



WORLD PREMIERE

# In What Language?

A Song Cycle of Lives in Transit

Photo: Pooja Bakri

**Vijay Iyer**, Composer • **Michael Ladd**, Librettist  
**Rachel Dickstein**, Director  
**Clifton Taylor**, Lighting and Projection Designer



Commissioned and produced by the Asia Society, *In What Language? A Song Cycle of Lives In Transit* is part of Asia Society's **Crossovers: Performing Arts of Asia America** series. The series celebrates "American Expression" as the product of an on-going exchange and fusion among diverse artists and musical traditions that have taken root in the United States. It is the amalgamation of African, European and Asian American influences that are part of the constant evolution of American music, dance, theater and poetry. Previous Crossovers programs have included artists and arts groups such as Jon Jang, Kenny Endo, Yin Mei, Brenda Wong Aoki, Ma-Yi Theater, South Asian Hip Hop, Muna Tseng, and Jason Hwang.

**Vijay Iyer**, Composer

**Michael C. Ladd**, Librettist

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**VOICES**

Latasha N. Nevada Diggs

Allison Easter

Michael C. Ladd

Ajay Naidu

**MUSICIANS**

Ambrose Akinmusire, trumpet

Stephan Crump, bass

Liberty Ellman, guitar

Trevor Shaun Holder, drums

Vijay Iyer, piano/keyboard

Dana Leong, cello/trombone

Rudresh Mahanthappa, saxophone

**ELECTRONICS**

Latasha N. Nevada Diggs

Michael C. Ladd

**VIDEOGRAPHY**

Clifton Taylor

Rachel Cooper

Rachel Cooper, Producer

La Frances Hui, Associate Producer/Video Operator

Melissa Caolo Hagen, Stage Manager

Ken Hypes, Technical Director

Eric Chase, Lighting Operator

Jonah Lawrence, Sound Engineer

Brian O'Connor, Stagehand

To read an interview with Vijay Iyer and

Michael C. Ladd, visit

<http://www.asiasource.org/arts/language.cfm>

To read an interview with Ajay Naidu, visit

<http://www.asiasource.org/asianamerica/ajaynaidu.cfm>

## Words From The Creators

This project takes its title from an experience of Iranian filmmaker Jafar Panahi, who, transiting through JFK from Hong Kong to Buenos Aires in spring 2001, was wrongly detained by INS officials. Sent back to Hong Kong in handcuffs, Panahi wanted to explain his story to fellow passengers: "I'm not a thief I'm not a murderer! ... I am just an Iranian, a filmmaker. But how could I tell this, in what language?"

Panahi's story was circulated widely as an email message around the time that Rachel Cooper generously invited me to create some new music for the Asia Society's "Crossovers" series. As a fellow brown-skinned traveler, I wanted to use the opportunity to amplify and address Panahi's question. His plea – to assert one's humanity in the face of ignorance and oppression – resonated with our life experiences, and it quickly became the central theme of this piece.

When creating this cycle, Mike and I both thought a great deal about spaces. I approached the music as architecture, constructing sonic environments for the poems to stretch out and be themselves. I wanted to respect the individuals we meet in this piece, and so I imagined these musical spaces as frames – operating in dialogue with the texts, suggesting a specific gloss on each of them, but also working at a purposeful distance, resisting facile re-presentation.

Structurally, I use rhythmic techniques of repetition, superposition, permutation, and geometric elaboration, derived from the music, visual arts and architecture of South Asia and Africa: playful and precise aesthetics for shaping space. I view improvisation as human movement within these spaces; improvising provides an occasion for the performers to interact with the musical environments, marking them with their own voices and hands.

These indispensable elements, polyrhythm and improvisation, remind us that transit is not neutral; after all, they are "non-Western" ideas, having arrived on these shores in their own peculiar ways. I am thinking of Ntozake Shange's line, which Latasha has brought to my attention: "We are the subconscious of the Western world." Or, as Mike expresses so compactly in "Asylum," "My skin is critique."

In his nineteen short sketches, Mike speaks volumes about history, globalization, human migration, and hybridity, and he does so with grace and power. The realities facing people of color in global modernity can perhaps only be expressed through the condensed, visceral medium of poetry. Mike rises to the challenge, posing many challenges of his own. I have been blessed to match wits with such a brilliant creative spirit.

A basic directive for creative work is that it reflects the world around it. This piece has had a two-year gestation period; during this time, the world has utterly transformed, and the need to produce critical reflections of it has only intensified. What I hope you'll take home this evening, aside from pure thrill at the marvelous performers who surround me onstage, is the sound of people taking collective action, and urging you to do the same.

**VIJAY IYER**

Vijay approached me about writing a libretto on people of color in airports in the spring of 2001. Since then, the role of the airport has changed immensely, so too have the people who inhabit these spaces. Although intended as a neutral facility, airports have been utilized as a highly charged political space almost since their inception. September 11th 2001 solidified the function of airplanes and airports as frontiers, places of conflict and quarantine, reception, departure and detention.

However this is only one aspect of what an airport may represent to an individual. As the centerpiece of globalization, the airport serves as a contact zone for those who feel either empowered or subjugated by the globalization process. The airport is a center of commerce and a crossroads of cultures.

This libretto attempts to give voice to a new global worker and his or her perspective on the world via the airport. I interviewed people in airports serving Tokyo, Bombay, Calcutta, and most major cities in Western Europe and the U.S. Some of the interviews are based on true stories; others were inspired by a glance or a nod. Some of the subjects I passed by at a security check or departure gate. Others I spoke with over breakfast during a layover and some I have known for several years.

It is important to understand the airport and globalization as parts of a very old global history. They are not products of a vacuum somewhere in the 20th Century. The airport is still a port and people of color have been traveling the globe for more than a millennium. Much of history is about the mixing of culture and people. Understanding terms like poly-culturalism and hyphenated realities as part of a very old phenomenon helps us to negotiate their current forms. The music and the text attempt to embody the multi-dimensional truths of culture and society. Musical and poetic forms are combined and utilized together not to create a cultural

experiment, but because only by using these different methods together, or next to each other, can Vijay and I begin to properly convey our own multi-hyphenated experience, let alone the experiences of those around us.

I chose to compliment Vijay's use of polyrhythms combined rhythms and musical forms by occasionally adding specific poetic meters to the mix. Playing with rhythm and rhythmic counterpoints were key in the rewriting process. When iambic pentameter appears it is usually off of a four four beat. A Ghazal floats in and out of Vijay's brilliant melodies. TLC is written to a specific five beat taal I learned when playing tabla. It is written to bounce off Vijay's miraculous 5 and a 1/4 rhythm.

It has been a privilege to work with an artist as complex and graceful as Vijay Iyer. Vijay produces remarkable sounds that seduce poems into place. I am grateful to be surrounded by all the great artists on this project, Rachel Dickstein, Ajay Naidu, Allison Easter and special editorial thanks to Latasha Diggs. Without the Asia Society, Frances Hui and Rachel Cooper none of us would be able to convene with such ease.

In *What Language* debuts at a point in global history so volatile, so urgent for rational voices and listeners that it is hard to keep up and successfully contribute to the betterment of the world. Of course, this is up to all of us. We here to night are all participants on a global stage. I invite you to be a part of this stage, this music tonight and continue the dialogue of understanding with us.

**MICHAEL C. LADD**

**The Color of My Circumference I**

Michael C. Ladd

**The Density of the 19th Century**

Latasha N. Nevada Diggs

Allison Easter

**Terminal City**

Michael C. Ladd

**Rentals**

Ajay Naidu

**Security**

Latasha N. Nevada Diggs

**De Gaulle**

Allison Easter

**TLC**

Ajay Naidu

**Tropicard**

Michael C. Ladd

**Three Lotto Stories**

Latasha N. Nevada Diggs

**The Color of My Circumference II**

Michael C. Ladd

**Iraqi Businessman**

Ajay Naidu

**Smoking Section**

Latasha N. Nevada Diggs

Allison Easter

Michael C. Ladd

Ajay Naidu

**Taking Back the Airplane**

Allison Easter

**The Color of My Circumference III**

Michael C. Ladd

**Innana After Baghdad**

Latasha N. Nevada Diggs

Allison Easter

**In What Language**

Ajay Naidu

**Asylum**

Allison Easter

**The Color of My Circumference IV**

Michael C. Ladd

**Plastic Bag**

Michael C. Ladd

## Who's Who

### **Vijay Iyer** (Composer, Piano, Keyboard)

Vijay Iyer is a pianist and composer based in New York City. The son of Indian immigrants, Iyer draws from African, Asian, and European lineages to create improvisational, polyrhythmic music in the creative jazz tradition. He has released several critically acclaimed compact discs as a leader: *Memorophilia* (Asian Improv), *Architextures* (Asian Improv/Red Giant), *Panoptic Modes* (Red Giant), and *Your Life Flashes* (with the collaborative trio Fieldwork, on Pi Recordings). He was recently selected for the 2003 CalArts Alpert Award in the Arts for distinction in the field of music, and is nominated as one of the up-and-coming artists of the year by the Jazz Journalists Association. Iyer performs frequently in the New York area and internationally with his current projects: the Vijay Iyer Quartet, Fieldwork, and Raw Materials, his duo with Rudresh Mahanthappa. He has also worked extensively as a featured artist with Roscoe Mitchell, Amiri Baraka, Steve Coleman, and Greg Tate. In addition, Iyer has lectured and published on various topics, including improvisation, cognitive science, and jazz studies. He holds a B.S. from Yale College and an interdisciplinary Ph.D. in Technology and the Arts from the University of California at Berkeley.

### **Michael C. Ladd** (Librettist, Voice, Electronics)

Boston-born Michael C. Ladd received his BA in Black expatriates in the Nineteenth Century from Hampshire College and an MA in poetry from Boston University. He has published in several literary magazines including *Long Shot Review* and *Bostonia*. His work is also featured in the book *Swing Low, Black Men Writing* and several anthologies including *Aloud: Voices from the Nuyorican Poets Cafe*, *In Defense of Mumia*, *Bum Rush the Page*, *Por La Victoire* and *Everything But the Burden*. Ladd is the writer and producer of five albums *Easy Listening For Armageddon* (Scratchie/Mercury),

*Live From Paris* (Home Style Cooking), *Welcome to the Afterfuture* (LikeMadd/Ozone), *The Infesticons: Gun Hill Road* (Big Da Da), and *Majesticons: Beauty Party* (Big Da Da). As a Fellow at the Institute for Arts and Civic Dialogue at Harvard University, he produced and directed *Blood Black and Blue*, an audio documentary/performance about Black police officers in the United States. Michael currently lives in the Bronx.

### **Rachel Dickstein** (Director)

Rachel Dickstein is a director, choreographer, teacher and the Artistic Director of Ripe Time, an experimental theatre ensemble dedicated to exploring the meeting ground between dance and theatre, between word and image. She recently devised, choreographed, and directed Ripe Time's *The Secret Of Steep Ravines* at Performance Space 122 and directed Ellen McLaughlin's version of *The Trojan Women* at Fordham University. Rachel has also created and directed other new works for New York Theatre Workshop, New Georges, TheatreWorks/USA, The Ohio Theatre, SUNY-Purchase, NYSF/ Joe's Pub, Lincoln Center Theatre Director's Lab, Drama League Director's Project, Adirondack Theatre Festival and Seattle's Annex Theatre. She has served as a resident director at New Dramatists and has worked locally and internationally as an Assistant Director to Martha Clarke on both opera and dance-theatre projects. She has received grants, fellowships and residencies from the Jerome Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts/ Theatre Communications Group, the Drama League, the Ko Festival of Performance, and Yale University. Rachel is a teaching artist for Lincoln Center Institute, a Usual Suspect at NYTW, and a graduate of Yale College.

### **Clifton Taylor** (Lighting and Projection Designer)

Previously at Asia Society, he designed the projections

and lighting for "The Floating Box." In addition, Mr. Taylor has worked for companies in twenty countries in Asia, Europe and the Americas. His extensive credits include work in the repertoires of the American Ballet Theater, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Houston Ballet, Pacific Northwest Ballet, the Lar Lubovitch Dance Company (resident lighting designer), the ballet company of the city of Rio de Janeiro, the Maggio Danza in Florence, Italy, Ballet de Lorraine in Nancy, France, New York's Juilliard School for Music and Dance, Maria Benitez's Teatro Flamenco, the Elisa Monte Dance Company (resident lighting designer), Buglisi/Foreman Dance Company (resident lighting designer), and Sardono Dance Theater, Indonesia.

Mr. Taylor's designs have been seen in many of the world's major arts festivals including the Vienna Dance Festival, Hamburg's Sommertheater Festival, New England's Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival, the Indonesian Arts Summit, Singapore's Festival of Asian Arts, the Hong Kong Arts Festival, the Istanbul Festival and New York's Next Wave Festival. He has also designed scenery and/or lighting for numerous major U.S. theatre and opera companies including the New York City Opera (National Company) American Conservatory Theatre in San Francisco; the Delaware Theatre Company, the Dallas Theater Center; the Pasadena Play House; Alabama Shakespeare Festival; the Westport Country Playhouse and the Cleveland Playhouse (resident lighting designer).

Recently, his work has been seen at the Joyce Theater (Buglis/Foreman, Jose Limon, David Parsons and Elisa Monte Companies), off-broadway for MCC Theater (Scattergood), and at City Center (Flamenco Festival / Farruquito). This year, Mr. Taylor has been named a fellow of the Asian Cultural Council and has recently completed a 2 month residency at the Royal University of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh, Cambodia where he developed and taught a course in design. He holds a degree in fine arts from New York University's Tisch School of the Arts.

### **Latasha N. Nevada Diggs** (Voice, Electronics)

Latasha N. Nevada Diggs is a writer, visual artist, vocalist and recent New York University graduate. Her poetry, music critiques and essays have been published in several magazines and journals including *The Source*, *Ego Trip*, *Urb*, *Long Shot*, *Drum Voices Review*, *Bum Rush the Page*, and *Everything But the Burden*. She has performed and collaborated with Vernon Reid, DJ Logic, Lawrence "Butch" Morris, DJ Little Louie Vega and others. She has been featured on recordings by Ryuichi Sakamoto, Towa Tei, Billy Bass, Domenico Ferrari, Mike Ladd, Guillermo E. Brown, and on the compilation *Eargasms*. She is the author of two chapbooks, *Ichi-Ban: from the files of negrita muneca morena linda* and *Ni-Ban: Villa Miseria*. She is a member of the Cave Canem Workshop/Retreat for African American Poets as well as a 2002 Artist in Residence at Harvestworks Digital Media Arts Center. Latasha performs regularly as an electronic vocalist in Greg Tate's *Burnt Sugar Ensemble* and the Zappa-esque project, *The Yohimbe Brothers*.

### **Allison Easter** (Voice)

Allison Easter (actress, singer, dancer) was the first American woman to appear Off-Broadway in the percussion sensation *Stomp*. She has worked with Meredith Monk for many years, touring the US, Europe and Asia, and receiving a Bessie Award for her work in *The Politics of Quiet*. She played *Vengeance* in Will Pomerantz's *A Tale of Two Cities*, Jerri Lewis in Tony Zertuche's *Anchors*, Ms Porgy in the upcoming feature film *Vacuums*, and Anita Chambers on *Law & Order*. She was featured in the *Village Voice* article *Breathtaking Performances* for her dancing with Susan Marshall and Company. Regionally, she has appeared at the Alley Theater (Houston), Actor's Theater of Louisville, and at the Denver Center. She received a BA from Sarah Lawrence College.

**Ajay Naidu** (Voice)

Ajay Naidu (actor) has appeared in various roles in film, theater and television. His film credits include Office Space, K-Pax, Pi, Requiem for a Dream and Suburbia – for which he was nominated for an Independent Spirit Award. He has starred in theater productions at The Goodman, Steppenwolf, A.R.T. and most recently in "The Resistable Rise of Arturo Ui" directed by Simon McBurney, opposite Al Pacino. He is also a regular on television in the series Lateline with Al Franken, The West Wing and Sopranos, among others. As a dancer and lyricist Ajay has been working on a variety of projects in the U.S., Britain and India for the past eight years. His solo piece Darwaza ran at the Labryinth Theatre last summer to wide acclaim. Ajay is a graduate of the American Repertory Theatre's Institute for Advanced Theatre Training at Harvard University.

**Ambrose Akinmusire** (Trumpet)

Ambrose Akinmusire was born in 1982 in Oakland, California. At the age of 4 Ambrose's mother noticed her son's unique ability in playing tunes from the radio on the piano and decided to seek formal studies for Ambrose. After a couple of months of lessons, Ambrose was already playing in his church. He later became musical director for his church choir at the age of 10. It would be a concert by the Chicago Art Ensemble that spark Ambrose's interest in playing the trumpet which he began playing at the age of 12.

Currently in his junior year at the Manhattan School of Music, Ambrose has played with many distinguished artists such as Billy Higgins, Joe Henderson Big Band, Lonnie Plaxico, Steve Coleman, Stefon Harris, and Joshua Redman.

**Stephan Crump** (Bass)

Memphis-bred bassist/composer Stephan Crump is among the latest generation of up-and-coming players on the NYC jazz scene. While maintaining a busy schedule as a sideman to mainstream jazz stars, downtown explorers, singer/songwriters and others, Stephan remains intensely involved with composing and performing his own music. His compositions can be heard in Miramax, HBO, Showtime, Bravo and Simple Focus films, as well as on his two critically-acclaimed albums, "Poems and Other Things" and "Tuckahoe".

Shunning barriers of musical genre, Stephan has performed and recorded in the US and across the globe with a diverse list of musicians- from late blues legend Johnny Clyde Copeland to Portishead's Dave McDonald, The Violent Femmes' Gordon Gano, Big Ass Truck, Dave Liebman, Sonny Fortune, Eddie Henderson and Bobby Previte, among others.

Stephan is currently a member of Gregg Bendian's Mahavishnu Project, the Vijay Iyer Quartet, the Liberty Ellman Trio, the Weimarband, and singer/songwriter Jen Chapin's band.

**Liberty Ellman** (Guitar)

Guitarist Liberty Ellman has worked with a notably diverse cross section of New York's most individual artists, including Henry Threadgill, Lawrence "Butch" Morris, Greg Osby, and Steven Bernstein. Mr. Ellman has an album out on Red Giant Records called ORTHODOXY (featuring Vijay Iyer), and is currently working on a score for the stage adaptation of Barbra Ehrenreich's Bestseller, "Nickel and Dimed."

**Trevor Shaun Holder** (Drums)

Drummer and composer, Trevor Holder, 28 was born and raised in New York City. His musical interests were realized at the age of 5, which found him composing songs on the piano. Trevor developed his musical foundation in classical piano while studying at the Manhattan School of Music from early youth through his teen years. His Bajan decent exposed him to musical styles including Caylpso, Reggae and R&B. Trevor's affinity toward different genres of music lead to the discovery of his innate talent as a drummer. His formal drum set studies began at Wesleyan University, from which he earned a degree with honors in 1996. There he studied with phenomenal jazz artists and educators Jay Hoggard, Pheeroan ak Laff, and Anthony Braxton. Upon completion of his studies at Wesleyan, Trevor returned to New York where he started performing with various artists. The list of performers including Jazz greats Roy Ayers, Angela Bofill, Jay Hoggard, Lillias White, and Brian Jackson with whom Trevor co-wrote and produced their recent recording entitled "Gotta Play". Trevor has also collaborated with several spoken-word artists such as Hip Hop stars Jungle Brothers, and with poets Amiri Baraka, Saul Williams, and Jessica Care Moore.

Trevor's recent work with pianist Vijay Iyer is one of the multiple projects that Trevor has been able to contribute his unique musical perspective on time and space as a drummer. Many local artists of varying genres such as R&B singer Angela Johnson, Reggae artist Nufrika, R&B/ROCK vocalists K.O. Artist and Yewande, Jazz trumpeter Glenn Makos, and R&B/Soul singer Lisala Beatty have requested his talents and ideas.

In addition to his performance work, Trevor currently gives private drum lessons to students at the Dalton School as well as at the Trevor Day School.

**Dana Leong** (Cello, Trombone)

Dana studied classical cello and jazz trombone at the Manhattan School of Music. He has recently performed and recorded in many genres and venues around the world on both instruments with such artists as Richard Stoltzman at Canegie Hall, Ray Charles, Henry Threadgill, Manhattan Chamber Orchestra, Lionel Hampton, The Mingus Big Band, Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra, Barry White, and Earth Wind & Fire.

As a composer, arranger & producer, Dana has produced musical recordings used in the New York TIME OUT showcase for video, music, dance, performance, film & literature at NYC's The Kitchen.

He has also been commissioned to write music for the 'Special Session on Children' performed at the United Nations 2002.

**Rudresh Mahanthappa** (Saxophone)

Described as being "one of the strongest voices on the jazz scene" by All Music Guide, Rudresh Mahanthappa has fused his various cultural influences to create a truly unique style. As a performer, he has toured internationally, has worked as a sideman with some of the most important figures in jazz today, and leads/co-leads five groups of his own to critical acclaim. As a composer, Rudresh has twice received the Rockefeller Foundation MAP Grant to develop new work in conjunction with the Jazz Institute of Chicago (Manodharma Trio, 2001) and The Jazz Gallery of New York (Raw Materials, 2002). Recently, he was the only jazz composer to receive the prestigious American Composers Forum CCP Grant to compose BLACK WATER which was released on Red Giant Records in November 2002. Mahanthappa currently teaches at The New School University.

**Melissa Caolo Hagen** (Stage Manager)  
Melissa has worked with a variety of artists in her Stage Management career. Her work in dance led to extensive international touring as well as performances across the United States and in New York. Dance credits include: Boston Ballet, Jacob's Pillow, New York City Ballet, The School of American Ballet, Martha Graham Dance Ensemble, Ballet Builders, Urban Bush Women, Meredith Monk, and the Trisha Brown Dance Company. She has also had the opportunity to work on theater and music. Music and theater credits include: North Shore Music Theater, Lincoln Center Festival, Lincoln Center Institute, and Schubert's Winterreise produced by Lincoln Center New Visions.

## Asia Society

Asia Society is America's leading institution dedicated to fostering understanding of Asia and communication between Americans and people Asia and the Pacific. A nonprofit, nonpartisan educational institution, the Asia Society presents a wide range of programs including major art exhibitions, media programs, international conferences and lectures, and initiatives to improve elementary and secondary education about Asia. Since 1960, Asia Society's Cultural Program has been one of the country's leading centers devoted to the visual and performing arts of Asia. As a part of the Society's mandate to serve as a bridge between the peoples of America and Asia, one of the goals of the Cultural Program is to present contemporary work from Asia and highlight work by emerging Asia American artists.

Recent projects of the performing arts programs include commissioning and producing *Forgiveness* by Chen Shi Zheng, Akira Matsui and Eve Belgarian; *Empty Tradition/City of Peonies* by choreographer Yin Mei and composer Tony Prabowo; presentations by renowned Iranian singers Sharam Nazeri and Parisa; music from Afghanistan by Ustad Mahwash and Quraishi; the Mongolian musical ensemble Altai Hungai; the national tour of Ratan Thiyam's Chorus Repertory Theater of Manipur; Cloudgate Dance Theater of Taiwan and most recently the chamber operas *The Floating Box: A Story in Chinatown* by Jason Kao Hwang and Catherine Filloux and *Wenji: Eighteen Songs of a Nomad Flute* by Bun-Ching Lam and Xu Ying.

**Nicholas Platt**, President  
**Vishakha N. Desai**, Senior Vice President, Director of the Museum and Cultural Programs

### PERFORMING ARTS

**Rachel Cooper**, Director of Performing Arts and Public Programs / Producer  
**La Frances Hui**, Program Associate of Performing Arts / Associate Producer  
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**Rena Schilsky**, Volunteer  
**Gulai Topcubasi**, Volunteer

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