



# REIMAGINING THE 1914 VANCOUVER TRIAL OF MEWA SINGH

## THE UNDOCUMENTED TRIAL OF WILLIAM C. HOPKINSON

WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY PANEET SINGH



JANUARY 8 - 11, 2016  
VANCOUVER ART GALLERY  
750 HORNBY STREET





## Cast List (By Order of Appearance)

William C. Hopkinson	Patrick Nagel
Mewa Singh	Harwant Brar
Mr. McCann/H.H. Stevens	Bradley Bergeron
Justice Morrison	Sacha Romalo
Mrs. Dalton	Sherry Duggal
Mr. Woods	Andrew Wade
Mr. Taylor	Michael Strickland
Mr. Campbell/Peter	Daniel Juozaitis
Bhag Singh	Sidantha Murjani
Annie Wright	Tabatha Visutskie
Dhadi (Musician)	Arwant Kang

## Crew

Producer	Jagjeet Singh
Producer	Naveen Girn
Producer	Gurdit Rangi
Writer/Director	Paneet Singh
Designer	Adelaide Wilder
Stage Manager	Sharon Johal
Assistant Director	Sunny Brar
Hair & Make-up	Natalia Blanc
Costume	Kaylee Fleckney
Set Decoration Assistant	Brianna Huntley Smith
Assistant Stage Manager	Manveer Sihota
Assistant Stage Manager	Harleen Minhas

## Marketing

Communications Director	Nimritta Parmar
Graphic Designer	Japneet Kaur
Volunteer Coordinator	Gurjot Cheema
Community Liaison	Sukhninder Singh

## Special Thanks

Ishmeet Singh  
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 Guru Nanak Sikh Gurdwara Surrey-Delta  
 Gurdwara Sahib Kalgidhar Darbar Abbotsford  
 Khalsa Diwan Society New Westminster  
 Gurdwara Sahib Khalsa Darbar Vancouver  
 Gurdwara Sahib Dasmesh Darbar Surrey  
 Gurdwara Sahib Dukh Nivaran Surrey



Inspector William C. Hopkinson served as an officer for the Immigration department of Canada as an interpreter. Through his ability to speak Hindi and Punjabi, Hopkinson served as a communication point between the South Asian community in Canada, and the government. Inspector Hopkinson maintained a network of South Asian spies in Canada which would report on activities in the Sikh and South Asian community.

Inspector Hopkinson is considered a key player in the infamous Komagata Maru episode. On May 23rd 1914, the Komagata Maru ship, dubbed the "Guru Nanak Jahaaz" by charterer Gurdit Singh, arrived in Burrard Inlet carrying 376 passengers following a lengthy and strenuous journey from Asia. Upon arrival, the ship was not allowed to dock, and the passengers were refused the right to disembark on the grounds that the ship did not fulfill the requirements of the "Continuous Voyage Regulation," one of Canada's most infamous exclusionary laws. The ship sat in the limbo off the coast of Downtown Vancouver with the passengers living on board, repeatedly running out of food and supplies, while the matter was taken to court. After two months, only 24 of the passengers were given the right to disembark, and the others were sent back to India, where they were greeted by the British Indian military, which opened fire on many of the unarmed passengers. Many passengers were killed, injured, or arrested.

On September 5th 1914, Bela Singh, one of Hopkinson's spies, entered the Gurdwara (Sikh Temple) on W 2nd Avenue in Vancouver and opened fire in the middle of a funeral service, assassinating community leader and Gurdwara President Bhag Singh and another man by the name of Badhan Singh, while subsequently injuring eight others. He was promptly arrested, charged with murder, and taken to court.

While many eyewitnesses reported to local newspapers on the day of the attack that the shooting was unprovoked, the testimonies given in the trial contrasted the earlier reports, with all the eyewitnesses testifying that the shooting had taken place in self-defense. Mewa Singh, an eyewitness of the shooting, reported that his life was repeatedly threatened by Inspector Hopkinson and his informants and that they were attempting to intimidate him to testify in favour of the assassin, Bela.

Seeing no way around the threats, the day that he was to testify at the trial of Bela, Mewa Singh entered the Vancouver Provincial Courthouse (now the Vancouver Art Gallery), and with two revolvers shot and killed Hopkinson. Mewa Singh immediately surrendered his weapons and turned himself into police. When his trial for assassinating Hopkinson began, Mewa Singh refused his barrister the opportunity to construct a case for defense, and took full responsibility of assassinating Hopkinson. He presented only one statement in which he detailed his motive and implicated Hopkinson in being the root of the problems in the Sikh and South Asian Community. Mewa Singh was found guilty and hanged for his actions on January 11th, 1915 in New Westminster.



In 2012 I was sitting outside of parliament in Victoria, BC. Naturally, the tour guides attract a great deal of attention with their sensational old-timey outfits. I noticed two groups of people outside of the building. One group was lined up, waiting for the next tour, and one group was lined up by the tour guides, waiting to get a picture with them in their outfits. The former group would get the experience itself, and the latter would get the facade of an experience. I can't say for what reason, but this moment really resonated with me. In consequence of much of my writing being historically based, it started echoing that moment outside of parliament, thematically. Getting the three dimensions of experience.

This is not a mock trial deciding if a historical figure is guilty or not guilty. This is about re-living the experience and sympathizing with four perspectives, both comparable and contrasting, of the same time period. It is about revisiting the spaces where history lives - walking these halls where Hopkinson walked moments before his death. Revisiting the trial of Mewa Singh in this exact building it took place. Site-specific theatre naturally lent itself to being the most effective medium to share this story. This story needed to be told here at the Vancouver Art Gallery, formerly the Vancouver Provincial Courthouse.

While sensory stimulation is the most powerful experience for a human, it is always perceived, analyzed, and reflected upon in the mind's-eye. The mind's-eye has no limitation. Again, this is echoed by the production. Site-specific theatre, no stage lighting, no auditorium styled seating, authentic courtroom circa 1910, historically based - that is the sensory stimulation. The truth in the experience. The surrealist plot, the non-linear storyline, the fictionalized and dramatized backstories - therein lies the mind's-eye. The higher truth in the limitless reflection.

Over 100 years after the Komagata Maru and Mewa Singh, there remain a few issues in our Social Studies classrooms throughout the country. Our history books do not accurately reflect the make-up of the students in those classrooms. Monumental stories like the Komagata Maru are reduced to just half a page in those same books. Stories like Mewa Singh's and Hopkinson's are largely forgotten and ignored, and consequently haven't been viewed through a 21st-century lens. While things do certainly improve over time, we still do not yet see the three dimensions of the experience.

Luckily, we have thousands of wonderful, passionate educators and bright, proactive students from coast-to-coast who only need the slightest light of exposure to bring stories like these to their students and peers, respectively. It is my hope, that this production can be a part of that tiny light that sparks research and constructive analytical discourse.

The truth is in the experience, the higher truth is in the limitless reflection.

Peace and love,  
Panneet Singh  
Playwright/Director





Shaheed Bhai Mewa Singh Society Members

Bikar Singh Dhillon  
Jagir Singh Nagra  
Gurbax Singh Sanghera  
Jagdeep Singh Sanghera  
Pal Singh Sidhu  
Surinder Singh Brar  
Daljit Singh Uppal  
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