

By MARGIE O'LOUGHLIN

Dreamland Arts is a 40-seat performance and teaching space at 677 Hamline Ave. N. It is right at home in this residential part of Hamline-Midway, blending seamlessly into the neighborhood. Attached to the small brick theater by underground passage is the home of Zaraawar Mistry, Leslye Orr and their son Sam.

The theater is the longtime vision of Mistry and Orr and it would seem that they have made their dream of "providing high quality arts programming in an intimate, accessible, community-friendly environment," come true.

What could you hope to see and hear at Dreamland Arts? A sampling of past events includes: children's stories from India; concerts the likes of The Enchanted Guitar Forest and Music from Around the World on traditional instruments; St. Paul Almanac Lit Fest; seasonal stuffed animal shows; and countless plays, readings and more.

The husband and wife team of Mistry and Orr goes back to 1991, when they met at the Children's Theater Company (CTC). Orr was in a two year internship program there while attending theater classes at the U of M, and Mistry was an actor in the company.

Orr, who is legally blind since birth, had moved to Minneapolis from Sioux Falls, South Dakota, and eventually worked for CTC for ten years as an actor, voice teacher and coach.

"Over time, I couldn't help noticing that I was the only actor with a disability, and that audience members with disabilities were few and far between," she said. She began to wonder about



Zaraawar Mistry (pronounced za-RA-wa, also goes by "Z") and Leslye Orr, co-founders of Dreamland Arts. (Photo by Margie O'Loughlin)

"the possibilities of disabilities", and set in motion the early formation of her dream of welcoming all actors to the stage and all persons to the performance.

Early on in her career she was cast as Annie Sullivan, the legally blind teacher of Helen Keller, in the Arkansas Children's Theater production of "The Mira-

cle Worker." She was the first legally blind person to play that role anywhere, and the experience was vitally important to her development as an actor.

Orr created "Hand in Hand," the story of what happened to Annie Sullivan and Helen Keller after "The Miracle Worker," based on letters they exchanged and lec-

tures they delivered. The play is part performance and part workshop, in which audience members close their eyes and learn to "see" using their other senses. Orr has performed it off and on since 1982 in the US, and internationally in Israel, Latvia and Lithuania since 2012 as a representative of the US State Department. She has

become recognized as an "ambassador of inclusion."

Mistry arrived in Minneapolis from India via Vermont, where he graduated from Bennington College, and California, where he earned his MFA at UC San Diego in theater. In addition to the work he did at CTC, Mistry has acted at MU Performing Arts, Mixed Blood and the Guthrie.

As the years went by, he became increasingly aware of his desire to work independently, and of his dream to mentor other actors in producing their own solo shows. To date, he has been a mentor to 15 artists from around the world and has drawn deep satisfaction from their successes. His own solo works, all of which are informed by his love of India, have been well-received by audiences of children and adults alike.

When Mistry and Orr purchased the Hamline Ave. property in 2005 that became their home and theater, it was "pretty dumpy," but they agreed that the basic set-up was just what they'd been looking for. The couple decided not to operate Dreamland Arts as a non-profit but as something better suited to their independent personalities, more like a Mom and Pop business. That way, they'd have the freedom to produce the shows and offer the classes they really cared about. After a year of hard work, the theater opened in September 2006 with a solo production of Orr's and they've just kept rolling since.

In their roles as married business and theater partners, Mistry and Orr identify themselves as either super-hero or side-kick.

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Theater

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Sometimes Mistry is the super-hero and sometimes Orr is—who the boss is depends on whose show it is. “We’ve learned,” Mistry said, “that ensemble creation is *not* for us.”

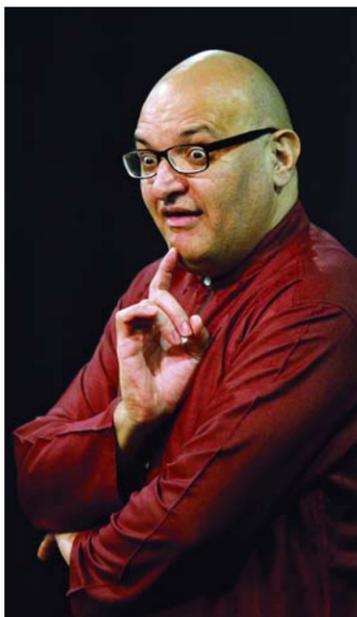
As they continue pursuing their dreams independently and together, the work coming out of Dreamland Arts keeps engaging audiences from the neighborhood and beyond.

“If I could pick only one thing that would outlast me,” Orr said, “it would be the book I wrote and illustrated called ‘The People on the Corner.’” The premise of the book is that “people are people first, not disabilities first.”

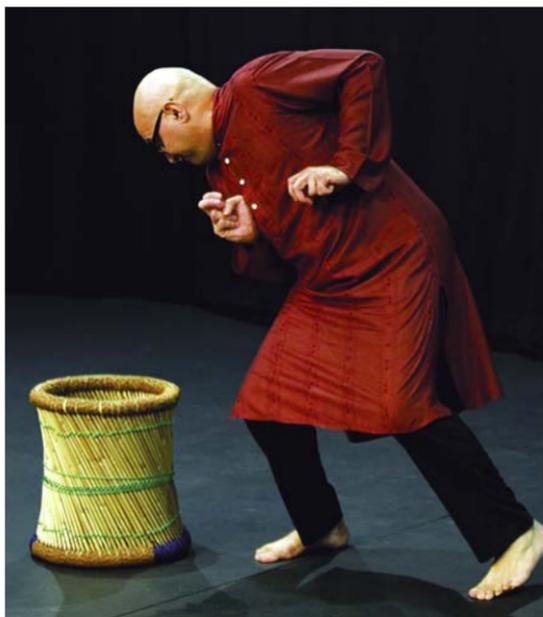
“Everybody’s so scared about having a disability, but if you have one, you just need to find your own way of communicating,” Orr said.

Mistry and Orr are delighted to have landed in the Hamline-Midway neighborhood. To hear them talk, it was good when they got there eight years ago and it’s only gotten better. Because Orr can’t drive, being able to walk to the library, the grocery store and now the light rail are all big pluses. Most importantly, they live and work in a neighborhood that values the performing arts and comes out to support it.

Google the goings-on at www.dreamlandarts.com or call 651-645-5506 to inquire about booking “Hand in Hand” for your school, work or community group. The theater is available for rental at reasonable rates, tickets to performances are affordably priced, and parking on Hamline Ave. is free.



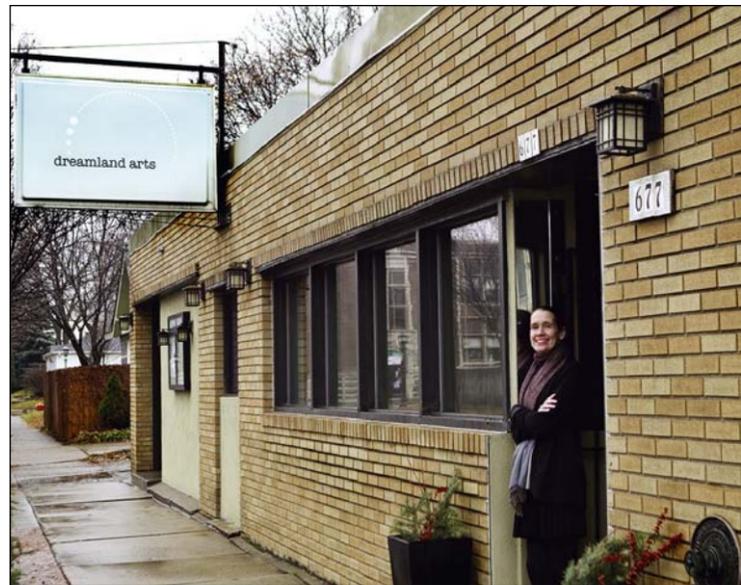
Mistry has a dynamic, physical style of storytelling. (Photo by Margie O’Loughlin)



Orr says, “Blindness was one of the best things that happened to me. Through it I’ve learned to use the gift of my imagination.” (Photo by Margie O’Loughlin)



A family enjoying a Saturday morning performance of children’s stories from India. (Photo by Margie O’Loughlin)



Mistry and Orr hope to make Dreamland Arts the first theater in the Twin Cities to have solar panels on the rooftop. (Photo by Margie O’Loughlin)

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