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## **Anosh Irani's homesick imagination**

**Author moved to Vancouver in search of solitude. This gave him the time, and the fire, to write plays and novels about the land he left behind**

Anosh Irani was a 24-year-old ad copy writer working in Mumbai in 1998 when he abruptly packed up and moved to Vancouver to reinvent himself as a struggling young author.

"I've always been someone who takes risks. I've never played it safe," he recalls, during an interview at the Toronto offices of his publisher, Doubleday.

"I realized that I loved writing stories. And I needed to get away so that I could start all over again.

"Bombay was too full a life for me," he says, preferring to refer to the city by its former name. "With a full-time job in advertising - and not just 9 to 5, but 9 to 9 - there was no time to hone my craft. The city is intoxicating in the most energizing way, but it also leaves you drained out at the end of the day."

Irani moved to Vancouver in search of solitude. At least on that level, he was not disappointed.

"The intense isolation that I felt when I came to Canada was a gift. You need that as a writer," he says.

"For the first time, I understood what homesickness is. I understood what it was to ache for a place. But that was also a gift. This yearning for Bombay made me want to tell stories about it. I would wake up every day and feel so ill that the only thing I could do was write."

In the fall of 2003, Arts Club Theatre produced Irani's *The Matka King*, a play adapted from a short story he had published. The next spring his debut novel, *The Cripple and his Talismans*, was published. Irani has continued to divide his time between fiction and drama, with growing success. A second play, *Bombay Black* earned four Dora Mavor Moore Awards after its 2006 Toronto premiere and has since been produced in India. A follow-up novel, *The Song of Kahunsha*, was a finalist in 2007 for Canada Reads.

If anything, the overlap between his twin writing vocations has become tighter. After visiting Toronto last week to promote his new novel, *Dahanu Road*, he had to hurry home for the premiere of a play, *My Granny the Goldfish*, which opens Friday in Vancouver.

"I didn't plan things this way," he says. "It just happens that I've been working on plays and novels simultaneously. It seems very natural."

*Dahanu Road* is an ambitious, multi-generational family story steeped in the author's background as the descendent of Zoroastrians who settled in India after facing persecution in Iran. Irani spent time researching the novel during his frequent return visits to Mumbai. He was in the city during the 2008 terrorist attack on the Taj Mahal Hotel.

"My grandfather was the florist at the Taj Mahal Hotel," he recalls.

"So there were a lot of childhood memories. My first visit to a bookshop was at the Taj Mahal Hotel. When the attacks happened, I heard about this little boy hiding in the bookshop. That was very strange. To picture this image of bullets flying all over the place and this little boy taking shelter in a bookstore." *Dahanu Road*, set in a coastal city two hours by train from Mumbai, concerns a doomed Romeo and Juliet love affair between a young man and woman from different classes. It weaves elements of Irani's

own family history and lore into the fictional narrative.

"There are a lot of personal details but there is a point where the autobiography stops and the imagination takes over," he says.

"It's very difficult to pinpoint what happened and what didn't happen, what is true and what isn't true. It's a clash of everything: history, religion, spirituality and storytelling.

"That's what I love about this particular story. Its scope is vast. Everything seemed to collide. And there were no easy answers. That's what a good novel should do."

Anosh Irani, now based in Vancouver, was in Mumbai researching his new book when terrorists attacked the Taj Mahal Hotel in 2008. Dahanu Road weaves elements of Irani's family history into narrative. Carlos Osorio/Toronto Star

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