

Best of Toronto Fringe 2025 Winner Shaharah "Gaz" Gaznabbi Makes Their Fringe Directorial Debut with Thera Theatre's *Belly Button*, Written by Fresh Talent Hemali Sankalya Ratnaweera



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Toronto, ON – June 30 – July 11, 2026 – Step through the portal and into the strange, soaring world of *Belly Button*, a weird and wild new play premiering at this year's Toronto Fringe Festival. Written and produced by emerging playwright Hemali Sankalya Ratnaweera and directed by Shaharah "Gaz" Gaznabbi (Best of Toronto Fringe 2025), here making their Fringe directorial debut — *Belly Button* is staged by Thera Theatre at Soulpepper Theatre's Michael Young Theatre from June 30 to July 11, 2026. For more information and to purchase tickets, visit fringetoronto.com/fringe/show/belly-button.

About the Show:

In this weird, wild, and chorally-driven story, Q leaves home the only way they can: by crawling through the portal in their stomach... their belly button. On the other side, they meet the famous Hungarian-Indian painter Amrita Sher-Gil, who challenges everything Q thinks they know about family, immigration, culture, queerness, and community. Equal parts surreal dreamscape and tender coming-of-age tale, *Belly Button* is a bold, choral, 60-minute meditation, rooted in exploratory movement, on the mothers we come from and the homelands they carry with them. Brought to life by a full cast of POC immigrant artists, the play traces the textures of diaspora

through the maternal line — the inheritances our mothers hand down, the motherlands they leave behind, and the new homes we learn to build in their wake. *Belly Button* is the kind of bold new theatre the Fringe was built for: a form-pushing, movement-driven story that anyone who has ever struggled to belong will recognize as their own.

Key Details:

- **Title:** Belly Button
- **Playwright & Producer:** Hemali Sankalya Ratnaweera
- **Director & Dramaturg:** Shaharah "Gaz" Gaznabbi
- **Movement Director:** Nuha Yousuf
- **Company:** Thera Theatre
- **Cast:** Shriyanshi Quanoongo, Sandy Aurora Ramdin, Stephanie Bisram, Alexandra Martin, Trinity Lloyd, Nora Alexander, Reena Goze
- **Producer:** Kemi King
- **Assistant Producer:** Nadine Maranan
- **Stage Manager:** Laurie-Anne Rohaly
- **Assistant Stage Manager:** Rebecca McDonald
- **Intimacy Coordinator:** Kass Prus
- **Lighting Designer:** Sephora N'Kosi
- **Set Designer:** Sebastian Cattrysse
- **Costume Designer:** Crescent Choudhary
- **Sound Designer:** Ashley Naomi Skye
- **Runtime:** 60 minutes
- **Performance Dates:**
 - Tuesday, June 30 – 5:00 PM
(*Pay What You Can*)
 - Friday, July 3 – 8:15 PM
 - Sunday, July 5 – 12:15 PM
(*Mask Mandatory*)
 - Wednesday, July 8 – 3:45 PM
(*Pay What You Can*)
 - Thursday, July 9 – 6:00 PM
 - Friday, July 10 – 10:30 PM
 - Saturday, July 11 – 4:15 PM
- **Venue:** Soulpepper Theatre's Michael Young Theatre, 50 Tank House Lane, Distillery Historic District, Toronto, ON M5A 3C4 (*physically accessible*)

Accolades: Director and dramaturg Shaharah "Gaz" Gaznabbi, winner of Best of Toronto Fringe 2025 as a playwright and producer, makes their Fringe directorial debut with *Belly Button*. The production's ensemble, composed entirely of POC and immigrant artists, features Dora Award winner Trinity Lloyd (*FLEX*) and Dora Award nominated Reena Goze (*Ladies and Gentlemen, Boys and Girls*), bringing a stacked roster of talent to this surreal new work. The

production's Creative Team features Sound Design from 2026 Pauline McGibbon Award and TTCA winner Ashley Naomi Skye.

About the Playwright:

Hemali Sankalya Ratnaweera is a playwright, director, and producer whose current work explores the nuances of our identities, colored by queerness, immigration and language. They are interested in the wacky, weird and whimsical within creation, with a focus on creating and facilitating values-based spaces.

Recent Credits: Queer Youth Cabaret (Soulpepper Theatre), Bump (Guild Festival Theatre, YES Program), Chitra (Paprika Festival). They are also a graduate of Generator TO's Producer Development Unit. "Belly Button" is their debut.

About the Director:

Shaharah "Gaz" Gaznabbi (They/Them) is an ACTRA & Equity Actor, Playwright, Puppeteer, Comedian, Deviser, Dramaturg, Drag Artist, (you name it!) based in Toronto. They were an Artist-In-Residence at Tarragon Theatre as a recipient of the Ellen Ross Stuart Award, and was part of Tarragon Theatre's Young Playwrights Unit. Shaharah received The Neurodiverse Review's Birds of Paradise Emerging Talent Award at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival 2023, where they presented their solo-show "What Can Indian Look Like? Can It Look Caribbean?". They have also received TO Live's "Best of Fringe", as well as the Canadian Green Alliance's "Greenest In The Fringe" at the Toronto Fringe Festival 2025 for their solo puppet filled musical comedy "My Pet Lizard, Liz: The Shakespearean Existential Crisis that Led to his Ultimate Demise". They additionally received the inaugural Gerda Hynatyshyn Launch Grant for English Theatre.

Recent Credits: Noor in Season 3 of CBC's run The Burbs, Ontario and US tour of "Jungle book" Directed by Rick Miller & Craig Francis, 4 city tour of "Quest for The Moon", and 5 city tour of "Old Man and the River" both with WeeFestival.

About the Movement Director:

Nuha Yousuf is a multidisciplinary creator, musical improviser, and multi-genre vocalist. She is a lover of the odd, peculiar and absurd, and loves playing with expectation, subverting tradition and breaking form to piece it back together in unexpected ways. Her work focuses on creating and devising bold new original work, bridging music, theatre and dance together into one cohesive vision, and aims to uplift marginalized stories.

Highlights include Assistant Directing Tapestry Opera's *Briefs*, performing her NUMUS 2025 winning curation, *Of Mothers and Daughters*, sound designing and performing live music for Before I Die (Mada Theatre, MT Space's Works in Progress Festival), and partnering with Conservation Halton to create a site-specific multi-instrumental piece at Crawford Lake.

PULL QUOTES:

1. “*Belly Button* is the kind of story I wished I had when I was starting my theatrical journey. The mix of poetic yet weird, wonderful queer quirky joy paired with lyrical, devised, gorgeous movement is delicious. It is a delight to be reminded of the vivacious energy that truly multidisciplinary devised theatre created with truly delightful performers and designers is steeped in. This is what will keep our industry alive.” – **Shaharah "Gaz" Gaznabbi**, *Director*
2. “We are creating unapologetic work, and because of that we are creating magical work. This is the kind of theatre we need more of in Toronto, and frankly the only type of work I want to keep investing in.” – **Shaharah "Gaz" Gaznabbi**, *Director*

Join Us: Don't miss *Belly Button*, a show that promises the strange, the funny, and the deeply felt. A journey through identity, diaspora, and the bodies we carry our histories in. This is theatre for anyone who has ever wondered where home really begins.

To book your tickets visit <https://fringetoronto.com/fringe/show/belly-button>

For more information and to keep up with Thera Theatre, follow @theratheatre on Instagram.

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