



Theatre

Midnight's Children

Barbican, London

★★★★☆

Adapting Salman Rushdie's epic novel for the stage is like trying to lasso a leviathan. Inevitably it thrashes about and ultimately slips from the grasp of the theatrical troika of Rushdie himself, Simon Reade and Tim Supple; yet there is a wild recklessness about the project that kept me engaged for much, if not all, of three and a quarter hours.

The problems are obvious. Rushdie's novel is built around the conceit that its narrating hero, Saleem Sinai, born on the stroke of independence in 1947, is not just handcuffed to history: in a sense he is history, in that he becomes a symbol of the whole seething sub-continent. Swapped at birth, he is raised by rich Muslims and endowed with the artist's gift

for storytelling; his poor counterpart Shiva, on the other hand, grows up to become the man of action, riot and war.

It is a brilliant literary device which enables Rushdie to encompass Indian history from 1915, with the meeting of Saleem's grandparents, to the 1980s and to present an enfolding series of Arabian Nights stories. But drama does not have the novel's expansive sense of time. And, although the adaptation is skilfully reinforced by news-reel film reminding us of the march of history, there comes a point when exhaustion sets in. Characters and incidents are subsumed by this restless Indian kaleidoscope. And a crucial second-half sequence, dealing with the war in East

Pakistan and showing Saleem leading a group of men into a phantasmagoric jungle, loses much of its visionary quality.

It would need something on the scale of the RSC's *Nicholas Nickleby* to do full justice to Rushdie's original; and even in the book Saleem asks whether the urge to encapsulate the whole of reality is an Indian disease. Yet, for all my caveats, this version does manage to capture something of the novel's narrative abundance. Early on we see Saleem's doctor-grandfather examining his modest future wife through a perforated sheet from which a nipple hilariously protrudes. And you get a sense of the horror of the 1919 Amritsar massacre as Brigadier

Dyer orders his troops to open fire, with a cry of "We have done a jolly good thing".

It is an evening of memorable moments in which huge narrative gallons are squeezed into a pint pot. It is also held together by Supple's fluid production; Melly Still's design, which projects film and video on to screens; and, above all, by Zubin Varla's performance as Saleem. He is simultaneously narrator, chameleon-like changeling, historic symbol and ruined victim of the Indira Gandhi years. He dominates the stage and a production which gives you something of the novel's aromatic flavour.

Michael Billington

Until February 23. Box office: 020-7638 8891.



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**XTR
INFORMATION
ME**



Indian kaleidoscope . . . Zubin Varla, Meneka Das and Neil D'Souza in *Midnight's Children* Photograph: Tristram Kenton

Source: Daily Telegraph

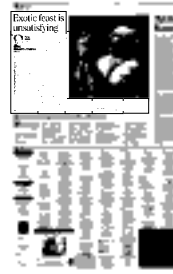
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XTRME
INFORMATION

Exotic feast is unsatisfying



First Night

Charles Spencer

Midnight's Children

BARBICAN

READING Salman Rushdie's epic novel is a bit like going to a huge banquet at the Indian restaurant of one's dreams.

The manager (Rushdie) is genial and witty, while the vast army of waiters (the characters) are memorably engaging and eccentric. And as for the food (the prose) why, it is just amazing – ornate, rich, piquant, unlike almost anything you have tried before.

But as elaborate course follows elaborate course (the chapters) you find yourself longing for something simpler. The manager begins to seem tiresomely garrulous rather than entertaining, and you begin to get the waiters muddled up. Most of all, you find yourself longing for some plain naan and a glass of cool water rather than over-spiced delicacies and cloyingly sweet champagne.

All of which is a roundabout (and rather Rushdiesque) way of saying that *Midnight's Children*, first published in 1981 and named the Booker of Bookers in 1993 gave me the literary equivalent

of indigestion. I could see it was something special, but after 150 overwrought pages, I'd had enough.

So I was looking forward to the RSC's stage version which has been adapted by Rushdie himself, along with the show's director Tim Supple and its dramaturge Simon Reade. Here, surely we would get the essence without the longueurs, the sub-continental flavour without the Delhi belly. Well, up to a point. The RSC, in desperate need of a hit, has gone for broke, in a lavish, big-cast production that combines stage action with computerised graphics, historic documentary footage, and sections where the excellent British Asian cast interact with their own images on screen.

Rushdie's story, which combines a sprawling family saga with a history of India, and later Pakistan, from 1915 to 1978, as well as launching off into extravagant and sometimes embarrassing flights of magical realism, has been filleted with skill. Supple keeps the show moving at a hurtling pace, the narrative is reasonably clear, and there are moments that are genuinely touching.

But you never quite forget that you are watching a book rather than a play. Novels and stage dramas have different priorities, different time scales, and on stage Rushdie's epic seems cramped and diminished. Just as a scene is building a head of dramatic steam, we move on to another. With a cast of 20 playing more than 70 characters, there isn't enough time, or detail, to get to

know them well.

Much of the staging consists of the narrator and central character, Saleem Sinai, one of the midnight's children born at the hour of Indian independence in 1947, telling us what happened, while the rest of the cast act out often alarmingly perfunctory scenes. With violent deaths, witchcraft and lashings of sex all part of the tale, it ought to be thrilling, but the whole is somehow less than the sum of its parts.

There are many things to cherish – I loved the big family rows, the vivid Indian slang, and the Fellini-like carnival scene set in the Magicians' ghetto in Delhi. But too often Supple's staging seems over-simplistic, even cartoon like, and there are few of the inspired touches of physical theatre he brought to shows like *Grimm Tales* and *Tales from Ovid*.

You never really feel the crush of the crowds in India, or sense the vastness of history in the making. This is also a curiously sanitised, tourist brochure view of India, which airbrushes out the poverty and squalor.

Zubin Varla heroically holds the ramshackle show together as Saleem Sinai, a narrator as endearing as he is strange. There are strong contributions too from Kulvinder Ghir, Shaheen Khan, Meneka Das, and Anjali Jay among many others. But for all the undeniable energy, I left this epic feeling exhausted rather than elated

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XTRME
INFORMATION

For all its energy, what this needs is a bit of recklessness

SALMAN RUSHDIE'S novel *Midnight's Children* won the Booker in 1981. It landed the all-time "Booker of Bookers" in 1993. By rights, it would already be a movie and television series, but, partly because of shameful political obstacles (such as India banning filming) all attempts to transfer it to video tape and celluloid have so far come to grief.

The screen's loss should now prove to be the stage's gain, with the world premiere last night of the new theatrical adaptation devised by Rushdie, the director Tim Supple and the dramatist, Simon Reade.

But the event is only a very partial success. Supple's colourful and committed RSC production takes us on a dogged and over-restrained tour of the history of India from 1919 through the first 34 years of its independent life (1947-81) from Partition to the collapse of Mrs Gandhi's iniquitous state of emergency. The not-so-reliable guide is Saleem (a slightly and rightly irritating *tour de force* by Zubin Varla), who is one of the eponymous babies born at the stroke of that August midnight when India gained its freedom from Britain.

For all its energy and attack, the production is deficient in true dramatic dynamism. Padma (Sameena Zehra), the pickle lady in the frame narration, all too often has to hang around as a spectator. A story that takes more than 100 pages to catch up with its official start may be comic in a *Tristram*

FIRST NIGHT

Midnight's Children

Barbican Theatre

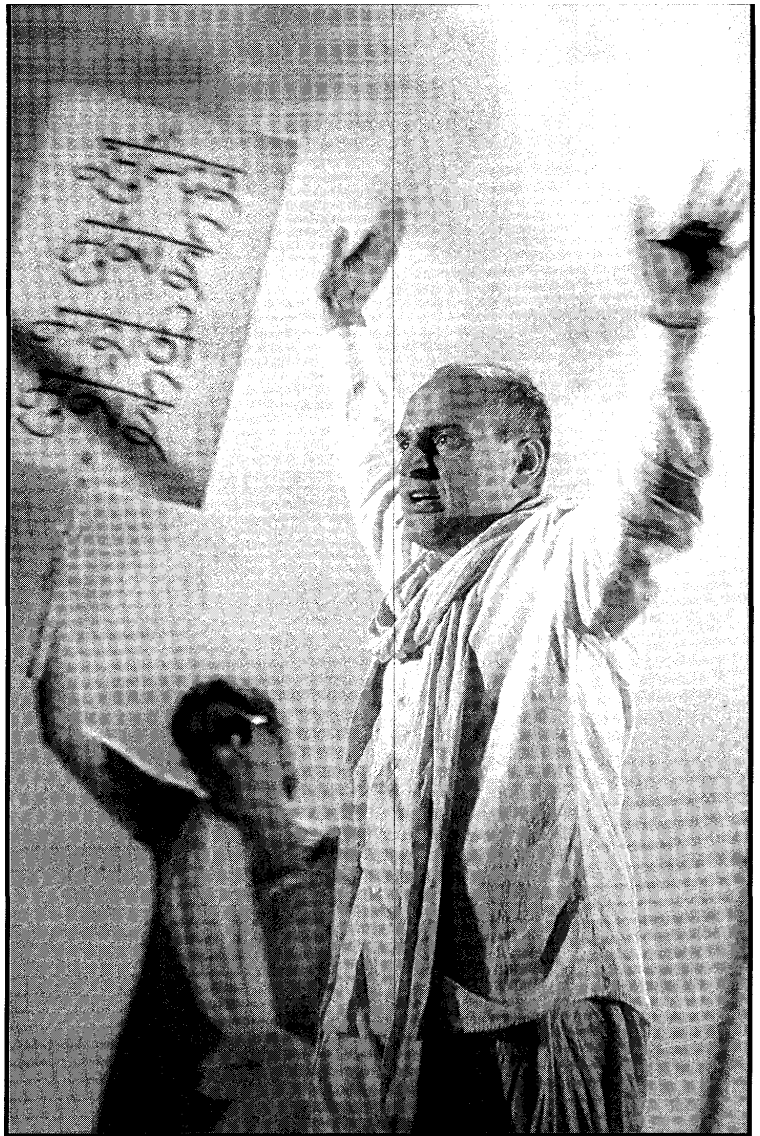
Shandy-esque novel; a theatre piece that takes a great deal of its first half to do the same just gets wearying. The adaptation and the staging make artful use of mixed media in a flow of live action, newsreel footage of historical events, shadow-play and specially filmed episodes. But there's not enough joy or jolting discontinuity in this procedure. There's one episode where a teasingly naughty, censor-circumventing black-and-white movie, *The Lovers of Kashmir*, is interrupted by the news of Mahatma Gandhi's assassination and the film turns coloured with the characters on screen sharing (humorously) in the live consternation.

But in general there's not enough convention-violating interaction between the media.

There's also very much a them-and-us atmosphere in the huge Barbican Theatre. You long for the cast to be able to mingle amongst us promiscuously, as they could at a venue like the Young Vic.

I do not think that the adaptation or the production are fundamentally misconceived and I hope that *Midnight's Children* will loosen and warm up. The show does not lack the courage of its convictions. What it needs is a bit of recklessness.

PAUL TAYLOR



'Midnight's Children' by Salman Rushdie opened last night