

## **Risk and Reward in Life and Art**

### **by Manjeet Mann**

Hello, thank you so much for inviting me here today. It's so exciting and a real privilege to be asked to speak to you all, here at the festival. I would like to talk about taking risks. Taking risks in life, taking risks in work, taking risks in art. And when I talk about risk I'm not talking about risks that will damage your livelihood in some way, like, racking up credit card debt, or something that will harm your physical or mental well-being. I'm talking about those whispers that come to us from deep down inside our bellies. Those whispers that say, "you know that idea you've had to create that thing you've talked about for ages and ages, yeah that, well how about you do it, give it a go, go on, because, well, what's the worst that can happen? What might you be rewarded with if you just took that leap of faith."

So, I'd like to tell you a story. My story. Of how I became a writer, because the path to me becoming a writer wasn't a conventional one. I'm not someone who can stand here and say that I always dreamt of becoming a writer since I was five years old, I was always writing stories, I always had my head in a book. Not at all. It wasn't something that I ever saw myself doing, or ever thought I could do. Getting here today has been the culmination of taking many risks. Some small, small big and all the rewards that have come my way because of those risks.

So let's start with the story of little Manjeet or little Manj who had such big dreams. This little girl always knew she wanted to be an actress, however, little Manj also knew a career in the arts was something she wouldn't be allowed to pursue. My parents...no not just my parents, the whole family, because in my family anything you wanted to do had to filter through your siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins, you name it, everyone had an opinion on what you should and shouldn't be allowed to do with your life and in my case being an actor was definitely not one of them. So, it was pretty risky of me to join the after-school drama club, which I disguised as an after school extra study group telling my parents, I was in the library doing homework when really I was in the school theatre rolling around on the floor pretending to be a cat. I was constantly nervous and scared, just waiting to get found out and the wrath of the family to descend upon me for lying and disobeying them.

But it was during my time in the drama club that I developed my love of storytelling. I learned what made a good story, what makes characters tick, I learned to listen, and most importantly I learned to take risks in my work instead of overthinking. I had a great drama teacher who told me; "In a field with so much competition, actors who take risks in their auditions and as artists are the ones who stand out. If you are not prepared to take risks, make mistakes, face your fears, and make bold choices...you'll never come up with anything original. After all a life without risk is a life half lived." That has stayed with me.

Fast forward a few years and I start to think seriously about becoming a professional actress and what that would look like. It had always been a dream but now I could really see it. It felt like it could become a reality. So, in my final year of school I secretly applied for drama schools. I knew my parents, sorry entire family and their pets wouldn't allow it, but I figured once I got in, I could show them what a prestigious honour it was, how difficult they are to get in to and therefore a validation of my talent that I'd got in. This was my dream. There wasn't anything else I wanted to do with my life. What was the worst that could happen? There would be arguments, tears, and hell to pay but it was a risk I was willing to take. Well, the worst did happen, they found out and there was no way they were going to allow it. There were big family meetings where they would discuss my future, my rebellious ways and how I needed to be watched and my movements curtailed. I was told I was selfish, I was told I had the devil inside me, I was told I was causing my parents to fall ill, I was told I would be the death of them. All this for the risk of applying to drama school. Was it worth it? This is where the dream should stop right? There's clearly no reward. The risk was not worth taking if it's going to cause this much trouble. Or maybe it was. Because no matter how many bricks they tried to pile on my back, I stood taller, I grew stronger. I told myself I wasn't selfish, when you only have one life, how can pursuing something that makes you happy be selfish. I told myself I didn't have the devil inside me, although for a short time I did start to wonder if I did. I eventually told myself *they* were wrong. I told myself the risk was worth taking. So, I pivoted. OK they don't want me to move away and go to drama school, but I can I apply to a local university to study drama? The answer was still no, but by this point I'd had enough and I took the risk and did it anyway. I figured I was not financially dependent on them so really what objections could they have. You see I didn't grow up rich. I lived on a council estate, I was one of the children at school that was given the label of coming from a 'deprived background', so I think my parents were scared. Scared that if I pursued a career that had limited financial rewards then I would continue to struggle through life, just as they had done. But you see, for me, growing up poor meant I wasn't scared of being poor. The way I saw it...the risk was worth it, because the only way was...up.

After university I moved to London. It felt risky to move to one of the most expensive cities in the world but as an actor it's where I felt I had to be. The risk was worth it, I got an agent, I started to book jobs, things were looking up, I started to feel like a real actor. I spent a lot of time feeling as though I was in a film. I couldn't quite believe the girl from a small town was now living in London and working as an actress. My dream had come true and it felt like all the risky sneaking around and anxiety of my school days were finally being rewarded.

However, after about ten years, I, like a lot of actors eventually started to feel fed up with the roles I was getting, fed up with the roles I wasn't being seen for. I was feeling uninspired and angry with the blatant racism that I and other actors around me were facing in the industry. I figured I could either give up or do something about it. Around this time I started seeing a lot of my peers who were feeling the same way about their careers, writing and performing their own work. Instead of waiting to be chosen, they

were choosing themselves. They were taking risks, they were taking their careers into their own hands and going for it. They were making a change. "What's the worst that can happen." They said. Inspired and scared in equal measures I decided to take a leap, choose myself, and write a play, write the role that I wanted to perform. "That's risky." A director friend told me. "Why?" I asked. "Well, people in the industry are a bit suspicious of actors who start to write their own work." I didn't respond, I didn't care if she was right, I figured anyone who is suspicious of an actor wanting to diversify their skills is clearly motivated by their own fear and that's their problem and not mine. I told myself, I was willing to take the risk. I was going to do the scariest thing that I could imagine as an actor which was to stand on stage alone and perform in my own solo show. If nothing happens after that, if it doesn't open any new doors then so be it, if it gets panned by critics then so be it, I actually didn't care, this endeavour was about pushing myself as an artist, really going outside my comfort zone, putting myself on the line as it were, taking a leap into the unknown, what's the worst that can happen? No-one comes to see the show? I get really bad reviews? Oh well, at least I can say that I gave it a go. I'll learn and I'll move on. So, I wrote my first play, 'Flying Solo.' Even before it was written I had booked three performances at the Camden Fringe Festival. I figured once it was booked I had to do the thing I'd promised myself I'd do, there was no backing out! Long story short it went OK. Was it perfect? No. Did I sell out? No. Nowhere near. Did I get rave reviews? No. But what I learned through the process of writing, producing and performing my own show made the risk worth it, because it led to me writing another show, called A Dangerous Woman. This show would be directed by a wonderful woman called, Yael Shavit and we both took a few risks with the show. As A Dangerous Woman was autobiographical my director Yael wanted it to be about the story, she didn't think I needed anything to detract from the power of the story. So we made a show without any set, props, or sound design. It was a huge risk, people like glitz and glamour at the theatre, they want costume, set, lighting and sound design. But we decided to be brave and cut out the noise.

My tour of A Dangerous Woman finished at the Soho Theatre in London. A dream come true! One of my favourite theatre's in London. Not only was I sold out for my run but I also got a standing ovation. I couldn't believe it. The Soho Theatre select a few shows each year to take to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival and I was sure that after seeing the success of my performances I might be picked. I sent an email the next week asking what my position was for being supported at the Edinburgh fringe festival and after a week or so of waiting for a reply I was called in to have a meeting with the literary associate. Then the worst happened. She proceeded to tell me that I wouldn't be going to Edinburgh with them as she thought the show was boring, her and her colleague struggled to stay awake, she asked why we had chosen to do a show with no set and sound and lighting design. "You can't have a show without those things, it was awful." She told me. It was like a dagger in my stomach. I was so embarrassed. What had I been thinking? Who was I to think I could create my own work?

I started to feel like choosing myself was too big a risk. Doing my own work was no longer worth it. I couldn't handle feedback like that again. I decided to believe everything this woman had said to me. I told myself she was right and all the other lovely feedback and great reviews were wrong. I started to wonder whether my work was worth anything if I chose myself. Surely you have to be chosen, your worth depends on outside validation. I know the answer to this is a resounding 'no' yet till this day I still wrestle with it.

Luckily I didn't stay in my depression for too long. Like most things that feel like they destroy you, you eventually scrape yourself together and rise once again. You might feel wobbly at first, but you'll soon find your feet and then your wings. It's OK for people to not like your work, of course it is, art is subjective, but it's not OK to tear someone apart. That was cruel, but I'm stronger for it and more certain and confident of the work I want to make, to continue being bold and brave and risk not being liked.

A year later, now in 2018, I took another risk. This one was perhaps the one that really changed my life in ways that I couldn't have imagined. I applied for a mentorship program with Penguin Random House. I didn't even have a finished book, I barely had ten thousand words, there was no way they were going to choose me out of the three thousand applications. I had joked about wanting to write a book whilst working on *A Dangerous Woman* with my director Yael and when she was editing my script she would often say, "that bits for the page not the stage, save it for the book." And those bits did eventually find themselves in what was to become *Run, Rebel* my debut semi-autobiographical novel- and so started my career as an author.

The risk was definitely worth it. The books have done very nicely and the rewards have been bountiful. My most treasured times are when I visit schools and libraries and get to talk to teachers, librarians and students. On more than one occasion though I've had a teenager on the cusp of university crying and telling me they want to study English or drama but their parents won't allow it. And it's the same story, they think there's no money in it, there's no way it can be a career. So, I tell them my story and I tell them to go home and tell their parents that you met a woman today who makes a very nice living as a writer. But I can see that their parents fear has already sunk in and it's been absorbed by the child and it makes me so sad.

When you start taking risks, you stop caring about the end result and to me that makes life more exciting. You'll never regret taking that chance. Along the way I've risked sending work out to producers and publishers only to get rejection after rejection. That's OK, not everything you do will be for everyone but that doesn't mean you should stop trying or dare not to try in the first place.

So, what's the one thing you want to do but still haven't? What's holding you back? Your friends, your family, your social media followers? I know it feels risky to step into an unknown space, but the question I want to ask is, which risk scares you more? The risk of failing on your way to creating something great or the risk of doing nothing, watching your ideas gathering dust whilst life passes you by. It's never too late to try.

So be bold, take that leap, dare yourself to fail, because by not doing you fail, you fail by default, if you take the risk and it doesn't work out, that's not failure, that's called learning and you pick yourself up and you carry on. Choose yourself, boldly and fearlessly choose yourself. Take those risks and be fearless. Fearless in life, fearless in work, fearless in your learning, fearless in your writing, fearless in your reading, fearless in your dreams, fearless in love. We've got so much to gain, life can be so rewarding if you'll just take the risks. So, who's in?

Thank you for listening.