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XTRME
INFORMATION

Taking the heat and lust out of India

Georgina Brown
Theatre

Midnight's Children

Barbican Theatre, London

3hrs 15mins (including interval)

The Duchess Of Malfi

Lyttelton, National Theatre, London

2hrs 15mins (no interval)

As a condensed, colourful and crude cartoon history of India, the stage adaptation of Salman Rushdie's hugely-admired and, in my opinion, overrated novel, *Midnight's Children*, has lots going for it as it cuts short a long, complicated and often boring epic story.

But compression also diminishes it and as drama, which requires a driving narrative, suspense and rounded, detailed characterisation, it leaves a great deal to be desired.

Tim Supple's handsome and fluent production has some vitality, a sweet, simple humour and innocence but little of the inventive imagination of his memorable success, *Grimm Tales*. Despite being souped up with lashings of newsreel footage and interactive video images, the adaptation, a joint and too-slavish effort by Supple, Rushdie and Simon Reade, lacks spice or sophistication.

The wearisome episodic structure cannot, I suppose, be avoided when charting the history of India from 1915 to 1978. But in these circumstances, it is impossible to get to know particularly well the hundreds of characters who appear so fleetingly. Such constraints rule out emotional involvement with anyone except Saleem, our narrator and guide, through whose eyes we witness the big issues.

Those of you who ploughed through this famous Booker of Bookers (supposedly the best of 25 years of Booker winners) may remember that the title refers to those children born at midnight on the eve of India's independence from British colonialism. Saleem Sinai is one of them. He is also a changeling with special powers (the potential discovery of which adds a little – but not enough – tension to the proceedings).

Engagingly played by Zubin Varla, he believes that he is responsible for the course and causes of India's history. Thus fact and fiction mingle.

The performances, skin-deep as they are, are marvellous as far as they go. I longed for real people, real atmosphere; for the sense of the teeming masses, the emptiness, the squalor, the breathtaking beauty, the seductive scents and the revolting stench – the huge and overwhelming contrasts – which I associate with India. I longed for that sinking feeling when you see one thing leading unstoppably to another with dire consequences.

You get none of it. Just Salman, filleted and garnished with a bit of Bollywood. Give me *Bombay Dreams* any night.

You would never guess from the new production of *The Duchess Of Malfi* that when a director gets things right, this play can be a thrilling, gripping experience, both a terrifying living nightmare lit by the most dazzling poetry and a moving moral triumph of purity over evil. John Webster's play is the story of a widowed duchess who secretly marries her steward, Antonio, whom she loves, to the fury of her two vilely corrupt brothers. One, Ferdinand, her twin, is both bonkers and in lust with her: the

other is a lecherous and hypocritical cardinal.

The gruesome twosome take revenge for their sister's disobedience with a series of increasingly sick ways of tormenting and ultimately destroying her and her family. Murders most foul are Webster's forte, death his preoccupation.

Phillida Lloyd's production, featuring mostly modern dress in a confusing mix of Edwardian and Fifties, is bursting with ideas, but most of them should never have gone further than the rehearsal room. Too often they feel like a failure to trust the play to speak for itself.

The opening, for example, has a suited Ferdinand, microphone in hand, gabbling frantically like an over-excitable television commentator as the Duchess presents a huge silver cup to her steward.

Antonio takes over, an interviewee invited to comment on the principal characters, each of whose images fill a large glass screen that stands between the stage and a bank of seats at the back.

It makes no dramatic sense whatsoever and has a disastrous effect on some of the characters, especially Lorcan Cranitch's Bosola, who has the manner of a dodgy car salesman rather than one of the theatre's most complex and tormented villains.

Moreover, the pace is so fast and furious that the poetry which has survived the initial cull is frequently squashed in the rush.

From the start, this uninvolved production feels like a race against the clock. It comes in, interval-free, at two and a quarter hours, leaving many in the audience breathless and



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History lesson... Anjali Jay as
Jamila in the adaptation of
Midnight's Children at the Barbican

mudly shell shocked.

To judge from the laughs (which should have been gasps of horror) greeting the final (over-loud) pistol shots, some had lost the plot hours ago.

Janet McTeer's powerful performance as the Duchess survives this flawed revival, just as her character's courage and purity cannot be snuffed out by the darkness and evil around her. She is sexy, warm and dignified. Alas, when she dies, well before the end, so does the only reason for seeing this production.