

Leather Woman

Review of R&D theatre

by Anisha Debbarman

What can be said about Walsall, a unique little post-industrial town, nestled between the bustling cities of Birmingham and Wolverhampton? Beyond its geographical oddities, the town is famous for its leather goods, an age-old business with colonial roots, and apparently known to supply leather saddles and handbags to the royal family, including for the late Queen Elizabeth, crafted by Launer London, another staple of the Walsall leather industry. However, there is more to this town than its craftsmanship and royal ties.

In October 2025, Sohaya Visions presented its timely R&D play, *Leather Woman*, with a performance steeped in the rich and complex histories of female friendships at the Walsall Leather Museum, itself based in a renovated Victorian leather factory. Drawing upon oral histories, it is a fictional script written by Raminder Kaur and directed by Lisa Goldman. The play focuses on the lives of four women--Brenda, a white woman who is oblivious to racism (played by Kathryn Bond); Dorothy, the daughter of a nouveaux riche factory owner who seeks to become 'one of the gals' (Michelle Butterly); Debbie (Debi), an Asian (Punjabi) first-generation migrant who tries to avoid shaking the status quo (Tanya Katyal); and Keira, an Irish-descent woman who is prone to asthma (Miriam Grance Edwards).

The script begins with their shared laughter during break times from leather glueing, between making stitches from their Singer sewing machines, to finding bold ways to support one another and protest in the face of employment injustice and discrimination. Work life in these factories was never easy for the women workers, who were often paid less than their male counterparts and not provided with protective gear to shield them from the dust and toxic fumes while handling leather products. Remarkably, women from different racial and religious backgrounds worked on these factory floors, reinforcing how colonialism has made a lasting impact on industrial towns in the UK and with migrants from colonised areas in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean.

Full of music and dance from the 1970s, the presentation moved between punk to new wave music, and from the party Conga dance to the Panjabi women's folk *giddha*. While the play revolves around the lives of these women, it also brings together shared memories of finding sisterhood in unlikely places. With a strong female cast, these women embody more than just fictional characters but invite the audience to share the laughter and tears felt by each character, reliving the memories of what it meant to 'make it or break it'.

To a packed room with a riveted audience, the R&D presentation was informative as well as a joy to see. Perhaps it was a chance to even *shake it*, inviting everyone to a *giddha!*