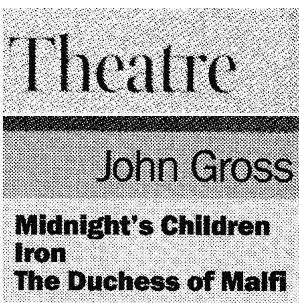




# Too much spice



**T**here is a good deal to enjoy in the RSC adaptation of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, at the Barbican. Tim Supple's production is highly spiced and picturesque. There are swirls of colour, vivid snatches of Indian talk, imaginative use of film. Individual scenes, from classroom antics to a murderous riot, are sharply realised. Recurrent motifs – the defective green and yellow neon sign advertising pickles, for instance – have a pop art charm.

Yet none of this adds up to a satisfying play. The evening lacks momentum. It is often confusing. The hero, Saleem, may be “handcuffed to history” – we all are – but you don't get the sense of national epic that is being aimed at.

Part of the problem lies in the inherent difference between theatre and fiction. A novelist is free to expand, explain and take his time; a playwright is under much greater pressure to concentrate and select. And while the play's three adapters – Rushdie, Supple and Simon Reade – are naturally aware of this, the effect they produce is still one of too much being crammed in.

Some of the trouble,

though, goes back to the novel itself. It is a bold and often brilliant piece of work, but it is also frequently show-offy and self-indulgent. As they pile up, the magical or surreal scenes in particular seem increasingly arbitrary, while much of the wordplay is a good deal less cute than it thinks it is: the extended comparison between the birth of Mrs Gandhi's Emergency and the emergence of a child being born, for instance.

Still, the surface energy of the production is undeniable. A 20-strong British Asian cast slip in and out of a multitude of parts with verve and animation, while there is a notable performance from Zubin Varla as Saleem, the midnight changeling (he has been swapped around by a nurse) who combines wry humour with an artist's insight.

What we don't get, however, even from him, is what Rushdie wants us to get – an overwhelming sense of waste, of midnight's children (born at the very moment India achieved independence) as the vessel of unfulfilled hopes. We are shown it and told about it, but we aren't made to feel it: the show remains a spectacle rather than a work that touches the heart.

Rona Munro's *Iron*, at the Royal Court, is about prison – iron bars, iron in the soul. It is set in a women's jail in Scotland, where Fay is serving life for murdering her husband. Her daughter Josie was a child at the time, and she hasn't seen her since. Now, after 15 years, Josie suddenly shows up.

Fay has sunk deep into the

prison system. Josie is a career woman who has got divorced and begun to feel lost. For both of them, the reunion and the visits which follow represent a lifeline. But it isn't as simple as that. There is awkwardness and mistrust. (Is Fay, as a warder warns, much harder and more manipulative than she looks?) Hostilities flare up, meetings are twisted out of shape by prison discipline and surveillance. It is only gradually that we learn what led to the fatal stabbing.

Having seen and admired the play in Edinburgh last year, I thought I knew what to expect. But I had forgotten its nuances – the skill with which it avoids clichés, in a setting which lends itself to them; the subtlety with which it explores guilt and emotional dependency. It doesn't answer all the questions it raises, and some of them at least ought to have been cleared up. Why should Fay's sentence stretch out to eternity, for instance, without prospect of parole? But mostly they are questions which don't admit of an easy answer. They bring us face to face with the characters' uncertainties and inconsistencies.

Sandy McDade gives a memorable performance as Fay – gritty, desperate, volatile, intensely Scottish, utterly believable. It's hard to keep your eyes off her sharp, thin features. But Louise Ludgate ensures that the production gives due weight to Josie, too, while Ged McKenna and Helen Lomax reinforce one of the play's unexpected strengths – its insistence that

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**A spectacle** Zubin Varla and Mala Ghedia in *Midnight's Children*