Troupe, a charitable Gilbert and Sullivan society in New York City. Tim Rosser is an alumnus of the BMI Lehman Engel Musical Theatre Workshop and is writing a new musical with lyricist/librettist Charlie Sohne called *The Profit of Creation*.

ELIS ARROYO (production stage manager) has been in theater for close to 20 years. *Tea with Chachaji* marks his second production with Making Books Sing. He has toured nationally and

internationally. Off-Broadway credits include *Celia* the musical and various productions at the Pan Asian Repertory Theatre, Irish Repertory Theatre, Ensemble Studio Theatre, Ballet Tech, and Pascal Rioult Dance Company, to name a few.

CORY EINBINDER (set and media designer) is the artistic director of Adhesive Theater Project (www.adhesivetheater.com), now celebrating its 10th year. Adhesive Theater Project is dedicated to collaborating with artists of all disciplines, particularly those with a nontheatrical background. His most recent set and video design credits include *The Government Inspector*; *NOIR*, *I*, *Object!* and *Chantecler*. He received an M.F.A. in performance and interactive media arts from Brooklyn College and currently teaches stagecraft at the New York City College of Technology, CUNY. In addition, Cory Einbinder is a freelance director and fight choreographer. He can't wait for his baby boy, Emmett, to be old enough to enjoy his first Making Books Sing production.

DOUGLAS COX (lighting designer) also designed *José Limón: The Making of an Artist*, *The Butterfly*, *A Shelter in Our Car*, *The Orphan Singer*, *A Band of Angels*, *The Upside Down Boy*, and *Bird Woman* for Making Books Sing. Other recent credits include off-Broadway productions of *Fool for Love*, *Hiding behind Comets*, and *Bold Girls* (29th Street Rep.), *Romeo and Juliet* (Shakespeare and Co.), *Rigoletto* (Baltimore Opera), *Aida*, *Macbeth*, and *Otello* (Syracuse Opera), and *Il Camponello* (Manhattan School of Music). His work in television includes projects for ABC, CNN, MSNBC, and NY1. He received an Emmy nomination for his work on NBC's 2004 election night coverage and his work in architectural lighting design has received the Lumen Award.

LESLIE BERNSTEIN (costume designer) has designed costumes for a wide range of theater productions.

Her off-Broadway productions include *Brothers Booth* (world premiere, Samuel Beckett Theatre); *Bad Girls* (New York City premiere), *Love in the Age of Narcissism* (Directors Company); *Hard Feelings* (Women's Project); *Women's Work* (Phil Bosakowski Theatre); and *The White Whore and the Bit Player* (Theatre Row Theatre). Off-off-Broadway credits include *Ghosts* (Rebel Theater Co., resident designer); *King of Clocks*, *Life's a Dream* (HERE); *The Marathon 2002: Series A* (New York City premiere, Ensemble Studio Theatre); *Six Available Men* (New York City premiere), *The First Course*, *The Beach Plays* (HB Playwrights); and *Life Happens* (New York City premiere), *Hedda Gabler*, *The Big Knife*, *The Happy End*, *Hopscotch*, *Shooting Gallery*, *Hot L Baltimore*, *Loot*, *An Ideal Husband*, and *A Month in the Country* (T. Schreiber Studio). Her regional/opera credits include *Godspell* (Syracuse Stage); *Intimate Apparel*, *Little Rock* (Arkansas Repertory Theatre); *The Opposite of Sex* (regional premiere, Magic Theatre, San Francisco); *History of the Word* (regional premiere, Crossroads Theatre, New Brunswick, New Jersey); *Italian American Reconciliation* (Emelin Theatre, Mamaroneck, New York); *Carmen*, *West Side Story*, *Guys and Dolls*, *A Little Night Music*, *Abduction from the Seraglio*, *La Cenerentola*, *Romeo et Juliet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Brevard Music Festival, North Carolina); and *The Sorcerer* (Purchase, New York, PAC). Her film and television credits include *The Opponent* (Lions Gate) and assistant costume design for *Law & Order* (original series), *All My Children*, *Guiding Light*, and *Della-ventura*. Leslie Bernstein is a graduate of Purchase College.

SARAH BIRD (prop designer) has been a prop person in New York for five years, working mainly on off-Broadway productions. She has designed for MBS's productions of *The Butterfly* and *Museum Trip*. She is very excited to be working on *Tea with Chachaji* and can't wait until the next Making Books Sing!

B. D. WHITE (production manager) has a long list of previous productions, including *Spain*, *Grace*, *Some Girl(s)*, *Frozen*, *Fat Pig*, *Runt of the Litter*, *A Letter from Ethel Kennedy*, *The Mysteries*, *The False Servant*, *Richard III*, *New Jerusalem*, *The Mercy Seat*, *Scattergood*, *Intrigue with Faye*, *Bright Ideas*, *Sessions* the musical, *The Distance from Here*, *What of the Night*, *Colder Than Here*, *Nixon's Nixon*, *The Wooden Brecks*, *Temporary Help*, *Cheat*, *Hard Feelings*, *The Strange Case of Mary Todd Lincoln*, *Nuyorican Stories*, *St. Lucy's Eyes*, *Leaving Queens*, *Underneath the Lintel*, *Sophie Tottie and Bell*, *Songs of Paradise*, *Buicks*, and *Monsieur Ibrahim and the Flowers of the Koran*. B. D. White has toured with Jam on the Groove, the Hip-Hop Dance Musical, the Core Ensemble, and the Elevator Repair Service production of *Gatz*. He is also the production director of the London-based live art company Lotos Collective.

UMA KRISHNASWAMI, the author of *Chachaji's Cup*, was born in India and now lives and writes in northwest New Mexico. She is the author of a dozen books for young readers. Among them are picture books including *Chachaji's Cup* and *Monsoon*, books for early readers (*Yoga Class*, *Holi*), and a middle-grade novel, *Naming Maya*. She is on the faculty of the Vermont College of Fine Arts' M.F.A. program in writing for children and young adults. In addition she is an eloquent voice for diversity in children's literature. Aline Pereira of PaperTigers describes as remarkable Uma Krishnaswami's "commitment to good books for children and young adults related to South Asia and the South Asian diasporas and to promoting understanding within and across cultures."

SOUMYA SITARAMAN, the illustrator of *Chachaji's Cup*, developed her unique style in California and works primarily in oil paint, mixed media, and installations. Her work reflects elements of Shivite artistry and nature. She lives and works in Bangalore, India. ■