

THE INDEPENDENT

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'Dream' team: Joy Fernandes, Ajay Kumar and Archana Ramaswamy

Theatre

A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM
Swan Theatre
STRATFORD-UPON-AVON ★★★★★

Seven plays into the Complete Works Festival at Stratford, and, at last, an outstanding theatrical event. This visiting *Midsummer Night's Dream* is the baby of the British Council, which had the smart idea of asking Tim Supple, whose *RSC Comedy of Errors* wowed audiences on its 1997 Indian tour, and who has staged his adaptations of

Midnight's Children and *Harun and the Sea of Stories*, to work on a production with theatre performers in India and Sri Lanka.

He has tackled the brief with epic thoroughness. Recruited from auditions held across the subcontinent, the cast of 22 hail from all parts of the region and from many different performance traditions (acrobatics, martial and classical dance, street entertainment, etc). But while it's a celebration of the diversity and multiplicity of India (seven languages are spoken, including English), this polyglot *Dream* never feels like a mishmash. Supple has welded his

heterogeneous artistes into a crack ensemble whose manifold skills cohere in a vision of the play that is at once ravishingly beautiful, sexy, wild yet dignified, and delightfully funny.

At the start, a silken carpet is whipped away to reveal a red earth floor. Ajay Kumar's Puck (a tubby, loinclothed imp with a raccoon haircut) is seen lustrating a phallic symbol. Dishes of fire blaze. From this foundation in elemental purity, the production creates a startlingly vivid sense of the anarchic power of love and magic. In a spectacular coup, the fairies erupt like riotous demons through the paper wall that covers the

huge lattice of rungs at the back. Titania and Oberon (played by the disarmingly attractive duo of Archana Ramaswamy and PR Jijoy) wrestle each other with erotic tempestuousness over the Indian boy: Helena (Shanaya Rafiqat) is nearly raped in the wood. The four bickering lovers have to clamber over the tangle of tape Puck weaves round them. The magic flower juice is, here, a red powder that is smeared into the faces of the victims.

Joy Fernandes is perfection as a bulky Bottom of enormous charm, who is perplexed to discover that he has developed a fat aubergine of a penis during

his translation into an ass. He's hilarious as he tries to hide it from Titania. With most of his lines in English, he relishes the language, hitting the consonants in a way that brings out Bottom's pedantic earnestness.

The story is so familiar that we even recognise the linguistic shifts, and the visual imagery is stunning, with swags of red curtain twisted into cocoons. The superb music and dance coalesce in the transportingly lovely close, where the entire company joins in a song of gentle, hypnotic thoughtfulness.

Paul Taylor
To 17 June (0870 609 110)

ON TOUR

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