



ARTS

Edited by Stephen Bevis



Multilingual dream night



THEATRE

A Midsummer Night's Dream
Dash Arts Production
His Majesty's Theatre
Review: David Hough

It is an audacious director who schedules a South-Asian multilingual version of A Midsummer Night's Dream in her first Festival after the South Korean Yohangza Theatre Company's benchmark production of The Dream last year. Shelagh Magadza should be humming "Hakuna Matata" — No Worries!

Tim Supple's astonishing production has brought together the colour, energy and cultural diversity of India's 2000-year theatrical and linguistic heritage and, with the help of 23 actors, dancers, performers and musicians from across the subcontinent, presented a wonderful night's entertainment.

Originally conceived for outdoor, arena staging, it has been adapted for the proscenium arch. It is, therefore, somewhat cramped in the Maj but the trade-off is a greater intimacy between stage and auditorium, especially in the funny bits and the more lyrical passages, and an almost physical involvement in the vigorous stage action, and there is plenty of that. Martial arts exchanges one minute, the climbing of ropes and suspended textile panels of crimson and purple the next.

Multilingual theatre is not so foreign these days — effective use of it is now occurring in plays with

Aboriginal subject matter — but a production involving seven languages might have raised even Shakespeare's eyebrows.

Supple has used enough of the original text to keep on track the story-line for those whose memories might be a little rusty but there are, of course, some sacrifices. Oberon's aria, "I know a bank where the wild thyme blows", is one of them

The transitions from one Indian tongue to another will be missed by most but what this diversity has demanded from a multicultural cast is an understanding of each actor's performance language and the theatre tradition that goes with it. This has resulted in clear storytelling and fine ensemble playing. It was folk-theatre at its best but there was still scope for individuality.

Joy Fernandes, who plays Nick Bottom the weaver, speaks English, Marathi and Hindi. A very fine actor, his raunchy costume transformations needed no interpreter. Fernandes and his fellow mechanicals would be as at home in the side-streets of Mumbai as they were in Athens, and the audience loved them.

The women were a feisty lot, especially Archana Ramaswamy who doubled as Titania, Queen of the Fairies and Hippolyta, the Queen of the Amazons. The argument, in "the spiced Indian air", with Oberon (PR Jijoy) over the little changeling boy had a certain piquancy. And Yuki Ellias as Hermia and Shanaya Razaat as Helena handled the English text

and their respective lovers with precision and passion.

Shakespeare's comedies involve as much music and dance as they do other elements, and on either side of the stage, the three musicians made an understated but indispensable contribution on wind, string and percussive instruments.

Sumant Jayakrishnan's scaffold set made from ash saplings, covered with moulded paper, might have been a nightmare for the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service, but it was visually and theatrically effective.

His costumes were as rich in colour as a naive painting and varied in sartorial style from nightclub to martial arts, from the traditional to the contemporary.

A Midsummer Night's Dream is the most frequently performed of Shakespeare's plays, in India as elsewhere.

Ten years ago the Royal Shakespeare Company appeared at the Maj as a Festival guest in a forest of bobbing light bulbs and an upturned umbrella filled with satin cushions, suspended from on high, as Titania and Bottom's romantic retreat.

Supple's offering is a more red-earth, red-blooded production but a revelation of how a classic play can be such engaging entertainment when framed by another culture.

A Midsummer Night's Dream runs until February 24.



Spiced Indian air: Dash Arts' Midsummer Night's Dream is a revelation.