

Royal Shakespeare Company on tour in the US

Midnight's Children cast members speak out on war against Iraq

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The British Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) recently concluded a residency at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. In addition to Shakespeare's Coriolanus and The Merry Wives of Windsor, performed by the company, a special cast presented the North American premier of Midnight's Children, an adaptation of Salman Rushdie's award-winning novel. Originally published in 1981, Rushdie's novel was awarded the Booker Prize in 1981.

The play traces the traumatic course of Indian independence and the creation of Pakistan and Bangladesh through the fate of one family. Midnight's Children refers to those born at the stroke of midnight August 15, 1947, the moment of India's independence from Britain.

The novel and the play are powerful indictments of the legacy of the Indian national movement. The stage work, directed by Tim Supple, begins with a speech by India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, promising a new India of prosperity and fulfillment. It ends with Indira Gandhi's imposition of martial law in 1975, which marked a sharp right-wing turn by the Congress Party and the entire political establishment in India, paving the way for the rise of the Hindu-fundamentalist BJP. In the play, Gandhi sterilizes or kills the Midnight Children, who, in the play, represent the hope of a free India.

The entire RSC cast came out in opposition to the war against Iraq. A number of actors performing in the Shakespeare works sent a letter to the Michigan Daily, the University of Michigan student newspaper, declaring that their trip to the US did not imply support for the policy of the Bush administration. They participated in the March 5 student strike against war. The Midnight's Children cast is uniformly opposed to the war, and a number participated in an another anti-war rally held in Ann Arbor during their stay.

Midnight's Children will be performed at the Apollo Theater in New York City March 21-30, followed by a tour in April-June of a number of cities in the UK, including Aberdeen, Glasgow, Leeds, Nottingham, Birmingham, Bath and Norwich.

The World Socialist Web Site spoke to two cast members, Sameena Zehra and Antony Zaki on March 13.

WSWS: I am interested to know your opinion on the war in Iraq and how you would gauge British public opinion generally with regard to the war.

Sameena Zehra: Well I am a pacifist, and I am not for war at all. This particular war is suspect for so many different reasons. Everybody is talking about Saddam Hussein and that he should disarm, that he has nuclear weapons and weapons of mass destruction. In fact, the largest holder of nuclear and chemical weapons in the world is the United States of America, and I don't hear them saying that they will disarm, so why are they asking someone else to? And they would be the first to say that we need to defend ourselves, so why shouldn't every other country? Of course Saddam Hussein is a dictator with a terrible human rights record,

but to say that he is a threat to the entire world is just too easy.

I think that the British public opinion is very much opposed to war. There was a march in February that attracted 2 million people, though my feeling is that there were probably more than 2 million at that march. People from different walks of life, different age groups, different ethnicities, different socioeconomic groups. This war would have been done and over two years ago if it hadn't been for public opinion, which is very heartening. Because often you feel very cynical and depressed, thinking, well, how can I make a difference. But actually it does make a difference and they are actually more accountable than they would have otherwise been.

WSWS: Why do you think Bush and Blair are so determined about making war?

SZ: It is no huge leap of imagination to know that there is oil there, and that this is a factor. I think the war is about oil. At a very simplistic level, I think it is about the American government saying, well, we have nuclear weapons and our friends can have some, but if anyone else does we will kill them, which is kind of a bully-boy tactic.

One can make the argument, well, Saddam Hussein is a dictator and has a terrible human rights record. But if you make that argument, there are many other such leaders. Why does the US pick this one?

The huge irony of the argument that the US is going to democratize Iraq is that Bush wasn't elected. If that election had happened in an African country, you would have had UN peacekeeping forces there saying, this is terrible. So I think the moral argument that is being presented for war is completely wrong. It is about power and control, political, economic and military. The US thinks it can tell everyone what to do, but like every other civilization that has attempted this, it will fall on its own arrogance. I think that the difference is that the world is a much smaller place now and the weapons are much more dangerous.

One can point to America's overthrow of Mossadegh in Iran [the nationalist prime minister overthrown with the aid of the CIA in 1953] and the installation of the Shah. Or the overthrow of Allende in Chile [in 1973]. The US really has no moral argument or moral legitimacy.

And the way the ideological issues are being posed is really detrimental. The only thing that I think should be globalized in this world is the sense that we all have to live together and that we have to live together with understanding, without condemning people just because they are different. The recent developments have focused particularly on the nature of Islam and the real huge separation between extreme right-wing fundamentalism and the moderate Islam and needs to be encouraged. And it doesn't get encouraged by people saying, all Muslims are fundamentalists.

It is similar to saying that Americans are all right-wing capitalists that want to rule the world, but actually the American government is not the American people. One of the fantastic things about being here is that one

sees that American people don't agree with it.

WSWS: That was actually my next question, namely, what your impression of American people has been.

SZ: My impression while in Britain was very much what I got from CNN and BBC which was dreadful because it's only Colin Powell or Ari Fleischer or people like that. But I have been to America many times and I have always found that the American people are very different from the American government. But it is heartwarming to see that there is such a swell of public opinion against this war. This is especially true here in Ann Arbor—maybe because this is a university town and there are young people who have ideals and want to be able to change the world.

WSWS: What do you think of Blair's future?

SZ: (Laughs.) He won't be throwing any parties. I voted for him the first time. I had a lot of respect before for the former home secretary Jack Straw. But now that he has become foreign secretary he has just gone bananas. But I don't know what will happen to Blair. There is a lot of opposition within his own country. There are already questions that there might be a change in leadership.

WSWS: What do you think will be the consequences if they do go ahead, in the face of world public opinion?

SZ: I think it will be so dangerous. That then means that the UN has broken down. And that is just a dangerous precedent. International law will be undermined and there will be no way to regulate relations between different countries.

And I think that will eventually implode on them [the Bush administration], because I don't think that the American people will tolerate it and I don't think the American community will tolerate it. There is only so much you can do with money and military power. If the world closes its doors on you, then eventually you will suffer the consequences, no matter how strong you are.

WSWS: Do you find that as a result of the war drive that there is any kind of radicalization within artistic or theatrical circles?

SZ: Absolutely. This play that we are doing, which is the story of Saleem and his family, is set against Indian history and particularly the partition [of India and Pakistan]. And the more that we rehearsed it, the more we realized that there is so much in it that is about having good intentions and wanting to do the best, but being overridden by fear and the lust of power. There are many parallels with the present situation. We have had a lot of conversations about it. Some of us who have not been political in the past have come to the opinion that we need to make a stand. It is a time when you cannot say that politics does not concern me and I don't care. You absolutely have to decide what it is that you think and how it is that you feel if you are going to live in the world.

WSWS: What is your own personal experience with partition?

SZ: My family is Kashmiri, so we didn't go anywhere at the time of partition. But my family is Muslim and there have always been problems that have come up. I was in Bombay during the riots in 1992. And I lived in a block of six flats, which were mixed, with Muslims, Hindus and Christians living there. People were saying at the time that the Shiv Sena, the right-wing Hindu-fundamentalist organization that was organizing a lot of the riots, was going to come and pull out all the Muslims from the flats.

At about 2:00 in the morning a group began to approach the buildings, with torches and all. And all the men got ready with knives and such to defend us from what was coming. And all of a sudden one of the women began banging stainless steel utensils. And it just went from flat to flat, and within seven or eight minutes there was the most crushing sound of people banging all throughout the flats. And the Shiv Sena just left. It was to me the most wonderful moment. Amidst all the violence and carnage and hatred, that a community of people, who could easily have given up the 15 Muslim families in the flats, said no, we're not going to do that.

It gave me a lot of hope, and I think that hope still exists. For all the

warmongers in the world, there is always someone to protest. And that is for me what keeps us alive as a species. There are always the people who will pull us back and say, we can do this peacefully and we can sustain and we can keep our value system and integrity so we can look at ourselves in the mirror in the morning and not see something horrible and cruel and barbaric. I'm an optimist in the end. However depressed I am or however much I despair, I am still an optimist.

Like many who have come to the United States in recent months, actor and writer Antony Zaki had to deal with the growing attack on democratic rights within the country, especially as this applies to immigrants.

WSWS: Could you first of all tell us of your experiences entering the US.

Antony Zaki: I've been in the US before, and I have always felt that the US is a very open society, a very welcome society, which is different from any other country in the world. Before coming to Ann Arbor, when we were in the UK, I was looking forward to coming here. But actually before I arrived here, we had visa problems. Since 9/11 I think things have changed quite dramatically, not necessarily with the people, but with the governmental institutions, how they have whipped everyone into a paranoia.

And I think because I specifically had been born in Pakistan, even though I only lived there for a year, I had difficulty getting a visa to come here, even though I am with the RSC. I had to go through the process of having my visa application rejected, then having to have it go to Washington DC to get approval, and also having to have lawyers in American get involved. It left a bad feeling in me. I felt like I was being treated as a criminal before I had even boarded a plane.

When we arrived in Detroit, immediately I was called in and made to wait for 20 minutes, not told what the problem was. Then spent 40 minutes being interrogated about my family background, about my mother, about my father, things that I had already discussed with the American Embassy. I asked again, why am I being singled out? The response was, well, you were born in Pakistan. The icing on the cake was then being fingerprinted and photographed, which I really found offensive. It seems now you are guilty and have to prove your innocence.

That was a real taste of what has happened in the States since 9/11, and I think it is playing into the hands of what the terrorists want you to do. I know the people themselves are not changing in this way, though there will be people who are swayed by what is on the news media. It seems everything on the news is given from a very biased viewpoint.

WSWS: This is not an isolated experience. Recently there was the case of renowned Iranian film director Abbas Kiarostami being denied a visa to enter the country, and there have been a number of similar incidents within the artistic community. Of course besides the problems faced by artists, ordinary people have faced enormous difficulties both coming into the United States and staying here. Many immigrants, particularly those from countries in the Middle East like Pakistan and Iran, have been arrested and/or deported. Why do you think these developments have taken place?

AZ: It is obviously a governmental policy to just blanket everyone from these places, to investigate them. This is what Bush's policy is about. I had the backing of a huge company. I can imagine if you are just an ordinary person coming through, what sort of interrogations are going on there. Next to me was someone from Saudi Arabia, who had been in the states for many years studying, and he was there for two hours. It leaves a bad feeling.

WSWS: The Bush administration and many of its officials are very close to the Christian fundamentalist right, and there is a definite tone of racism and religious chauvinism in the attack on Muslims and people of Arab or Asian descent. Though I think the attack on democratic rights has a broader character. Those measures that may be directed now primarily at immigrants will be used against all people opposing the policies of the American government.

AZ: I think for me the Bush administration has played straight into the hands of the terrorists, for the US to be against the Arab world and the Muslim world and cause this divide. When you start having a policy of intolerance, it is going to hit back at you at some point. I think we are living in a very dangerous time. The whole atmosphere of intolerance and paranoia that the government and the media is generating. We are also getting this in the UK now. We had a period in which the airport was surrounded by the military during the period of Ramadan. That was paranoia to me. I think it will just get worse when the war starts.

WSWS: How do you see the work on the play *Midnight's Children* within this context?

AZ: In London this is the only political play on. I think it is a very good time to do this. The play deals with partition, the intolerance, the paranoia, the state-sponsored terrorism that was there within both India and Pakistan. These issues have resonance with what is going on today as well. I think everything now in life is political in a way. Everything you do is touched by the politics of today.

WSWS: Do you see think the artist has a particular role to play in this situation?

AZ: I think we do. There is a role to speak out from your point of view, whatever that is. I think people should have varying opinions and thoughts of what is going on now, and the artist must express these ideas and speak out.



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