



Bombay mixed

Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* broke new ground on every front. Can the RSC do it justice?

THEATRE

Susannah Clapp



Midnight's Children
Barbican, London EC2
The Duchess of Malfi
Lyttelton, London SE1

IT'S HARD to imagine modern fiction without *Midnight's Children*. But Rushdie's novel very nearly wasn't published. I was working at the publishers Jonathan Cape when the manuscript arrived – and I remember the omens were bad. It was extremely long. Rushdie, then a thirtysomething advertising copywriter, didn't have a good track record. His first novel hadn't sold well. Not all the early readers were enthusiastic about this new tome. No one expected it to make any money. Only enormous persistence and chivvying by Rushdie's editor, Liz Calder, got it onto the Cape list. Few of the diners at the publication lunch – held on two small wobbly tables

pushed together in the Bertorelli's round the corner from the office – were predicting that this book was about to explode one version of the British novel.

Midnight's Children was truly startling in 1981: an orchidaceous hybrid, a case, as the author pointed out, of 'the Empire strikes back'. Its prose is joshing, ornate and saucy. Its narrative loops and spins round on itself. Its enormous story, a mixture of family history and political epic includes: the founding of Pakistan, the assassination of Gandhi, the tale of a rich and a poor baby swapped in their cradles, a marriage to a witch, Mrs Gandhi's State of Emergency, and the fate of the supernaturally gifted children of the title, born at midnight on the eve of India's independence, who are the hope of the future – and who are crushed.

What is now familiar on the page is still new on the stage, where it is rare to intertwine documentary with imaginative flights, tricky to feature an unreliable narrator (when there's no author to tip you off about him) and unusual to see a large Asian cast. These are reasons to celebrate this RSC adaptation, developed from an unproduced television screenplay by Rushdie, in collaboration with Simon Reade and Tim Supple – who also directs. As is the vigour and variety of Supple's production, which tries to emulate the dense texture of Rushdie's prose, with its sly glides and twists, in a carnival mixture. There's newsreel of historical events (a great relief that no one has to prance around pretending to be Gandhi), and a mock Bollywood movie (interrupted when the stars



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eavesdrop on the stage actors and hear of Gandhi's death). There's music – Big Band and rock and Bengali song – though not enough of any. There's a narrator who begins by controlling the story and goes on to dip in and out of it, playing himself at different ages: Zubin Varla skilfully balances on a knife-edge between irritating and endearing.

Nevertheless, this is an adaptation rather than a free-standing play. It shadows the novel too closely and crams in too much: towards the end, mighty events whizz across the stage as rapidly and confusingly as pop-up ducks in a shooting gallery. More free-wheeling, more weirdness would bring the spirit of the original nearer. As would greater simplicity – and rather less celluloid. After all, one of the remarkable things about Rushdie's prose is that it shows the influence of cinema by evocation, not by replication: you don't get a roll of Kodak when you buy the book.

Not that the movies are dispensable. The best moments are those when the whole caboodle – the mix of media, the changing manners, the music that skips from one country to another – coalesces in a vision of subcontinental shift. On stage, in Pakistan, the narrator's sister sings,

with only her eyes peeping from a tent of cloth. Meanwhile on screen, she lounges in tinsel town, scantily clad in rhinestones, her glossy lips savouring the words of 'Paper Moon'. From burka to boa and back again in the flick of an eyelash.

John Webster's secrecy, swiftness and claustrophobia gets short shrift in Phyllida Lloyd's production of *The Duchess of Malfi*. It's a big, brooding, slow-moving affair, in which you can see the concept but can't always hear the words. There's an enduring image of Webster in *Shakespeare in Love*: the playwright as urchin, squatting in a dirty gutter poking at a small living creature while his illustrious contemporary rushes past on his way to glory. But if Webster is the poet of the grisly and the inexplicable – weak on structure and psychology – he's also the poet of the beautiful fragment and the heart-stopping line, picking up pearls from the abattoir floor.

It's not hard to trace a line between him and gifted, troubled talents of later centuries – Sarah Kane has been thought of as an artistic descendant – and *The Duchess of Malfi* stands in no need of the emphatic updating it gets here. Set in a very approximate 1950s – where women wear New Look full dresses and the