

British Theatre Guide

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Tales from the Arabian Nights

Farhana Sheikh

London Bubble

Southwark Park

1–6 August 2017

It is seven years since London Bubble Theatre mounted one of the summer promenade shows for which they had built up such a fine reputation. Savage funding cuts ended their production and the company has concentrated since on their work with the local community. This year they are back, though in only two parks and too few performances.

They deserve three cheers just for managing to achieve that (there is still no Arts Council money). Give them a very warm welcome back. They have certainly earned it with this delightful production. It has been done on a shoestring but it is an object lesson in how to make magic from nothing.

Shaharazade told her tales over 1001 nights, not all can be packed into one evening but dramatist Farhana Sheikh offers quite a few of them—including stories that you may not have heard before. There is no Sinbad, or Aladdin or Ali Baba (they weren't part of the original collection anyway) but there are tales of princes and kings, slaves and peasants, beautiful maidens, handsome men that a spell has put in goat bodies, wise genealogists, luck bringing monkeys and the framing tale of brother kings and their unfaithful wives that is the reason for the murdering revenge on women to which Shaharazade's storytelling brought an end.

This isn't a children's show, it's quite grown up, though the youngsters sitting on rugs on the grass at the front of the audience were clearly enjoying it. The framing story is about sexual infidelity and another includes a princess's bridal night with her goat-prince but they are cleverly handled. Other stories include those of the slave with one fault: once a year he lies to invent a story, the young woman who uses her charms to free her imprisoned lover and shuts her husband, the vizier, and the king up in a chest of drawers to ensure their escape.

The telling is extraordinarily simple: one reason why it is so very effective. Three storytellers share the main narration but other actors chip in too and the telling breaks into re-enactment. There is simple but appropriate costuming with one or two more dazzling outfits and almost no setting apart from the grass and the trees. A long rope represents a fishing net to cast into the sea, a cloth is lifted high to take the form of a genie, a cloth on a wooden pole, a chest when the plot needs it (but the audience must imagine its rich decoration. Designer Yasuko Hasegawa Fujihara knows when less can be more and presents a constructed set only for the finale.

The audience is always up close, they share the journey between locations with the actors and they help make the show with their imaginations turning prancing steps into riders on horses.

These are actors who are always heard, which isn't easy in the open air. Their communication skills make any symbolic gesture immediately comprehensible, awaken the child in all of us with a "let's

pretend" that's never spoken and they seamlessly pass the telling between them smoothly becoming different character irrespective of gender.

Nicholas Goode is delightful, especially as the bleating goat and handsome young man cantering in on his charger, Leila Ayad is charming as his princess and Simon Startin gives authority to her horrified father. Russeni Fisher is the fisherman who doesn't realise his luck when he trawls up an ape but can also be a princess, he doesn't really need a flower behind his ear to make you believe it. Rose-Marie Christian is a princess too, and a slave girl and Shaharazade's sister and a fluent storyteller with Leila and Joyce Henderson who brings a particular Scots energy that is infectious.

That vitality pervades Jonathan Petherbridge's straightforward production. He's made these actors a team that work as one to make a connection with the audience that makes them not watchers but sharers.

Performances continue in Greenwich Park 9 to 19 August 2017

Reviewer: [Howard Loxton](#)