# a mixtape for maladies introductory notes

**These notes were prepared for the 16/03/2025 performance of *a mixtape for maladies* and delivered live prior to the start of the show.**

Kia ora and welcome to today’s audio-described performance of *a mixtape for maladies,* presented by Agaram Productions, Auckland Theatre Company, and Te Ahurei Toi o Tāmaki Auckland Arts Festival.

This is the first production of Auckland Theatre Company’s 2025 season. It is 1 hour and 30 minutes long without an interval, and includes themes of war and trauma. Set in both present-day Aotearoa and Sri Lanka of the past, the narrative follows Deepan, a young man who discovers an old mixtape in his family home. As he questions his mother Sangeetha and listens to the mixtape, he delves into the intertwined lives of Sangeetha’s family, including her father Rajan and her siblings Subbalaxmi and Vishwanathan, and her love interest Anton.

## A note from the creator Ahilan Karunaharan அகிலன் கருணாகரன்

As artists of the South Asian diaspora, our actors have lent their voices as allies to this kaupapa so that these vital stories can still be told on our stages.

The Tamil spoken in Sri Lanka varies across regions. For the purposes of accessible storytelling, we have employed a broad South Asian accent in this production. Similarly, the songs featured in this work were originally composed and sung by legendary stalwarts of the music industry, and as a company we have reimagined these songs and music. This is a work about a past that no longer exists. We have had to imagine and recreate it so that it is not forgotten in the future. As children of the diaspora, we are at various stages in our journey of reconnecting with our mother tongues. It is our hope that one day this work will be performed by an all-Sri Lankan cast.

## Character and costume

The action starts with Deepan, played by Shaan Kesha. He’s a tall young man of Sri Lankan heritage with dark hair parted in the middle and flopping down to his ears on each side. He wears a blue hooded sweatshirt, jeans, and red sneakers. As he leans into the microphone to introduce his podcast show, he looks out to us as though we’re his audience.

Ambika G.K.R அம்பிகா plays Sangeetha, Deepan’s mum. She wears an orange floral patterned dress and has curly dark hair down to her shoulders. When she first appears, she has a laundry basket filled with clothes, all dyed pink.

The memory scenes of the show span a few decades – the timeframe isn’t specifically stated, but around the mid-60s to the late 80s. The ageing of the characters in these memories is indicated by changes to their voices, and through hair and clothing.

Young Sangeetha is played by Gemma-Jayde Naidoo. In her first scene she’s in a school uniform – white shirt and blue skirt – and wrapped in sari material. Her hair is two plaits framing her face. She’s lively and cheeky with a wide grin. As a teenager, she wear a yellow top, long maroon skirt, and jewellery including a nose-ring, earrings and anklets. When visiting Anton at his shop, she dresses in a tight green blouse, maroon skirt and a dupatta – a long yellow piece of fabric tucked in at the waist and draped over one shoulder. During the wedding-day scenes, Sangeetha wears a sari, a length of material tucked around the body over an underskirt, then pleated and pinned to the shoulder. Her hair is in a single braid. In the final scenes of the show, she wears a pink shirt and full red skirt.

Sangheeta’s older sister Subbalaxmi, played by Tiahli Martyn, has a quiet but firm manner. She also has her hair in two plaits and wears jewellery. She’s nearly a teenager in the earliest memory scenes, appearing first in her school uniform and then in a dark green top with matching long full skirt, and a long gold necklace. For the wedding day, she has a red sari with gold shimmer. Later, when she travels to Colombo, she has a light blue shirt, shin-length tan skirt, a satchel and suitcase.

Their younger brother Vishwanathan is played by Ravikanth Gurunathan. He is taller than his sisters with long hair tied back at the nape of his neck in a ponytail. As a boy he wears school uniform – white shirt, blue shorts – or a tan shirt and white shorts with large red checks. When he grows older, he dresses in a pale pink shirt and light purple trousers. On the wedding day, he wears formal white – a long tunic over a stiff lungi, a tube-shaped sarong tied at the waist.

The father, Rajan, is played by Meramanji Odedra in today’s show. He is tall with greying hair cut to his ears. He wears a short-sleeved shirt with vertical brown stripes running down the sides over a cream lungi while at home, and shirts and trousers when out and about. Like Vishwanathan, he has formal white on the wedding day.

Bala Murali Shingade plays two characters. As Suthan, Vishwanathan’s school friend, he is serious and earnest in black-rimmed glasses, wearing his school uniform buttoned neatly with dark suspenders over his white shirt. As he ages, he cut a dapper figure in his outfits – on the wedding day, for example, he has an bright orange floral shirt and red trousers with black suspenders. As the character Anton, his dark hair is swept back from his brow and he sports polo shirts over white flared trousers. He strikes suave poses, aware of the impact he has on the young women as he flirts with Sangeetha.

The musicians are Ben Fernandez and Seyorn Arunagirinathan சேயோன் அருணகிரிநாதன். They wear black silk shirts with large red flowers over black trousers.

## Set and lighting

There are a number of distinct areas in the set, and lighting is used to define the particular space that is the point of focus. The action begins in Sangeetha’s garage in Aotearoa New Zealand. There’s a raised platform on the front right of the stage and at the start it is tightly lit so that nothing else is visible. It has rough wooden panels for walls, without plaster or gib, and is set up as Deepan’s podcast studio with two microphones, an old cassette player, and a laptop on a table with two chairs behind it. There is an entrance to the garage on the far right, and also a short flight of stairs which lead onto the main floor of the stage. The garage is visible throughout, with Deepan and Sangeetha looking across the floor space as they look back through time.

Later in the story the boundaries between New Zealand in the present and Sri Lanka in the past blur, enabling Deepan and his mum to walk amongst the characters in Sri Lanka.

The two musicians, one on keyboard and the other on violin and flute, are positioned throughout the play at front left, on a small platform atop a round stage. Behind them is a floor-to-ceiling gold curtain with a cluster of large lightbulbs hanging midway. During musical numbers, a warm golden light fills the space and a shadow pattern of foliage is projected on the curtain. The stage has an microphone stand with mic set up, and is easily accessed from the main floor.

The main floor has two levels. A wide red staircase runs between them, just to the left of centre and facing us. The upper level can be accessed via these stairs. A second staircase runs from the main floor up to the right, disappearing behind the back wall of the garage. Beneath the upper level are two low rooms.

The floor is used to create a series of locations in Sri Lanka. I t is usually clear from the dialogue where these are set: the street, inside the family home, or outside the temple. During the scenes at Anton’s store, the rooms under the stairs house shelves that can be wheeled out.

The cinema scene is created in one of the downstairs rooms with a row of four large leather seats, with lighting to evoke the glow of the projected film. The dance number portrayed during this scene is an enactment of what Vishwanathan and Suthan are watching on screen.

Later, this room becomes the hostel in Colombo with a phone hanging on the wall.

There’s a short gold curtain that hangs above the width of the stage, echoing the gold curtain behind the band. The remaining stage areas can all be concealed by lowering two golden-brown panels.

The show is underpinned by musical interludes and enactments of the songs on the mixtape. At times the songs are recorded – they play and stop as a character hits the clicky buttons on a tape player. Other pieces are sung live by various characters at the musicians’ stage, both to live accompaniment and to recorded tracks. There are also several musical numbers where the characters sing and dance. These songs have a filmic quality, like scenes from a Bollywood or Tamil movie.

Finally, a quick note on some of the words used in the show to indicate relationships between characters. Deepan refers to the older Sangeetha as Amma, Mum, and I mostly use this word as well to distinguish her from young Sangeetha. The children call their father Appa, Dad, which I also use instead of his name, Rajan. Akka means older sister and is a term used by Sangeetha and Vishwanathan, and also by Anton when talking to Laxmi. And lastly, Vishwanathan is sometimes called Thumbi, which means ‘little brother’.

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