



REVIEWS

THEATRE

MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN

Barbican Theatre

London

It won the Booker prize in 1981. It landed the Booker of Bookers in 1993. By rights, Salman Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children* would already be a movie and a TV series. But, partly because of shameful political obstacles (India banning filming, etc), all attempts to transfer it to videotape and celluloid have so far come to grief.

The screen's ridiculous loss should now prove to be the stage's serious gain. But the world premiere last Wednesday of the adaptation devised by Rushdie, the director Tim Supple and dramaturg Simon Reade was only a very partial success. Supple's colourful RSC production (*pictured*) doesn't hit the stage running. Rather it trudges on a purposeful, over-restrained tour of the history of India from 1919 to the first 34

years of its independent life (1947-81), from Partition to the collapse of Mrs Gandhi's iniquitous State of Emergency. Our not-so-reliable guide is Saleem (a slightly and rightly irritating tour de force by Zubin Verla), who is one of the eponymous babies born at the very stroke of that August midnight in 1947, when India gained its freedom from Britain.

For all its force and energy, the production lacks dramatic dynamism. The pickle lady Padma (a nicely down-to-earth Sameena Zehra) valuably voices the audience's own scepticism about Saleem's oddly solipsistic take on political upheavals. But, all too often, she is left hanging around like a spare part while events are lengthily re-enacted.

The adaptation and the staging make artful use of

mixed media – issuing in a flow of live action, newsreel footage, shadow-play and specially filmed episodes. But there's not enough ludic joy or jolting discontinuity in this procedure. There's one fine episode where a censor-circumventing black and white movie of *The Lovers of Kashmir* is interrupted by news of Mahatma Gandhi's assassination. The film flushes with colour in shock and the fictional characters on screen join in the live consternation. It's charming, sad and funny. But in general there's not enough convention-violating interaction between the various media.

The quadripartite screen can split and open, yet it has a strangely static feel. It's part of the reason that the staging looks deadeningly compartmentalised: the divide between the area before the screen and

that behind it could do with being bridged on occasion by action in a diagonal direction.

There's also very much a them-and-us, cold atmosphere in the huge Barbican Theatre. You long for the cast to be able to mingle among us.

The adaptation or the production are not fundamentally misconceived, though there are times when its episodic inclusiveness feels interminable, and makes you think wistfully of *Monty Python's* snappier "Summarising Proust" contest. I hope that the event will loosen and warm up during the London run and the tour. The show does not lack the courage of its convictions. What it does need however, is a bit of recklessness

PAUL TAYLOR

To 23 Feb (020-7638 8891)

