



The stage and the storyteller

Playwright and director, Tim Supple tells us how the language of drama transcends language boundaries.

Text: Saroni Roy

“I travelled to India to make a production with Indian performers. While I was travelling, I met various people who spoke different languages. I became interested in mixing them and allowing people to speak in their own language. I decided to do Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*,” said Tim Supple, internationally acclaimed playwright and director.

Tim’s fascination towards the variety, the richness and the reach of Indian theatre with its ancient history, drew him to carry this out with actors from across India. “I don’t know any Indian languages. But I have worked for three years with people who do. So it wasn’t so difficult. After all, it is the same with any person anywhere in the world. When one works with foreign languages, you go on a deeper journey and the communication which compounds is through language,” he reveals.

Tim started working on the Indian production in January 2005. The play opened to packed houses when it premiered in Delhi in 2006. “The opening night for the play in England was a memorable occasion. It was our first performance in the UK and that too, in the home of the Royal Shakespeare Company. The performance went down fabulously,” reminisces Tim.

Like his past plays, this multi-lingual adaptation of one of the most widely performed Shakespearean plays has travelled across the globe with a mixed cast of Indian and Sri Lankan performers. But why multilingual? “As an outsider, how can I choose to do it in one language? After all, what language could I do it in? How could I exclude some actors and include others?”

Interestingly, the international audience, which does not comprehend Indian languages, perceived and enjoyed the play much more than the Indian audience. “People enjoyed seeing the play in a different way,” he explains. “They were excited about watching a play in languages that they did not know. In addition, they could follow the story — it is not so difficult. People comprehended; because they could understand the visual story... they could find a connect with the actors. For me, *Midsummer* is about telling the truth as I see it. And that’s what I was trying to do.”

Tim remembers, “It’s been a big journey; we brought people from across India to Pondicherry, where we rehearsed for eight weeks nonstop. We lived and worked together. We did an amazing performance for a group of Tamil villages. Since then,



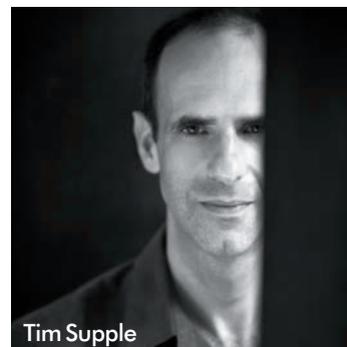
A Midsummer Night’s Dream

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members of our company have lost family: we had births and deaths, and marriages. This is a whole journey of life.”

Tim’s love for story telling began as a seven-year-old. “I would see a film or read a book or see a play, and then give my own version of it. I would see each story very vividly in my mind and I still remember the stories very strongly,” he says.

Now back in the UK, Tim continues working on *A Midsummer Night’s*



Tim Supple

Dream. He concedes that the play is one of his best works. Tim hopes to work on a new version of *Peter Pan* and *The Arabian Nights — The Great Arabic Stories*.

Ask him about the difference between Indian and international audiences and he responds — “In England, the theatre industry is very professional, where audiences shell money to watch plays. In India, there is a great tradition of theatre, but paying to watch theatre isn’t much of a norm. Another difference with our production is the audience is less conservative about Shakespeare. The audience in India can be little more conservative with Shakespeare.” □