



Cheek by Jowl on tour in the Indian Sub-Continent with A Midsummer Night's Dream (1986)

Wednesday January 15th

Excited, fully vaccinated Company gather at Heathrow, luggage crammed with pills of every hue and guaranteed to cement the loosest bowel for the 2 ¾ hours of our play. Each of us has been issued with a Foreign Office booklet urging us to make sure our servants receive proper medical attention. Plane puts down at Doha, and Dubai before Pakistan. The company all agree that this beats motorway stops on the M1 to Burton.

On arrival at Islamabad Airport we are shunted into the VIP lounge, which serves Coca-Cola and tea and has a prayer mat in the corner with an arrow to Mecca – whether this deluxe treatment is because we are considered stars or because the authorities won't risk us polluting the fair flower of Islamic youth is a moot point. Five hour wait for our connecting flight to the North West frontier, but police politely stop us from stepping out to see the Pakistani dawn.

Thursday January 16th

Arrive at Peshawar, nearest town to the Khyber Pass and Afghanistan. On our release from a smaller VIP lounge we walk through hundreds of motionless cowed Pathans and Afghan refugees with Kalashnikov rifles, all eyes fixed on our strange arrival. God knows what they're waiting for – probably not touring English theatre companies with innovative interpretations of the classics. We are the only guests at a fading Raj hotel. Gunfire in the night gives away at sunrise to wailing of the muezzin. We are abroad.

Friday January 17th

Fit up at St Edwards College, another relic of the Raj, complete with photos of cricket teams and desks and dust. Censorship session with Adam, from the British council, for the benefit of Muslim audiences, which cuts not only the giant phallus from the first act but all kissing, and even the popping of a champagne cork. First performance in the sub-continent to 400 male Muslim students. Occasional gasps of shock, particularly when Hermia beats up Demetrius. At the evening performance it was all adult males downstairs but in the circle rows of veiled shapes, women in purdah, the first women we have seen in Pakistan, have come to view us, each through two inches of gauze. As the show gets going the silhouettes start to rock with silent laughter until one lady looks as though she will fall of the circle, kersplatt, onto the men below. The veiled figures wait after the show, and women from the Company go up to speak with them. The Muslim women are very nervous, but speak perfect English and are studying biochemistry and medicine at the university.

Saturday January 18th

Arrival in Islamabad, the capital city with gleaming new presidential palace and mosque dwarfing the National Assembly. Few poor people and no beggars here, apparently they are sent packing by the police. The city is clean, spacious and quiet. The first of many alarming press conferences, typical question: "How can you reconcile late 16th century Epicureanism with contemporary objectivism?"

Sunday January 19th

We walk into our first workshop to find it bisected, the female half who all speak English, are down one side of the hall, and all the men, who only speak Urdu, sitting down the other. The men come from a drama workshop which is run by a television producer with a jaw and a great deal of English. He has rehearsed his group in political sketches which are neither anti-Zia, nor anti-American, but anti-British Raj. The first of these sketches consists of three boys singing 'God Save the Queen' in raspberries. After the briefest pause we break into rapturous applause, as befits right-on theatre folk, but the heart drops like a lead-pellet. Eventually the atmosphere thaws and an improvisation is set up in Urdu about an arranged marriage, and what would happen if one of the girls brought home an unsuitable boy. A story evolved about a pretentious woman and her boorish brother-in-law from the country and so involved the actors that by the end they forgot to translate the story for us.

Monday January 20th

Lahore. The best venue so far, a newly built Arts complex. We meet a group of 4 men who have driven 150 miles to see us and who annually present Shakespeare to an audience of 2000 on a tented football pitch. Last year they did King Lear with a cast of 75 men and boys. We asked them why Shakespeare is so popular in their town and their leader says "For two reasons. One, the universal truths; two, the pretty costumes".

Monday January 27th

Karachi. Commercial centre of Pakistan, but the venue is a filthy converted cinema and extremely ill-equipped. We go to a series of liquid receptions given by the sponsors. These are always well-attended in this dry state, in particular by ex-patriates. "Didn't see the show, old boy, only here for the booze, but must expect a few philistines about, eh?" Karachi is a distinct contrast to cultured and artistic Lahore – where we had met amongst others Tariq Ali's parents.

Thursday January 30th

Sri Lanka is beyond belief. Monkeys swing in palm trees, parrots squawk, butterflies flutter, islanders in sarongs smile and wave. It really is like that. The Company ogle as our truck winds up and around a mountain 'til we arrive at Kandy.

Monday February 3rd

First of a series of workshops with a Sinhalese Romeo and a Tamil Juliet. The only taboo we encountered is the suggestion that Friar Lawrence might be a Buddhist monk. The Company is relieved to get back to the uncensored version of A Midsummer Night's Dream.

Friday February 7th

Bangladesh. Not a tourist in sight. We're booked into the Dhaka Sheraton, the beggars, dope dealers and pimps are kept to a discreet 20 yards from the front door. The hotel is full of Americans and Russians on aid programmes. A cup of tea here costs the average national weekly income.

Saturday February 8th

50 police carrying submachine guns and riot shields attend the performance – in case there's "trouble", but laugh along with everybody else. Reception with some Bengali people. We meet their leading TV actress who gets paid £20 for a week's filming. Her brother was one of the hundreds of Bengalis shot by West Pakistan the day before Dhaka was liberated in 1971. Apparently the Pakistanis tried to liquidate the Bengali intelligentsia in the 24 hours before Bangladesh's independence. In all, three and a half million Bengalis were killed, mostly by indiscriminate bombing. We are told these stories without a trace of bitterness or even surprise that we are so ignorant.

Sunday February 9th

Nepal. Hippiedom seems to have left Kathmandu unscathed. Trekkers now abound. The roads are all up – being re-laid for the Queen's visit. Kathmandu is certainly the most abroad any of us have ever been. We see a 12th Century Monastery and within it a shrine of the Lord Buddha all in gold, bedecked like a Neopolitan Madonna. Closer inspection reveals huge, fat grinning rats slithering among the jewels and filigree. They're kept by the monks to guard the shrine.

Monday February 10th

Performance in cavernous 1500 seater Royal Nepalese Academy of arts and is packed. The workshop here is in a school. The car is searched at the gate because the Crown-Prince is a pupil. He isn't at the workshop which is just as well as demi-gods might be difficult to direct.

Friday February 14th

New Delhi. Back to a 700 seater auditorium which now feels intimate. Most enthusiastic reception so far and lots of autograph hunters.

Saturday February 15th

Workshop on Twelfth Night. It transpires that an Indian Orsino might dress as an English Sahib to show his exoticism. Very long and learned interview for the director on Delhi TV. Sample question: "What is the state of British theatre today?"

Sunday February 16th

We go sightseeing but on our way to the Mosque a large be-turbaned Sikh shouts at us to go back. "Who's the fighting between?" we ask. "Oh, just Hindus and Muslims again" he despairs. We thread our way back through some chanting Muslims and hear later that one of them had been shot dead.

Wednesday February 19th

Calcutta. Police escort on the way from the airport. Pope mementoes everywhere. Beggars push stumps of limbs through car windows. After a while you get used to the guilt and can push your way through dozens of pleading arms. But every hour the conscience is shocked anew. We see a one-armed boy shivering in the baking heat. He is so frightened that he has stopped begging and is shaking off streams of sweat. Cars scream past belching black exhaust and power cuts sporadically plunge the whole roaring monster into darkness and momentary silence.

Audiences are small but warm. On the first night the Company was garlanded at the curtain call.

Friday February 21st

Go to see Sircar's well-known theatre group perform 'Bhoma' dealing with contemporary rural exploitation. Audience sat all round a shabby first floor meeting room and watched six highly disciplined actors unfold their story with sharpness and austerity. We had arranged to meet Sircar afterwards but the room fills with the smell of smoke – a mob has set fire to a bookshop outside and the police are on their way. The British High Commission Land Rover gets us to the street corner, but the streets are now blocked with panic. Deserted tram-cars, rickshaws overturned, wave upon wave of people, gunfire and faces squashed against windows. We inch our way home.

Saturday February 22nd

Temple of Kali – where humans are reputed to have been sacrificed to Kali, Goddess of Destruction. Now the floor is awash with the blood of animals. After giving a donation to the Temple Fund for the poor, we have our foreheads doused in vermillion, drink some milky holy water and have flowers pressed into our hands. Round the corner, Mother Teresa's hospice offers a few hours of calm to the dying. Mother Teresa herself has quick eyes and a double, hearty handshake – the atmosphere is cheerful and chatty. Some of the younger sisters ask us to do a performance in the hospital – but our plane leaves this afternoon. Maybe next time...?