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Mystical, sexy 'Manganiyar Seduction' plays Miami Nov. 8

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Roysten Abel, who conceived and created The Manganiyar Seduction

Sex and spirituality are not usually associated with one another, but those two fundamental human experiences inspired The Manganiyar Seduction. The mystical musical [performance](#) was created by an agnostic Indian theater director and brought to life by members of an obscure, centuries-old Indian sect, with the prostitutes of Amsterdam as visual muses.

"It's the seduction of the soul and not the body," says the director, Roysten Abel. "You have musicians seducing your soul instead of women seducing your body."

Abel conceived the idea in 2006 while he was touring with another of his shows in Spain. His cast of street performers — jugglers, acrobats and the like — included two Manganiyar musicians, members of a musical sect from Rajasthan, the region in northwestern India where the Roma, or Gypsies, are [believed](#) to have originated.

Abel, 46, says he was depressed during the Spanish trip. The two musicians seemed to sense his mood, and constantly serenaded him.

"They would literally stalk me down and make me listen to their music," Abel says from Ann Arbor, Mich., a stop on the U.S. tour that is bringing The Manganiyar Seduction to Miami-Dade County Auditorium on Friday.

"They'd come to my room in the morning and sing, and that's how I woke up. We'd perform in the evening, and at the post-performance parties they would take over, and at 4 or 5 in the morning they would bring me back to my room and sing me to sleep."

After two weeks of this, Abel found himself not irritated, but inspired. "They had done something incredible to my mental state and my physical being," he says. "These Manganiyars pulled me up from that low place and took me on an upward spiral and threw me up on top somewhere and left me floating.

"I was on another planet. It seduced me to the core."

That sense of seduction brought back memories of a visit to Amsterdam, where Abel strayed into the city's famous red light district. He was mesmerized by the buildings filled with tiny, glowing, glass-fronted rooms, where prostitutes in lingerie posed amidst red lights and red velvet curtains.

"It was unbelievable, extremely theatrical, like a burlesque theater," Abel says. "All these red lit windows on both sides of the street. That image stayed with me."

In the show, the 38 musicians sit in four stacked rows of glowing red boxes – like a jewel box on its side. "To me these musicians are the gems of the country," he says. "They need a proper showcase."

Over the course of the 80-minute performance, the boxes light up one by one as the white-robed, turbaned musicians inside them play Indian drums called dholak and dhol, an alghoza or double flute and other string and percussion instruments and sing in nasal, ululating voices — creating a pulsating, hypnotic, accumulating, musical pattern.

The Manganiyar Seduction has toured almost constantly since its first performance in 2006, around India and to Europe, Australia and Singapore. It played New York's Lincoln Center in 2010 and the Kennedy Center in Washington D.C., in 2011.

Kathryn Garcia, director of Miami-Dade College's MDC Live Arts, which is presenting Manganiyar, says it gives Western audiences a glimpse, not into just another culture but another state of mind.

"It's this spiritual ride," she says. "The music is devotional music, and [Abel] has theatricalized it and created a way for the audience to access that. It's a portal into a whole other world."

Abel auditioned about 1,000 Manganiyar musicians before choosing 38 (plus a conductor) for the show; most are still in the cast. The production, with 59 people, travels with two cooks who prepare food that suits their tastes and religious requirements.

Originally a nomadic Hindu tribe, the [Manganiyars](#) converted to Islam when that faith moved into their area of India about 400 years ago. Their role has long been primarily as musicians whose presence and performances for rulers and patrons are believed to augur good fortune.

Although they sing Sufi, Muslim and Hindu music, they are performers, not missionaries.

"Their religion is music," says Abel, who says the group starts rehearsals with a song to an Iraqi Muslim saint and another to a Hindu goddess. "They're very pluralistic. They are Muslims by birth, but they don't go to the mosque. And they have a Hindu side and a Sufi side to them."

Getting the musicians used to rehearsing something repeatedly, mixing up songs or playing something chosen by someone else was a challenge, he says. They would stroll out of rehearsal for a cigarette or when the mood struck them.

"Their sense of time and space is totally different; they live in a much more open environment, almost like nomads," Abel says.

"They were only used to singing the songs they've learned since childhood. This was a bit difficult for them. It took us about a year and a half creating trust and them realizing, 'This man won't ruin our music.'"

[Abel](#), who was born in Kerala in southern India, trained at Delhi's National School of Drama and England's Royal Shakespeare Company. In 1995 he founded an Indian Shakespearean troupe, producing an acclaimed Othello that looked at issues of racism in India.

Since creating Manganiyar, he has focused on shows that mix Indian culture, spirituality and imagery. His latest, The Kitchen, uses 12 drummers inside a giant copper vessel.

"I'm on a search to create a proper holistic ritualistic experience in theater where the experience is much more than intellectual understanding or appreciation, but to have an out-of-body experience."

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