



PERTH INTERNATIONAL ARTS FESTIVAL

Language lost but meaning gained

THEATRE

A Midsummer Night's Dream

By William Shakespeare
Dash Arts Production. His Majesty's Theatre, Perth; Her Majesty's Theatre, Adelaide, February 29-March 8; Sydney Theatre at Walsh Bay, March 11-22.

WO dozen people from the Indian subcontinent, each with different artistic skills, are invited to perform a Shakespeare play in the languages they feel most comfortable speaking. There are seven languages, English being one of them. So why does this seeming recipe for disaster work like a dream?

A Midsummer Night's Dream has never been so exuberantly staged as in British director Tim Supple's groundbreaking collaboration with Indian and Sri Lankan performers. The show has won over Perth audiences and is likely to do the same in its Adelaide and Sydney seasons.

Any expectations that this is ethnicised Shakespeare, transposed clumsily into a Mahabharata-type Indian epic, is dispelled within seconds. When Titania's fairy rabble burst through paper-covered bamboo scaffolding (reminiscent of building sites all over Asia), they are as cheeky as Delhi street urchins but equally resemble the clowning spirits of Shakespeare's day.

Theseus and Hippolyta may appear as silk-and-jewel-clad Indian elites, but their power struggle is clearly that of Duke of Athens and Queen of the Amazons.

Titania's attempt to wrest back from lover Oberon her adopted Indian boy (who is indeed an Indian boy here) is a recognisable battle between fairy royalty even when acted in English, Malayalam and Sanskrit. And

Archana Ramaswamy and P. R. Jijoy, who play Hippolyta-Titania and Theseus-Oberon respectively, are spellbinding to watch.

This beautiful and exciting show was created after Supple spent months travelling across the Indian subcontinent for the British Council, seeking out exponents of the rich performing traditions of India and Sri Lanka.

He found them in droves, such as Tamil folk dancer and aerialist Palani (cast as Cobweb) and Delhi slum street performer and acrobat Dharminder Pawar (Snug).

Every person Supple met was steeped in their artform tradition, whether learned in squalid alleys or classical academies. Yet what one witnesses on stage is essentially Shakespeare's riotous romp through the topics of love, mischief and madness.

This *Dream* has often been compared to India's Bollywood films, but the similarity doesn't go much beyond the massed song-and-dance ending.

And Bollywood films are often bland and chaste. In this down-and-dirty show, young lovers hit the saffron-hued sand and wrestle for supremacy, acting out the male-female power struggle that so fascinated Shakespeare. Is some meaning lost when Shakespeare's words are spoken in Tamil or Hindi? Sure, but who cares? Enough dull nights have been suffered by audiences who can comprehend every word.

In its spirit and execution, Supple's *Dream* does Shakespeare proud. It acts as a reminder that the bard's Everyman is all of us, whatever our complexion or creed or native tongue.

Victoria Laurie



Proud execution: Joy Fernandes rehearses the role of Nick Bottom in Perth. Picture: Andy Tyndall