

theatre

A long, muddled conflict in Afghanistan: it's time to act

For a public unsure of what we're doing there, 12 new plays aim to offer an understanding, says *Brian Logan*

In *The Producers*, Max Bialystock's idea of box-office poison was *Springtime for Hitler*, a musical love-letter to the exterminator of the Jews. Were Max around today, perhaps he would stage *The Great Game*, a two-month arts festival about the history of Afghanistan. Certainly, conventional theatre wisdom doesn't equate arcane international affairs with commercial success. The Tricycle Theatre in northwest London has never much cared for conventional wisdom, mind you — but "there's no doubt this is a big gamble for us", says the director Nicolas Kent, who bears zero resemblance to Bialystock save the knack of producing theatre hits from the least auspicious raw materials.

It was the Tricycle that invented verbatim drama, with a series of docu-plays derived from real-life testimony (*The Colour of Justice*, *Srebrenica*, *Guantanamo*) that repositioned theatre at the heart of public and political life. With *The Great Game*, the intention is similar: "To raise a debate," Kent says, "to raise consciousness, get people interested in the subject, and to try and understand what's going on." Kent says that this is the biggest festival of Afghan culture mounted in Britain and features 12 new plays by top playwrights (David Edgar, Simon Stephens, Abi Morgan) alongside a ten-day film season, a programme of talks, photography and ceramics exhibitions and a concert by a Sufi music group.

Kent is too excited by these events to worry that his festival, a year in the making, has been gazumped by happenings in the real world. He conceived the season because "Afghanistan was in the back of people's minds", he says, "not the forefront". A year ago, Iraq dominated the news, while the other war, which had started earlier, war was ignored. But, with Obama in situ and Baghdad dropping down the bulletins, "I've been astonished," Kent says, "at how the media has really shone the light on Afghanistan." In fact, that makes *The Great Game* season more urgent. Yes, we may now know that the Taliban are back, that the Afghan President is a lame duck and



WAR STORIES
Sheena Bhattessa, above left, and
Jemima Roper
and, below,
Daniel Belts and
Sagar Arya in
The Great Game

for something, you want to get as much out of it as you can."

From *The Great Game*, Nicolas Kent says that audiences will get "a forensic look at where we are now using the events of history". So, as far as Afghanistan is concerned, where are we now? On this point, there is unexpected unanimity. "I felt before," Bhattacharjee says, "that we had to get the hell out of the country, and quick. Now, I'm re-evaluating that." Likewise Kent, who "started this project feeling we shouldn't be there" but now — having met politicians, aid workers and civilians in Afghanistan and the UK — is "convinced we're in for the long haul". Partly, that's about fulfilling our responsibilities to a state that (as the plays will show) we first saddled with unworkable borders, and have tinkered with ever since. But Kent will

have no talk of the white man's burden. "It's not just white men. India is the biggest aid donor. There are lots of countries trying to help. And most Afghans feel the international community has to stay. They'd love that not to have to happen, but that's the position."



died in Afghanistan since 2001. But we barely know why — which is the gap that the Tricycle can plug.

It's not been cheap to do so. "It's cost 2½ times our normal budget," Kent says — and drumming up those funds was "very difficult". Enthusiasm was more freely available. "Normally writers' agents say, 'Oh no, they're so busy'. But this time everyone was gung-ho for the project." Kent duly commissioned British or American dramatists (he failed to find any Afghan playwrights) to focus on different moments in history from the 1840s to the present. "I used to hear people talking about the first and second Afghan war," Kent says, "and I'd think, 'I know nothing about any of these!'" Now, he could brief playwrights to help him out. "I felt like an air traffic controller at Heathrow," he says, "bringing all the writers into land on a particular decade of Afghan history, and making sure no one touched down at the same time."

The challenge for those writers was to bring to life these historical moments in discrete, half-hour chunks. The plays are presented in evenings of four at a time — and "seeing the work of different writers in conjunction will be interesting for an audience," the playwright Stephen Jeffreys says. There was no party line to toe, he adds. The only edict was "to be true to your material and not do too much". It has to be dramatic. If you're doing one half-hour play among 12, you need to create a memorable image. His own play, *Bugles at the Gates of Jalalabad* (which opens the festival), is about the first Afghan war — "a snapshot," Jeffreys says, "of an army going to a country to prop up a puppet king whom nobody wants." The contemporary parallels, here as elsewhere, are glaringly obvious. In Ben Ockrent's play *Honey*, a CIA agent urges Bill Clinton's administration to deal with a troublemaker called Bin Laden. Throughout, "there are troops on the ground, there's a lack of understanding between cultures. In all the plays I've read," Jeffreys says, "these themes recur."

Of course, 150 years of history equals a lot of data to communicate — "and, theatrically, that can be tricky" says the actor Paul Bhattacharjee, who stars in six of the plays. "And they're all short plays," he adds, "which can be a constraint." David Edgar's play *Black Tulips*, in which Bhattacharjee stars, is a case in point. "It's all about the Soviet time there. The whole play is set in a briefing room. It's just briefing after briefing. You think, 'Bloody hell, this is dry.'" But then, when you get it up on its feet, suddenly it has a kind of life and vitality about it..."

Joy Wilkinson, one of the younger playwrights involved, at first questioned her right to comment on Afghanistan. "You're always told to write about what you know, aren't you?" she says. Now, having penned a play about Amanullah Khan, the country's modernising 1920s ruler, Wilkinson is an evangelist for the theatre of the hitherto unknown. "It's been a real lesson to me about what you can write about," she says, "and what it's your responsibility to find out about."

After all, she says, "when I go to the theatre, I want to leave knowing things I didn't know before. Something about the world in which we live, about different ways of life. When you're giving up your evening



The Great Game will help you to do so, or otherwise, with authority. And to understand a little more about one of the most inscrutable, intractable countries on Earth. "Plays like this give me the opportunity to deepen my knowledge of things," Bhattacharjee says — "and also to feel the human loss of it. No matter what our political views, we all have the ability to empathise. And it's terribly important that, every now and then we're given the chance to do so."

The Great Game, Tricycle Theatre, London NW6 (020-73281000), from Friday

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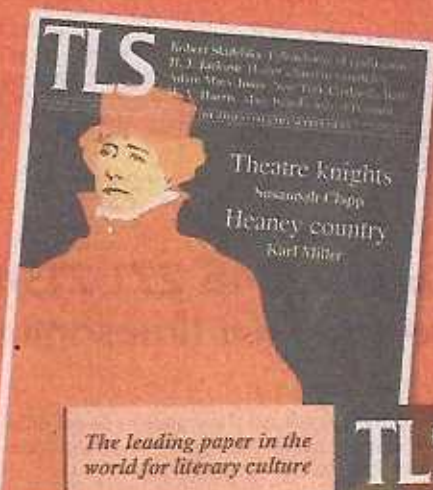
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