

British Theatre Guide

News, reviews, features and podcast on theatre across the UK

The Great Game: Afghanistan

Tricycle Theatre, Kilburn

To 14 June 2009

In creating this mammoth programme that includes not only 12 plays in a day but films, exhibitions, concerts, readings and discussions featuring the likes of Tony Benn, Clare Short and Sir Menzies Campbell plus more, Nicolas Kent has set out a clear manifesto.

"Afghanistan will be at the forefront of Western foreign policy for the next decade. We get daily reports on Afghanistan in the media - yet we know very little about how the foreign policy of Britain, America, Europe and Russia towards that country has evolved over the past 175 years.

"The Tricycle's Afghanistan Festival will offer the most comprehensive over-view of Afghanistan's history, culture and politics ever attempted in Britain.

"The aim of the Festival is to help audiences understand more about Afghanistan, and to open up debate, appreciation and discussion on Afghanistan's importance to Britain as we move into the second decade of the 21st century."

His ambition cannot be faulted, neither can the stamina of viewers who come out of the marathon bright-eyed and bushy-tailed after what is close to 12 consecutive hours, including intervals, at or near to his theatre.

The plays can be watched in three separate programmes but that diminishes the all-encompassing experience and should only be recommended for wimps.

Kent has persuaded many of Britain's finest playwrights from different generations (and an American) to get involved in what is a definitive exploration of a country that remains a constant in news bulletins.

The heady mix of styles, directed by Kent and Indhu Rubasingham, works well with far more hits than misses.

The intensive course in the politics and history of Afghanistan and by extension Britain, USA and Russia should be seen as a great success. It is a long day but ultimately very rewarding for anyone with an interest in political or global issues.

For those that haven't the time to get to the theatre, Oberon have published the text at a bargain £9.99, which could also prove a good complement to the experience for those that are lucky enough to attend. It also contains a thirteenth play, by Naomi Wallace, that is reviewed at the end of this article.

Part One: Invasions & Independence 1842–1930

***Bugles at the Gates of Jalalabad* by Stephen Jeffreys**

After a brief Siba Shakib prologue delivered by a muralist painting his country's history, the saga starts with a tale related by four British buglers in 1842, assisted by a General's wife.

The savagery that led to the deaths of 16,000 British troops and hangers-on forms a kind of introduction to the fate of a benighted country destined to be at war for generations.

The story is personalised by the arrival of Nabil Elouahabi playing a local philosopher who probes into colonial motives (are they supporting the cause of God or country?). The consequence of inefficiencies by the ruling classes is quite shocking and will prefigure the perpetual wars by which life in Afghanistan can almost be measured.

***Durand's Line* by Ron Hutchinson**

This play is preceded by a poetic duologue from Siba Shakib which glorifies Jemima Rooper's Malalai, a kind of Afghan Joan of Arc.

Her story melts into a tale of diplomacy British style. Sir Henry Mortimer Durand was British Foreign Minister in India from 1885-94 and judging by Ron Hutchinson's portrait, acted out by a suitably pompous Michael Cochrane, personified all that was bad about his country.

With a combination of bullying and bluster, he tries to persuade Paul Bhattacharjee's Abdur Rahman, the Amir appointed by the Brits, to divide up his kingdom.

He gets short shrift and the threat of an alternative alliance for the Amir with the Russians. The most telling moment is when the local man draws a parallel with Great (and wasn't it?) Britain, suggesting an enlargement of Wales and division of Scotland as an appropriate equivalent to what is proposed.

***Campaign* by Amit Gupta**

Campaign is set in the Foreign Office today. There, Tom McKay's PPS to the Minister meets a Pakistani Oxford Don with a specialism in Afghan affairs.

The Minister is trying to engineer a diplomatic withdrawal using information about an Afghan King of the 1920s who tried to modernise and was chucked out on his ear. One wonders where Amit Khan got his political information, as it interprets current Government thinking in a very interesting light.

***Now Is the Time* by Joy Wilkinson**

The slight fourth play takes us back to that modernising King Amanullah Khan, his wife Soraya and her father, Mahmud Tarzi, played respectively by Sagar Arya, Jemima Rooper and Vincent Ebrahim.

We see them stuck in snow on their way to exile following an uprising by local chieftains determined to turn back the clock to the days of the veil prior to Westernisation.

This is an opportunity for debate about Afghan and Muslim values but focuses on the individuals at the cost of the country and its politics.

Part Two: Communism, The Mujahideen & The Taliban 1979–1996

***Black Tulips* by David Edgar**

The first two plays after the lunch interval view Afghanistan from the perspectives of the countries that use it as a political pawn, the Soviet Union and the United States.

David Edgar sees the Russian outlook through the eyes of its military. The audience are cast as several generations of squaddies, addressed by officers and token locals.

Various different types of indoctrination and double speak are examined travelling backwards in time (although this could have been made clearer for those not steeped in recent Russian history), most amusingly through the use of interpreters who not only change the language but also the message.

The highlight is a comic cameo from Rick Warden as a mine-clearing Ensign with a wicked Cockney sense of humour.

***Blood and Gifts* by J T Rogers**

After another brief Shakib monologue from a Queen of 500 years back but way ahead of her time on gender issues, the highlight of the day is this fully realised if compact play by American writer, J.T. Rogers. He first takes us to the Pakistani side of the border and a meeting that didn't happen.

This pits CIA agent Jim, the remarkably versatile and extremely talented Rick Warden, in touch with a Mujahideen freedom fighter, the canny Abdullah (Vincent Ebrahim).

As they bicker over the secret provision of arms, respect grows. Even so, Jim struggles to understand the tribal infighting that characterises the country but gets in the way of his mission.

The action moves to an ante room prior to a meeting with a Senate committee, where the two men are at each others' throats and, movingly, a few years later when lives have been lost and truths are revealed.

***Miniskirts of Kabul* by David Greig**

David Greig's contribution features an imaginary meeting between a British journalist played by Jemima Rooper and the former President Najibullah (Ramon Tikaram). This takes place as Taliban fighters approach Kabul, terrifyingly for all concerned thanks to an impressive soundscape from Tom Lishman that could easily induce nightmares.

The fantasy adds humour without diminishing the powerful story of a man who spent four years leading his country with Russian help and then as many more under house arrest in a UN compound.

The discussion paints a picture of the deposed leader while also explaining some of the politics and the surprising fact that the leaders of the various factions (Modernist-Communist/Conservative/Islamist) were all at Kabul University together in 1973.

The ending seems gruesome, even if only imagined, but turns out to be as nothing when compared with the last play of the afternoon.....

***The Lion of Kabul* by Colin Teevan**

Following a brief but timely duologue in which the mural at the start is painted over by the Taliban, Colin Teevan achieves something quite special in showing us the absurdity of those Taliban fundamentalists, never quite tipping over the edge into the unbelievable.

This play centres on the verbal duel between Lolita Chakrabarti's Rabia, a lapsed Muslim UN aid worker, and Khan, a minor Government official and Mullah. He ironically works for a Justice Department that has no interest in pursuing its titular role.

Two aid workers have gone missing after taking a truck of food to the people. Their boss seeks information and for reasons that become all too apparent has been asked to attend a meeting at the zoo.

Nabil Elouahabi makes a wonderful job of presenting a man so keen on his cause that he seems inhuman, while his protagonist shows the depths of humanity that have disappeared from the country under such a Government.

Part Three: Enduring Freedom 1996–2009

***Honey* by Ben Ockrent**

Following a long early dinner break, the evening took time to get going. *Honey* features a series of diplomatic negotiations between an Afghan Defence Minister, Masood Khalili and CIA agent Schroen, played by Vincent Ebrahim and Michael Cochrane.

This is used as a means to show that the USA had provided weapons that ended up on both sides leading to the War on Terror.

It also strongly implies that with greater will and more trust for their allies, the warning given by the World Trade Center attack in 1996 should have been enough to prevent the devastation there five years later.

***The Night Is Darkest Before the Dawn* by Abi Morgan**

Abi Morgan's contribution focuses on tribesmen and women in Kandahar who have suffered terrible losses.

The level of suspicion of US motives, and the wish to return to traditional values, operate together when an aid worker, Daniel Betts' Alex, and teacher Huma (Lolita Chakrabarti) try to persuade a farmer (Ramon Tikaram) to allow his daughter to go to school.

His simple message is that having lost all of the menfolk of his family to the war, he needs her services in the fields.

The overly-complicated plot eventually sees feminist logic win the day in a not entirely convincing but happy ending.

***On the Side of the Angels* by Richard Bean**

Richard Bean was always likely to liven up proceedings but, while his tale of NGOs contains some great jokes and a series of memorable characters, it has a dark heart.

It starts with a scene where Jackie, a feisty aid worker on the ground played by Jemma Redgrave, tries to "sell" Afghanistan to the charity's fund raisers. Jemima Rooper and Daniel Betts as Fiona and Jonathan are less than impressed at trying to push farming and land rights on to the market but eventually get sold on the idea of projecting the plight of starving farmers who have lost their livelihoods.

The action moves to the poppy fields of Herat, where the politics are complicated and deals must be settled over ritualised cups of tea.

The combination of Jackie and her headstrong colleague, Tom Mackay's Graham, can be hilarious. They are also incredibly brave and, in Jackie's case, pragmatic, accepting traditional values. This causes a rift between the pair that ultimately leads to a tragic ending to one of the day's strongest plays.

***Canopy of Stars* by Simon Stephens**

Simon Stephens ensured that the long trek ended on a high, after a second short Verbatim piece compiled by Richard Norton-Taylor, the Tricycle's resident specialist. These brought us right up to date, with an idea of the possible impact of President Obama's Afghan strategy seen from the viewpoints of both sides in the struggle, NATO, Oxfam, the UN and the US.

Stephens shows us a pair of British soldiers, getting the demotic blokeish speech absolutely right as Private Kendall (Hugh Skinner) explains that he is there fighting for his mates, while Tom McKay's Sergeant Watkins has nobler ambitions. He has an ideological hatred of the Taliban and wants to save the people from their occupation.

So far so good. In the second scene, we move to Watkins' home at two in the morning where it becomes clear that his social commitment doesn't extend to Jemima Rooper as his wife and the young son whom he is unable to look in the eye, having effectively sacrificed them to the cause.

***No Such Cold Thing* by Naomi Wallace**

The thirteenth play about Afghanistan played separately and this review is taken from the text.

Naomi Wallace sees the tragedy of the country in human terms. Meena and Alya are teenaged sisters divided by conflict. Meena, at 15 two years the older, has travelled with her father to the West and left Mum and Sis behind.

Their reunion is difficult due to the cultural divide, with each promoting what they know. It becomes something much deeper, partly through the catalyst of a US serviceman, Sergio,

By an explosive and very moving ending their relationship becomes apparent, as does the pain that this war is causing on all sides.

Playing until 14 June

Howard Loxton [reviewed](#) the 2010 revival

Reviewer: [Philip Fisher](#)