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ON TOUR

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first night

Dreams of a sensuality like this could go on and on

Theatre A Midsummer Night's Dream

Swan, Stratford-upon-Avon

★★★★☆

SAM MARLOWE

THIS is the kind of dream that leaves you rubbing your eyes and wishing that you never had to wake up. An Indian and Sri Lankan cast performs in seven South Asian languages and English, while music, dance, ritual and acrobatics each add a layer of eloquence.

Co-produced by Dash Arts and the British Council, it is directed by Tim Supple and is rich yet clear and uncluttered. And it oozes a raw sexuality that reminds you that India gave the world the Kama Sutra.

The trigger of the play's action — Egeus's attempt to force his daughter, Hermia, to marry Demetrius against her will — has a new resonance here, evoking the convention of arranged marriage. The shifts from one language to another suggest the way in which people at odds can communicate and yet fail to connect; elsewhere, they intensify moments of anguish, longing or bewilderment. Shakespeare's poetry is discovered anew as each actor owns and personalises it, while the cross-cultural universality of the depth of feeling it conveys is reasserted.

And feeling — at its most instinctual and least civilised — is paramount. The forest where the young lovers flee is fecund with dangerous eroticism. Sumant Jayakrishnan's set initially looks as if it might be made of sunbaked stone, but the fairies burst through it, revealing the walls of Athens to

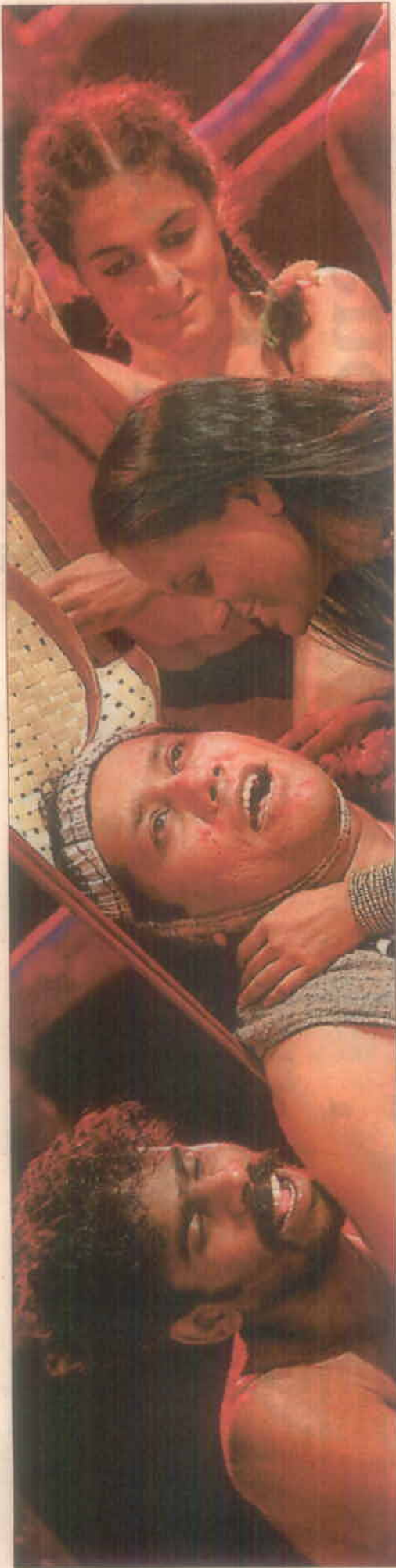
be made of flimsy paper. They rip it apart until nothing remains but a bamboo scaffold from which they dangle enticingly. Ropes descend and writhe like charmed snakes as spirits climb them, turning and twirling.

Archana Ramaswamy's fiery Titania swings her long, black hair in the red earth that rises in dusty clouds from the stage. P. R. Jijoy as Oberon wraps his limbs around her in a manner both sensual and dominating, and Joy Fernandes's corpulent Bottom, as vain as a Bollywood heart-throb, thrusts at the enchanted fairy queen with alarmingly bestial enthusiasm.

Such unbridled appetite soon spreads to the humans: Lysander and Demetrius pursue the women with crescent-shaped daggers in one hand while unbuttoning their flies with the other, and Ajay Kumar's Puck, dressed only in crimson briefs, torments the quartet with voyeuristic glee.

Yet once all is set to rights, the production ends in blissful tranquillity, suggesting the growth of mature love and contentment that will replace hot-blooded and inconstant passions. It's Shakespeare brilliantly reimagined: theatre to lose your heart to.

Box office: 0870 6091110



Joy Fernandes, centre, a Bottom "as vain as a Bollywood heart-throb", is caressed by Archana Ramaswamy's fiery Titania. "Feeling — at its most instinctual and least civilised — is paramount"

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