



ABTT Stephen Joseph Award:

2021 WINNER

Persis Jadé Maravala:

Persis Jadé Maravala is a living individual whose work or body of work has created an exemplary and adventurous relationship between performance and audience.

NOMINATION STATEMENT:

“Persis Jadé Maravala is Artistic Director of internationally acclaimed interactive and digital arts company ZU-UK, often cited as pioneers of the UK’s early, grassroots immersive theatre movement - using found spaces and public spaces to create temporary communities of audiences in extraordinary experiences. Ethnically Iranian-Yemeni-Indian and raised in East London, Maravala’s work epitomises her belief in a need for shared rituals and the use of unusual locations as an invitation to those who do not ordinarily engage with theatre. Her work creates playful, challenging relationships with audiences in public spaces that foster intimacy and disrupt class and political divides with a humorous lightness of touch to form rebellious, indelible shared moments.

With Pick Me Up (and hold me tight) she rung every pay-phone in the UK at 11am on the 1st January 2021, to mark the peak of suicides every year – audiences engaged in a new large-scale piece about listening. Maravala is internationally recognised as a leading figure in ground-breaking work into participation, interactivity, and technology as a tool for intimacy in performance, enabling audiences to genuinely share spaces with each other.

After the international success of all-night participatory piece, Hotel Medea, seminal in the entry of immersive theatre and the ethics of audience care into public consciousness, Maravala distilled the strategies developed in making the performance into a ‘dramaturgy of participation’. This training and making methodology for the new generations of diverse theatre makers, has been written about

extensively by journalists and academics, and is taught as an MA in Contemporary Performance by Maravala and ZU-UK at the University of Greenwich.”

Jorge Lopes Ramos, ZU-UK

SUPPORTING STATEMENT:

" I have known of ZU-UK's work since 2009 and have come to know Persis-Jadé Maravala personally since 2019. Without doubt, ZU-UK, with Maravala as its Artistic Director, produces adventurous, close and fundamental relationships between performance and audience. Persis Jadé is widely acclaimed for creating live theatrical experiences in unconventional spaces, from the ground-breaking Hotel Medea (2006-2016) to Binaural Dinner Date (2016-). Maravala is the writer and director of all ZU-UK's extraordinary work.

Across the past fifteen years, Maravala's practice has demonstrated meaningful impact, such as Pick Me Up (& Hold Me Tight) (2021) created in response to rising suicide rates, or Project Perfect Stranger [and its partner performance-game, PlagueGround Gameshow] (2020-2021), which established a caring and connected community across social media formats in response to the global Covid pandemic.

By reimagining public spaces, as non-threatening sites of interaction, utilizing game-design and communication systems to tackle challenging subjects, Maravala's work enables those unfamiliar with or excluded from theatre to engage in the arts and cultural debate in inventive and accessible ways.

Maravala's contribution to both innovation and inclusion within the creative industries - across analogue, digital and physical platforms - is clearly evidenced in her catalogue of practice to date. She champions this in her mission and values, which directly supports and represents working class, disabled and non-white emerging artists. GAS Station, opened in 2015 in Newham, is proof of this, serving as both a physical space and support scheme for disadvantaged artists to make and present work, involving mentoring from Maravala and the ZU-UK team.

Persis Jadé Maravala is thoroughly deserving of this award.

Seconder: Josephine Machon¹, author of Immersive Theatres (Palgrave Macmillan)"

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TESTIMONIALS:

“Innovative, ingenious, challenging, life-enhancing are all words that should be applied sparingly unless describing the 'real deal'. Having watched and been part of this company's work I've been amazed by the depth of their imagination and their ability to bring it to fruition through their theatre practice.”

Jude Kelly CBE, Former Artistic Director of the Southbank Centre, on ZU-UK.

“ZU-UK is a lot more than a theatre company - with a rigorous, and yet always celebratory set of approaches, the company has helped many artists find new ways of thinking about and making their work. With cross-cultural collaboration at the heart of its practice, ZU-UK encourages everyone who works with the company to explore surprising juxtapositions, new methods of working together, and original ways of inviting the audience into the work. Meanwhile, as a theatre company, ZUUK produces bold, joyful experiences that transform perceptions and take audiences on unforgettable journeys.”

John McGrath, Artistic Director, Manchester International Festival

“ZU-UK have over recent years developed an important approach to immersive theatre making. From the vast experience their works strikes an important balance that is often difficult to achieve in immersive theatre: it provides audiences with a carefully crafted and deeply engaging experience whilst maintaining an intense theatricality and a commitment to the highest artistic standards. ZU-UK's articulation of a methodology for performers in the field, as well as a design approach to a 'Dramaturgy of Participation' will have a positive impact in the field - for performers, makers and audiences.”

Mark Ball, Creative Director Manchester International Festival and former Artistic Director LIFT

“ZU-UK were part of Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park's Local Programme in 2015, where their project Rio Fone Hack #123 brought an innovative and interactive artistic experience into the Park's open landscape by fostering conversation and dialogue between visitors and connections to Brazil 5,000 miles away. We are incredibly excited that such forward, brave and innovative thinking in the arts has been working in east London over the last 15 years, and that we have been able to bring them into the Park. They are leaders in creating immersive experiences for a variety of audiences, and pioneering new uses of old and new technologies.”

Adriana Marques, Head of Cultural Strategy for Thamesmead at Peabody and former Head of Arts and Culture for Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park

“ZU-UK are one of the most ambitious and provocative theatre companies working in Britain today. Hotel Medea is a seriously playful programme of cleverly structured chaos, showcasing their desire to return the spectator to the heart of a theatrical ritual tempered with contradiction and irony and a very contemporary sensibility.”

Gareth White PhD, Researcher Central School of Speech and Drama

SUPPORTING EVIDENCE:

Persis Jadé Maravala’s work has been commissioned in the UK by LIFT, FACT Liverpool, Southbank Centre, Summerhall Edinburgh, and the British Council amongst others. Maravala is regularly invited to talk about her work, politics and aesthetics worldwide with recent keynote and appearances at ISPA, FutureFest and SXSW. For more information: <https://zu-uk.com/>

VIDEO CLIPS

Pick Me Up (& hold me tight) – [Crowdfunder video for National Version](#)

Pick Me Up (& hold me tight) – [Leeds version](#)

Binaural Dinner Date – [Theatre Royal Stratford East](#)

Binaural Dinner Date – [Audience Testimonials](#)

Hotel Medea – [LIFT Festival London \(Chapter 1\)](#)

Hotel Medea – [LIFT Festival London \(Chapter 2\)](#)

Hotel Medea – [LIFT Festival London \(Chapter 3\)](#)

FutureFest 2021 – [Maravala’s Keynote on The Future of Culture](#)

REVIEWS

“a New Cultural Force.” **The Sunday Times** on Maravala.

☆☆☆☆ “One of the defining hits of this year’s Edinburgh Festival Fringe.” **The Sunday Herald** on Maravala’s *Hotel Medea*.

☆☆☆☆ "A rare and wonderful experience of total suspension of disbelief." **The Daily Telegraph** on Maravala’s *Hotel Medea*.

☆☆☆☆☆ "Given the level of complexity the execution is immaculate. Until the cast drop their characters for the 6am breakfast the performances are perfect in every exhausting detail." **The List** on Maravala’s *Hotel Medea*.

☆☆☆☆ "Well developed and flawlessly executed...actually challenges you to be human again and try to see someone else for who they truly are." **Londonist** on Maravala's *Binaural Dinner Date*.

☆☆☆☆ "Ranges between excruciating and hilarious...an earnest social experiment into attraction, making connections and what we expect of relationships." **Time Out** on Maravala's *Binaural Dinner Date*.

"It really makes you think about what it means to be a human being, what it means to make contact with other people." **ZU-UK audience member** on Maravala's *Binaural Dinner Date*.













