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Vikram Hemanathan

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When Vikram Hemanathan came to Western Michigan University in 2016, he initially planned for an engineer’s life of logic and analytics, but a lifelong love of the theater became his greater calling.

He is now the owner of a performance arts theater in India that is changing culture through art. “I pursued a science stream of education in high school and was keen on further exploring the subject,” Hemanathan said. “I came from a family invested in engineering lines of businesses and I saw it wise to become an engineer so I would be able to contribute to the business down the line. Considering the Indian culture, it seemed to be socially more acceptable to pursue a degree in the sciences to ensure I would have better job opportunities.”

Hemanathan’s interest in theater began as a child participating in school and youth theater groups, eventually achieving the stature to work in local amateur and professional companies. When he was just 18 years old, he launched his own theater company—Boulevard View.

“When I started Boulevard View I knew absolutely nothing about running a business, had no business plan whatsoever, and had less than a hundred dollars in hand to get this obsession of mine off the ground,” he said. “What I did have—maybe at times in excess—was tons of enthusiasm, a will to succeed, good friends, great parents, a local library with play scripts and a blurred vision as to what we could do with this little project of ours.”

Even though he had become a business-owner, Hemanathan wanted to continue his studies beyond high school, but he found it nearly impossible to study theater and engineering at the same time in India. He decided to look abroad to satisfy his passion to learn more about theater while also earning an engineering degree.

“At the risk of sounding dramatic, WMU chose me as much as I chose WMU,” he said. “Unfortunately, the Indian education system didn’t provide me with the opportunity to pursue two degrees in completely different fields of study simultaneously. I was forced to look for options outside of India to find that balance. While looking at possible options in America, I came across the engineering twinning program offered by WMU through their partner university in Chennai, India—Hindustan College of Engineering. The cherry on the cake was that the program I opted for—WMU’s engineering management technology program—was ranked No. 1 in the United States. It offered the flexibility I was looking for, was affordable, and it provided me with the perfect platform to earn a degree at WMU.” Unfortunately, coming to the U.S. meant that Hemanathan had to give up his theater company; visa rules would not allow him to work in India while studying abroad.
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As Boulevard View began to gain momentum and become more successful, Hemanathan launched Barking Dog Productions. Today, Barking Dog has taken on a life of its own, becoming one of the largest English theater production companies, and setting itself apart by putting on shows that don’t shy away from socially sensitive topics. Most recently, Barking Dog put on a production of the “Vagina Monologues,” shining a light on sensitive aspects of the female experience, a particularly controversial topic in India. “Like in any other country, theatre and art play a pivotal role in shaping positive change and are the reflection of the mood of its society at large,” he said. “Issues about women’s safety, rape, and the LGBT community would have once been conversations that would have been taboo to discuss in public are now discussed through mediums of art coming to the conversation table. This has led to some visible change in attitudes and priorities. Through our own performance of plays like the “Vagina Monologues” we’ve seen conversations start on issues that would have otherwise been considered taboo to discuss in a closeted society like ours.”

Looking forward to the future, Hemanathan hopes to continue growing his company and changing public perceptions through art.

When he arrived at WMU, he hit the ground running, immediately becoming involved with the International Programs Council, French Hall Residents Association, and the Western Student Association. He fondly remembers experiencing his first snow, fall football games, and holiday events on campus, like the International Student Thanksgiving Celebration. With a background in theater and an outgoing personality, Hemanathan said it was easy to make friends at WMU. “If I had to describe my entire four-year experience in two words, I would say ‘life-altering,’” he said. “It was those friends that made me feel less homesick, those organizations that instilled leadership qualities and those professors who taught me responsibility and accountability. Coming to WMU was one of the better decisions I’d made in my life and for that I’m eternally grateful for the support and endless guidance of my parents, and Ms. Cathleen Fuller, former director of WMU’s transnational education programs.”

Hemanathan finished a bachelor’s degree in engineering in summer 2009 and returned to India; he had to forego picking up a second major in theater to complete his engineering degree on time. After traveling for a short while, he contemplated going into the family engineering business, but, instead chose to follow his passion for theater. “I realized that my heart was deeply entrenched with wanting to go back to the arts, and more so, to pick up the company I’d started before I’d left to study in the states,” he said. “There was a metamorphosis taking place around that time in India, and it seemed to offer a perfect ecosystem to invest in the arts.”

He set out to revive Boulevard View and discovered others were eager to help. “I came back to an India that was emerging to be a global player—at every corner there were new opportunities to be explored,” he said. “It was in this moment that I realized I would be doing justice to myself and to those who believed in Boulevard View to pursue our passion for the arts. Though India has always had a vibrant theatre, cultural and performing arts space, this renewed energy in India opened up new possibilities.”

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