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A fantastical, unforgettable Dream



THEATRE
Charles
Spencer

A Midsummer Night's Dream

SWAN THEATRE, STRATFORD-UPON-AVON

THIS is the most magical, fantastical *Dream*, and one, I suspect, that will be remembered, and talked about, for decades to come, just like Peter Brook's landmark staging for the RSC in 1970.

At the prompting of the British Council, British director Tim Supple travelled to the four corners of India to recruit his cast and crew, ending up with classical actors and dancers, fire-eaters and street performers, musicians, martial arts experts and mime performers from all over the sub-continent.

The play, located in a setting that blends present-day India with Shakespeare's own enchanted dream-world, is performed in no fewer than seven languages, so that English gives way to Bengali, Marathi, Malayalam, Tamil, Hindi and Sinhalese. There are no surtitles, but there is enough English to guide newcomers, and the acting is so strong and eloquent that every emotion, twist of plot and mood is clearly signalled.

Supple made his name with gloriously inventive and deeply felt shows for children at the Young Vic, and he brings a similar mixture of simplicity, imagination and wonder to the *Dream*.

The three interconnecting worlds of the play are all precisely caught. The lovers are Indian rich kids, gorgeous in their silks, like the stars of Bollywood movies. The beautifully individualised rude mechanicals look exactly like the traders you see on the pavements of bustling crowded cities, or squatting on their haunches in Indian village squares, while the fairies are like faintly menacing street performers, as surefooted when shinning up and down ropes as on the ground.

There are tremendous *coups de théâtre*. The backdrop looks like the vast stones of a huge fort. But when we enter the forest, the stones begin to rustle and quiver. They are actually made of paper, and the spirits burst riotously through them, creating a glorious mess and revealing a huge bamboo-scaffolding climbing frame extending almost to the roof of the theatre. And that is just one of at least a dozen such breathtaking

rchapman@ontour.org.uk

020 7438 9558 (tel) 07831 463 993 (mobile) 020 7242 3548 (fax) VAT No. 681 5527 19