Peacebuilder and poet-performer Dr. Rama Mani has been called ‘a catalyst of transformation’, ‘a cosmic agent of awakening’, and ‘an evocateur of the possible future’. Rama combines art with politics. She weaves poetry and theatre into her public appearances to bring vividly to life the challenges of global peace and security, and to activate diverse audiences around the world to become co-creators of positive change. Rama is the Founder of Theatre of Transformation and Co-Founder of Rising Women Rising World. She is a Councilor of the World Future Council and Senior Research Associate of the University of Oxford’s Centre for International Studies.

ON GENDER, ROLES AND CHOICES
Both my gender and my culture influenced my choice. Growing up in India, I was torn between love and horror for my culture. I admired the diversity and depth of our ancient Indian culture, rooted in universality. Yet, I was outraged constantly by the injustices imposed in the name of this culture against women and so-called ‘untouchables’ or lower castes and indigenous people. From a young age, I was determined to do everything I possibly could to end injustice against women and the vulnerable. I realised that this would require a combination of the power of art to move hearts and minds and to revitalise our culture, and the power of politics to change unjust policies and practices, and make our society more compassionate.

ON THE INTERSECTION BETWEEN POLITICS AND ARTS
Well, when it came to decision time for my studies, I chose to pursue the route of politics rather than art, as it seemed a more direct way of equipping myself to be a change maker. My studies pushed me further away from art, and pulled me more irrevocably down the political path. And it was my work as a peacebuilder in warzones across Africa, and my academic research and writings on genocide prevention, culture and justice that reunited me with my passion for art! My academic and professional background gave me the vital first-hand experience at the grassroots level, as well as the expertise at the global policy level that now fuel my artistic work, and enable my art to be taken seriously by decision-makers, scholars and the wider public alike.

ON SUCCESS
My philosophy as a political artist or an artist who seeks to catalyse transformation is twofold: First, ‘May the Beauty we love be what we do’, to quote Rumi. Second, that true art is not about ‘I’ and ‘mine’ but about ‘Us’ and ‘Ours’.Let me explain why these are so important for me and, I believe, for art and for society at large today.

The first part of my philosophy is directly inspired by the Sufi poet Rumi who wrote: ‘May the beauty we love be what we do!’ If each of us finds the way to link our purpose to our passion, it transforms us personally as well as the world around us. I discovered that true art, like true humanity, is born out of personal and collective crisis, out of the strength that emerges from suffering, out of the power that emerges from pain. This is what makes art transformative. This is what makes us fully human.

The second part of my philosophy is echoed in a simple Sanskrit saying: ‘Id ne mama’, which means ‘This is not mine.’ A true artist is not the creator of his/her work, but simply the conduit through whom art flows. Art is inspired by something beyond us.

In my experience, the art that touches and transforms individuals and entire societies is not about ‘I’ but about ‘Us’. It speaks to and for an entire people.

“Through my transformative art, I’m aspiring to shift the old paradigm that governed politics, economics and society so far and destroyed human life: ‘the love of power’ to the new paradigm of ‘the power of love’.”
ON BEING A ‘CATALYST OF TRANSFORMATION’.
It is the transformative capacity of my art that brings me deepest joy and satisfaction.

What moves me is the personal impact my performances have on diverse audiences from totally different cultures and backgrounds. Whether decision makers or the lay public, whether refugees or humanitarian workers, women or men, young or old, audiences everywhere connect deeply to the real-life people and situations I bring to life on stage.

Audiences realise that these ‘distant strangers’ that I bring to life in quick succession on stage are actually familiar kin. In fact, ‘they’ are ‘us’. And like them, we have the capacity to face difficulty and reshape our lives and our world. From audiences they become active participants, as they feel evoked to activate their solutions to the problems we face.

ON RISK TAKING
Yes! It is by taking risks that we discover ourselves – whole realms of ourselves that were hidden away as they were never pulled out of their comfort zone and challenged before. And it is by trying and even failing that we learn and grow.

Perhaps the biggest risk in my life is the one I am taking now, of stepping out of the comfort zone of my earlier activist, academic and policy work and mobilising the power of art and theatre to redefine power itself. Through my transformative art, I’m aspiring to shift the old paradigm that governed politics, economics and society so far and destroyed human life: ‘the love of power’ to the new paradigm of ‘the power of love’. And I seek to do this by raising it directly with decision makers as well as with the general public, so they can question and redefine it for themselves. To some this may seem risky, but to me it is essential, as it is what the world needs and what most humans long for. And art is such a powerful vehicle for this.

ON WORK LIFE BALANCE
When ‘the beauty you love is what you do’, it is easier to balance life and work because everything is interconnected, because everything you do energises and replenishes you, because you find beauty and
“When ‘the beauty you love is what you do’, it is easier to balance life and work because everything is interconnected, because everything you do energises and replenishes you, because you find beauty and humanity everywhere and in everything you do.”

humanity everywhere and in everything you do. Nevertheless, I must mention two factors that help me tremendously in finding balance. The first is nature and the second is love.

Art requires an inner-oriented time, when you create a new piece, and an outward-oriented time, when you share it with the world. To create, I have found that I simply have to spend time in nature. We have chosen to live in a very simple and simply beautiful, rural area in the Jura mountains in France, between Geneva and Lyon.

The second factor is love! I am very fortunate to share my life with my soul mate, who is equally passionate about nature, culture, art and the human spirit.

ON “RISING WOMEN RISING WORLD”
The inspiration was simply this: when my two incredible co-founders – Professor Jean Houston (www.jeanhouston.org) and Dr Scilla Elworthy (www.scilla.elworthy.com) and I came together, we felt that we are entering a new moment in history unlike any before. And we felt that this historic moment needed women to come together around a common purpose. We now need to articulate women’s visions for the future, and their strategies for taking us from here to there. Based on their own experiences of setbacks and breakthroughs, women have the courage and conviction to take us from the violence and destruction of the present to the future of collective wellbeing we long for. Our uniting vision is to ‘co-create a world that works for all’. Our experience shows us that what is essential to bring about outer change in the world is to build our inner resources, and this is a considerable focus of our efforts. A major upcoming highlight is an exciting ‘Femme Q Summit’ in Berlin featuring Rising Women Rising World, on 8-9 March 2016: see www.risingwomenrisingworld.org

ON FUTURE CHALLENGES
It would be my dream in five years to see Theatre of Transformation become a powerful global movement, as more and more people at all levels of society, engage in this form of participatory and purposeful art, activate their creativity and become co-creators of positive change.

My other dream in five years is to use Theatre of Transformation as a vehicle to catalyse the paradigm shift I spoke of earlier: from the destructive ‘love of power’ to the restorative ‘power of love’, in politics, in economics, and even in our personal lives.

Through Theatre of Transformation I offer myself, as a catalyst to realise this dream by activating the collective power of our creativity. And I invite you all to call on me wherever I can be of service! With me you will also tap into an exciting global pool of my creative collaborators, around the world – artists, musicians, dancers, scholars and activists with a shared passion for transformation.