

Sensational, strange and sexy – this Dream is a triumph

Theatre

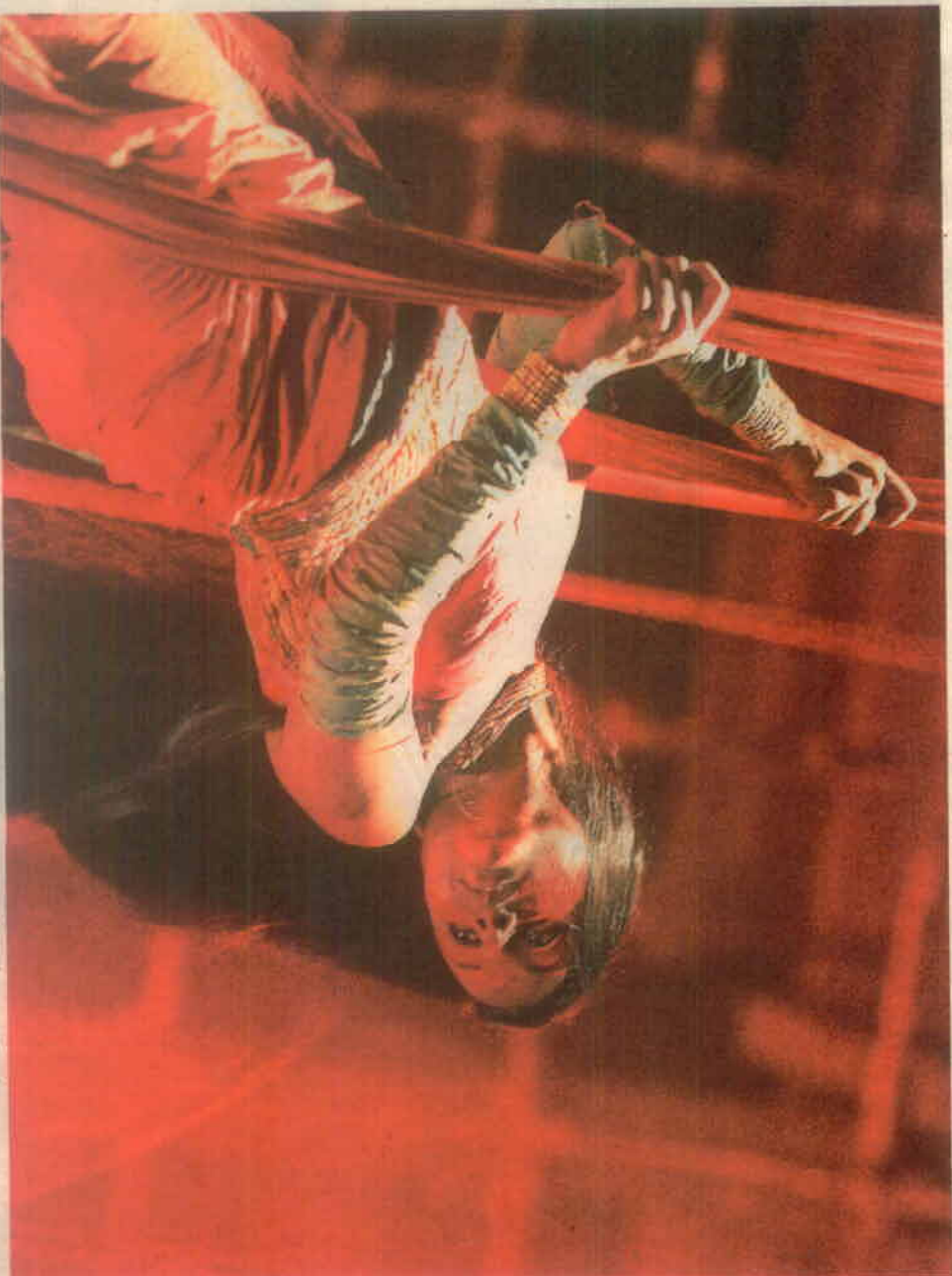
A Midsummer Night's Dream Swan, Stratford-upon-Avon

★★★★★

Seven weeks ago I sat under a night sky in Chennai watching Tim Supple's multilingual Indian Dream. But what was highly impressive in India now looks sensational in Stratford: in its strangeness, sexuality and communal joy, this is the most life-enhancing production of Shakespeare's play since Peter Brock's.

In the Swan, it inevitably seems more enclosed than in a Chennai amphitheatre, but that gives more focus to Sumant Jayakrishnan's brilliant design. The most eye-opening moment comes when the fairies burst through a paper-clad back wall with demonic frenzy. But the production is filled with images of suggestive, poetic beauty: at one point, Archana Ramaswamy's raven-haired **Titania curls up in a womb-like bower created out of red silk** only to emerge from it as if reborn. On a more basic level, Bottom is whirled around by fairy cords attached to a torpedo-like phallus suggesting he is led by something more than the nose.

But the big talking point, literally, is Supple's use of seven different tongues, with English constituting roughly half the spoken text. The result heightens attention to language because the action



Archana Ramaswamy, as Titania, emerges 'as if reborn' from her red silk bower. Photograph: Tristram Kenton

is perfectly suited to the word. When Helena, pursuing Demetrius, announces "Apollo flies and Daphne holds the chase", the allusion is enriched by the sight of her fiercely stalking her prey. And when Lysander rejects Yuki Ellis's sparky Hermia as "you bead, you acorn", he turns on her with hate-filled eyes that reinforce the meaning. Although a ravishing spectacle, this is a production rooted in textual understanding.

You see this most clearly with the mechanics, led by Joy Fernandes's matchless Bottom. All too often Bottoms seek laughs: Fernandes, a bulky man with a porpoise-like lightness allows them to come to him by the simple device of taking himself seriously. When, awaking from his phallic fantasy, he says: "I will get Peter Quince to write a ballad of this dream," it is with the moving sobriety of a man who wants to be remembered. Equally, the Pyramus-Thisbe episode is played not as the usual gagfest but as an earnest **undertaking** by a group of determined worker-actors – which makes it touching as well as funny.

The triumph of Supple's production lies in the way everything coheres to the same end: the creation of an act of transformative magic. The production conveys the union of flesh and spirit as the whole company finally joins in a candle-lit chant. We feel that we too have participated in act of ritual communion.

Michael Billington

Until June 17. Box office: 0870 609 1110. A version of this review appeared in later editions of yesterday's paper.