

# British Theatre Guide

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## Dishoom!

Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti

Rifco Theatre Company

Oldham Coliseum Theatre

2–13 October 2018

The title of this play is, apparently, an onomatopoeic word for "the sound of a punch or bullet from 1970s Bollywood movies", and this play is steeped in the effect those movies had on the imaginations of young British Asians during the decade of punk and the National Front.

After a prologue showing Simon's birth, which doesn't feel entirely necessary, we are projected forward to when Simon (Bilal Khan) is 16 and in a wheelchair, having been unable to walk since birth. His mother has died and so he is looked after by his father (Omar Ibrahim), his father's mother Bibi (Seema Bowri) and new arrival Baljit (Gurkiran Kaur), a "sort of cousin", who is a bit too much of a "swot" for Simon at first but he warms to her.

The family is ruled over by Bibi, who tells everyone how they should behave according to tradition and what others may think of them. She is ashamed of Simon's disability and frequently reminds him of this; Bowri plays her terrifically as a sort of well-meaning monster but one who is completely believable.

When he breaks out of the confinement of Bibi's home, Simon goes out with his friends Donna (Georgia Burnell) and Keith (James Mace), who are both white, and naïve Mark (Elijah Baker), who apparently had a black father and a white mother. This happy mixed band hear rumours of a National Front march, which scares them all, but when Keith is turned down by Donna and then gets knocked back from a job interview in favour of an Indian girl, he suddenly becomes a rampant racist determined to join the march and campaign to send all his former friends 'home'.

Scenes are linked by fantasy musical sequences in which confined Simon is able to become heroic, influenced especially by iconic '70s Hindi film *Sholay*.

There is a powerful story at the heart of this play, but it has been swamped by having too many elements crammed into it, so it all becomes rather superficial and doesn't always evolve in a believable way. It feels like scenes have been added on a whim whenever an idea has occurred rather than being part of any overall plan. There are moments of real power when the writing and the performances come together, but there are many others that don't ring true or end suddenly and don't go anywhere interesting.

There are some strong performances, particularly Bowri's tour-de-force as the fierce family matriarch, supported well by Ibrahim as her son—their scenes together largely work well. Kaur plays bespectacled Baljit as more of a comic character than any of the others. In the central role, Khan is making his professional stage debut; while he has some strong scenes, at times his inexperience shows in this huge role.

This can't be said for Burnell, also making her professional stage debut, who gives a very strong performance as the girl that all the boys fancy but who is only interested in getting enough money together to escape this town and her abusive mother. Mace is also extremely good as the two halves of Keith—one of the diverse bunch of friends and true believer in the vision of a white Britain—even if the script seems to make his transition a bit too quick and extreme.

On a cleverly adaptive set designed by Neil Irish, Rifco certainly presents a story worth telling, but some streamlining of the script would give greater depth and focus to the core issues and stories at the heart of it.

**Reviewer:** [David Chadderton](#)