

A close-up, high-resolution photograph of a man's face, focusing on his right eye. The eye is strikingly white and contains a detailed, miniature image of the Taj Mahal, suggesting a deep connection or observation. The man's skin is textured and warm-toned, and his dark hair is visible at the top. The background is a soft, textured yellowish-gold.

**Bush  
Theatre  
Guards  
at the  
Taj**

by Rajiv  
Joseph

# GUARDS AT THE TAJ

**Cross-Curricular: Drama and Theatre Studies, English Literature, History, Politics, PSHE**

Key Stages 4 & 5

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## Introduction

The resources, research and information in this study pack are intended to enhance your understanding of *Guards at the Taj* by Rajiv Joseph and to provide you with the materials to assist students in both the practical study of this text and in gaining a deeper understanding of this exciting new play.

This includes context (both political and theatrical), production photographs, discussion points and exercises that have been devised to unpack the play's themes and stylistic devices.

In line with the national curriculum, *Guards at the Taj* would be a suitable live theatre production for analysis. It will also provide an invaluable resource for students who are

focusing on new writing, ensemble work and theatre productions based on historical and real life figures.

*Guards at the Taj* tackles the challenges of researching, presenting and understanding social, historical and political issues in an accessible and creative way. The play will provoke students to ask pertinent questions, think critically, and develop perspective and judgement.

Please note that this Education Pack includes key plot details about the play. The Classroom Exercises are most suitable for students who have watched (or read) the play.

If you have any questions please don't hesitate to get in touch with Amanda Castro on 0208 743 3584 or at [amandacastro@bushtheatre.co.uk](mailto:amandacastro@bushtheatre.co.uk).



Danny Ashok and Darren Kuppan in rehearsals



# GUARDS AT THE TAJ

**It's 1648. Agra, India.** Imperial guards and best mates Humayun and Babur keep watch as the final touches are put to the mighty Taj Mahal behind them. The emperor has decreed that no one, except the masons, labourers and slaves who exist within those walls, shall turn to look at the building until it is complete.

Now, as the building nears completion and the first light catches on the pure white domes behind them, the temptation to steal a glance at the most beautiful monument the world has ever seen grows stronger. But beauty has a price and Humayun and Babur are about to learn its true cost.

Inspired by the myths and legends that surround the Taj Mahal, *Guards at the Taj* is an epic tale that prompts contemporary audiences to revisit questions about art and privilege.

## 2017 Cast

|         |                      |
|---------|----------------------|
| Humayun | <b>Danny Ashok</b>   |
| Babur   | <b>Darren Kuppan</b> |

## Creative Team

Playwright ~ **Rajiv Joseph**  
 Director ~ **Jamie Lloyd**  
 Designer ~ **Soutra Gilmour**  
 Lighting Designer ~ **Richard Howell**  
 Sound Designer & Composer ~ **George Dennis**  
 Costume Supervisor ~ **Lydia Crimp**  
 Fight Director ~ **Kate Waters**  
 Company Stage Manager ~ **Vicky Eames**  
 Assistant Stage Manager ~ **Remi Bruno Smith**  
 Set Builder ~ **TIN SHED Scenery**



Jamie Lloyd (director)

**“If we hadn’t done our jobs tonight, we’d be hanging by our necks in the royal courtyard getting our eyes pecked out by the royal crows. So excuse me if I don’t wallow in some misbegotten guilt all night. Was it fucked up? Yes, it was. But I don’t have to feel terrible about it.”**

Humayun, *Guards at the Taj*



Danny Ashok and Darren Kuppan in rehearsals



Danny Ashok in rehearsals for *Guards at the Taj*

## classroom exercise #1

### Reflecting on the production

**Curriculum links:** Drama, Art & Design, Music

**Time:** 20 minutes

**Materials:** Flipchart paper and pens

Use this exercise to get your students responding to work that they have seen onstage. This tool enables students to respond to any piece or dance, theatre or live performance that they have seen.

Organise the class into groups of 4 or 5 and give each group a large sheet of paper and some pens.

Write the name of the production on the whiteboard, then assign each group an area of the production to explore including:

- The set and staging
- Directing
- Costume
- Music and Sound
- Acting
- Themes of the play

Each group should write their chosen area of the production as a heading on their flip chart paper. Each group then has five minutes to brainstorm thoughts and comments around their assigned area of the production, noting them in a spider diagram on their flip chart paper.

After five minutes each group must pass their paper onto the next group and repeat this process until every group has commented on all areas of the production listed by the class.

These sheets can then be photocopied and handed out. You could also put the sheets up in the classroom for inspiration when discussing the production.



## Who was Shah Jahan?

*Guards at the Taj* is set in the rule of fifth Emperor of the Mughal Empire, Shah Jahan. In 1632, he commissioned an ivory-white marble mausoleum to be built on the bank of the Yamuna river in Agra, India. This was the Taj Mahal, built in memory of his late wife Mumtaz Mahal who died in childbirth. She was his third and favourite wife. The Taj Mahal is often described as one of the wonders of the world.

## Childhood

Shah Jahan was born in 1592. He was the third son of Emperor Jahangir and was given the name Khurram, by his grandfather, Emperor Akbar. Prince Khurram was raised by his grandfather's first childless wife, Empress Ruqaiya Sultan Begum, which was unusual for a prince in this period.



As a young boy, his education was typically royal. He was exposed to a wide variety of cultural arts, including poetry and music. He also undertook martial arts training.

Khurram wasn't interested in joining the politics of the court, preferring a life of Imperial luxury and, as the third son it was



unlikely he would take the throne. After a failed revolt by his older step-brother, Emperor Jahangir and Khurram's relationship grew closer, culminating in him being named the heir apparent in 1607.

## King of the World

In 1614, Khurram proved his military prowess. In an offensive against the hostile Rajput state, he commanded an army of 200,000 men in a yearlong war, ending in success for the Mughal Empire.

Jahangir was becoming increasingly paranoid over possible invasions as he planned to expand the Empire even further. He sought Khurram's help, and together they expanded the Empire to include the regions which are now known as modern day Northern India and Pakistan.

Khurram's success in the conflicts earned him a higher military rank, a special throne, and crucially, the title Shah Jahan (Persian for 'King of the World').

Shah Jahan soon grew impatient to take the throne. In 1622, he made a failed attempt to overthrow his father. Jahangir died in 1627 and Shah Jahan was named Emperor. Shah

**“The world believes it was built by love but reading Shah Jahan’s own words on the Taj, one could say it was grief that built the Taj Mahal and it was sorrow that saw it through sixteen years till completion.”**

**Aysha Taryam, The Opposite of Indifference: A Collection of Commentaries**

Jahan then went about eliminating potential rivals. He had his brothers, nephews and stepmother Nur Jahan - a powerful political influence in the Mughal courts - executed immediately.

## Art and Architecture

Under his rule, as well as his son's Aurangzeb, the Mughal Empire expanded considerably. But Shah Jahan's reign is most well known for being a golden age for Mughal architecture and aesthetics. Although a violent and brutal leader, Shah Jahan was a great lover of art and architecture. Under his patronage, the Mughal Empire became a rich centre of arts, crafts and architecture.

Some of the nation's most well-known architectural and artistic accomplishments were undertaken during his reign. The Taj Mahal in Agra, the Red Fort and the Jama Masjid in Delhi, and the Shalimar Gardens of Lahore are examples of Mughal architecture

from the period that survive to this day.

Shah Jahan died in 1666 and was succeeded by his son Aurangzeb.

## The Taj Mahal and Mumtaz

Emperor Shah Jahan built the Taj Mahal in memory of his third wife, Mumtaz Mahal. Mumtaz was born Arjumand Banu Begum, the granddaughter of a Persian noble. At a very young age Shah Jahan saw Arjumand on Royal Meena Bazaar on the streets of Agra and fell in love with her. They were engaged when Arjumand was only 15 years old but did not marry until five years later.

When married, Shah Jahan gave her the name Mumtaz Mahal which means 'Jewel of the Palace'. Although Shah Jahan had multiple wives he claimed they held "nothing more than the status of marriage". Mumtaz was his one true love.

Mumtaz, unlike most Mughal women, was largely seen and treated as Shah Jahan's equal. Mumtaz wielded considerable political power and influence and frequently accompanied Shah Jahan on military ventures. She was a well-respected de facto court adviser.

She died in 1631 while giving birth to their 14th child. Shah Jahan declared that the entire empire be in mourning for two years.

Following her death, Shah Jahan ordered for "the most beautiful mausoleum that the world has ever seen" to be built to entomb her. The construction of the Taj Mahal took over 22 years and 22,000 workers to complete it. Taj Mahal means 'crown of palaces' in Arabic.

## classroom exercise #2

### Creating mood boards

**Curriculum Links:** Design & Technology, Art, Textiles

**Time:** 40 mins

**Resources:** Internet, colour printer, marker pens, glue, A3 card

In small groups (3-4 people), tell students to imagine they have been commissioned to be the design team for *Guards At The Taj*.

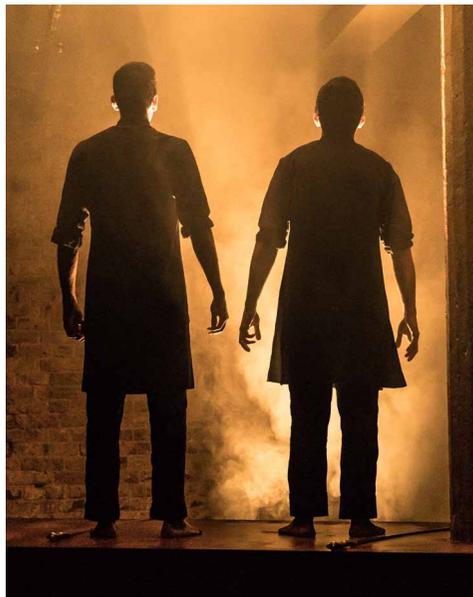
Ask them to:

- Choose a scene from the play and think how they would have designed the set, props, costumes and lighting. They can stick to the original design of the play or work

on a new idea. Their mood board should reflect their interpretation of themes and characters in the play.

- Print out relevant pictures from the Internet or scan images from newspapers, books or other found materials and stick them on an A3 sheet of card to form their mood board.
- Prepare a 100 word design brief in their group, which they will pitch to the class.

You can look at [this Pinterest board](#) of images that the Bush Theatre created for a previous production *Disgraced* as inspiration.



## Mughal Poetry

n. ghazal (in Middle Eastern and Indian literature and music) a lyric poem with a fixed number of verses and a repeated rhyme, typically on the theme of love, and normally set to music.

The most common form of poetry in the Mughal Empire was called a Ghazal. Ghazals originated in Ancient Persia but became popularised in India following the Mughal invasion in the 12th century.



Ghazal literally means “to talk to, or about, women”. Traditionally, Ghazals deal predominantly with the topic of love – more specifically, unattainable love. The poet is the distraught, spurned lover who tries to gain the affection of an aloof, disdainful, sometimes cruel beloved.

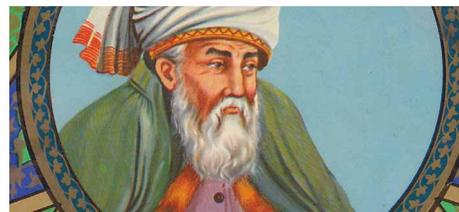
Each verse of a Ghazal is a complex but complete description of the topic. It requires great poetic skill to reduce the most complex of emotions into the fewest of words while maintaining sophistication of thought and word.

### Structure and Form

- A traditional Ghazal consists of five to fifteen couplets, typically seven.
- A refrain (a repeated word or phrase) appears at the end of both lines of the first couplet and at the end of the second line in each succeeding couplet.
- One or more words before the refrain are rhymes or partial rhymes.
- The lines should be of approximately the same length and meter.
- The poet may use the final couplet as a signature couplet, using his or her name in first, second or third person, and giving a more direct declaration of thought or feeling to the reader.

### Language

- Ghazals make excessive use of extended metaphors and hyperbole.
- Each couplet should be a poem in itself.
- There should not be continuous development of a subject from one couplet to the next through the poem.
- The refrain provides a link between the couplets.

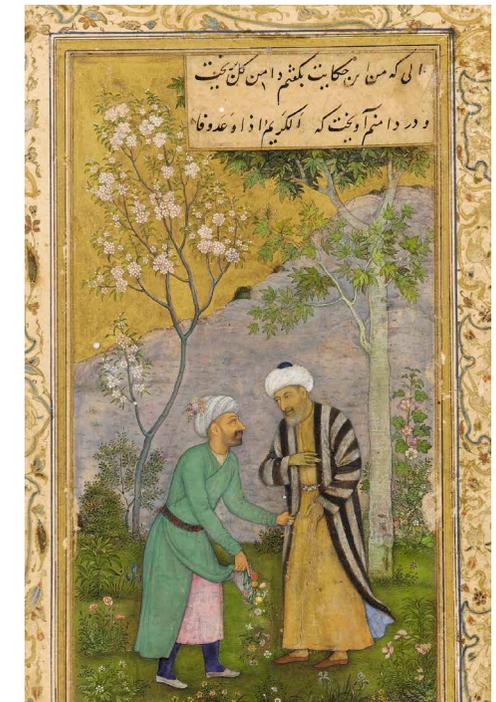


Here is a famous example of a Ghazal that you may be studying in GCSE English Literature.

### Ghazal by Mimi Khalvati

If I am the grass and you the breeze,  
blow through me.  
If I am the rose and you the bird, then  
woo me.  
If you are the rhyme and I the refrain,  
don't hang  
on my lips, come and I'll come too when  
you cue me.  
If yours is the iron fist in the velvet glove  
when the arrow flies, the heart is  
pierced, tattoo me.  
If mine is the venomous tongue, the  
serpent's tail,  
charmer, use your charm, weave a spell  
and subdue me.  
If I am the laurel leaf in your crown, you  
are  
the arms around my bark, arms that  
never knew me.  
Oh would that I were bark! So old and  
still in leaf.  
And you, dropping in my shade, dew to  
bedew me!  
What shape should I take to marry your  
own, have you

– hawk to my shadow, moth to my flame  
– pursue me?  
If I rise in the east as you die in the west,  
die for my sake, my love, every night  
renew me.  
If, when it ends, we are just good friends,  
be my Friend,  
muse, lover and guide, Shamsuddin to  
my Rumi.  
Be heaven and earth to me and I'll be  
twice the me  
I am, if only half the world you are to  
me.



## Exploring fact and legend: blurring lines through performance

**Curriculum Links:** Drama, History, English Literature

**Time:** Two 1 hour sessions

**Resources:** Open space, computers/internet, flipchart paper & pens.

*Guards at the Taj* is set in 1648. This was a pivotal year in Indian History. After twenty years of construction, the Taj Mahal was ready to be unveiled. At the same time, the Mughal Empire was beginning to decline and faced threats of invasion from the East India Company. The opulent lifestyle of the Emperor was unmatched by investment back into the Empire. It was a period of increasing inequality and tough regimes were put in place to keep the masses subdued.

Rajiv Joseph's play faces the oppression of the era in a shocking scene of brutality. Humayun and Babur are ordered to cut off the hands of 20,000 workers. Legend has it that the Emperor Shah Jahan was so concerned that no piece of architecture so beautiful should ever be built again that he ordered that every hand that built it be chopped off. This story became a popular myth which has often been mistaken for historical fact.

*Guards at the Taj* blurs fact and fiction to explore a broader theme of art and privilege concerning who gets to create art, access art and enjoy art and who is excluded. The following sessions are designed for students to take a historical figure or setting as a starting point to explore how different art forms can blend fact and fiction.

### Session 1: Dictatorships

**Read the following extract from *Guards at the Taj* with your class.**

HUMAYUN: Yeah. The Emperor is angry. So now the emperor has issued a decree: Nothing so beautiful as Tajmahal shall ever be built again.



BABUR: What kind of decree is that?

HUMAYUN: He has ordered that the hands of every mason, laborer and artisan who crafted Tajmahal... be chopped off.

BABUR: WHAT? Wait wait wait. He's going to chop 20,000 hands off?

HUMAYUN: 40,000.

BABUR: Because they wanted to look at Tajmahal?

HUMAYUN: We need not ask why. A Royal Decree is exactly that.

BABUR: Every worker? Every man who built this?

HUMAYUN: Every one.

BABUR: So someone is going to have to chop off 40 Thousand Hands?

HUMAYUN: Yep.

BABUR: That's a terrible job

### Class Discussion

- What is dictatorship?
- What do you think motivates dictators?
- Is dictatorship the best way to rule a nation or even necessary sometimes?
- How do people resist or fight against dictators?

In small groups ask students to research one totalitarian regime from the options below. Find out how these leaders came to power, why they enforced a dictatorship, how they restricted people's freedom, what life was like for everyday people and did the dictators face any backlash?

- Hitler's Germany
- Caligula (Roman Empire)
- Chang Hsien Hung
- Stalin's Russia

Each group should present their research on a flip chart. You may draw, write and print any relevant images. These can be displayed in classrooms.

## classroom exercise #3 continued

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### Exploring fact and legend: blurring the lines through performance

#### Session 2: Still Images

In the same groups, using the information learnt during the research process, create 3 still images dramatizing events in the historical period you have studied. The still images should be from the point of view of both the dictator and ordinary people. Two of these images should be historically accurate but for the third the students can use “artistic license”, e.g. distorting factual elements or presenting myths or rumours as fact.

Following on from your still images, develop one of it into a 5 minute dramatization to present to the class.

After presenting their dramatizations, lead a discussion:

- Was it different using a real historical event as inspiration, as opposed to an entirely fictional piece?
- Could the audience tell which aspects of each dramatization were accurate and which weren't? Does it matter if the audience can or cannot tell truth from fiction and does the artist have a responsibility to tell the truth?
- Did deviating from the facts add tension, create drama, or make it more exciting?
- What might an artist have to think about when using a real life historical event as the basis of art?

**“We’re not turning around!  
We are Imperial Guards!  
This is very important to  
me!”**

*Humayun, Guards at the Taj*



## classroom activity #4

### Exploring tension and plot twists

**Curriculum Links:** Drama & Performing Arts, English Literature

**Time:** 45 minutes - 1 hour

**Resources:** Classroom space

There are number of moments in *Guards at the Taj* where the unexpected occurs. These moments are styled in a matter of fact way, taking place in a seemingly mundane conversation, which has the effect of normalising the absurd in Humayun's and Babur's reality.

#### Example 1: Chopping hands and feet

BABUR: So someone is going to have to chop off 40 Thousand Hands?

HUMAYUN: Yep.

BABUR: That's a terrible job.

*A long beat as they both realize what this means.*

#### Example 2: Humayun cuts off Babur's hand

HUMAYUN: But he said you could live. But only if...Only if I take your hands.

BABUR: No! No! No!

*Humayun starts weeping. Babur just stares at him.*

HUMAYUN: *(head in hands; weeping).* I have to do it.

Humayun goes and retrieves a large sword.

### Discussion

First have a class discussion about your favourite plot twists. This could be a piece of theatre, a book, a movie or a TV programme.

Ask the class:

- What made it so effective?
- How did this alter their viewing experience and what was their reaction?
- Did it make the scene more exciting?

In small groups, ask students to devise their own short scene which has a dramatic or unexpected plot twist. You can either use characters from *Guards at the Taj* or create completely new characters. Encourage students to be as imaginative, emotive and shocking as possible.

Ask the groups to perform their scenes in front of each other and discuss afterwards what they have presented. Compare what they expected to happen to what actually happened.

- Did this make the play more interesting?
- Are there drawbacks to including shocking plot twists in a piece of work?
- What other techniques could you use to make a piece of drama more interesting?



**“Think about it! The most beautiful thing ever made... Tajmahal is sitting there, waiting to be lit by the day’s first light... waiting to be seen.”**



## Absurdist Theatre

Absurdist Theatre emerged from the aftermath of World War Two as a movement primarily led by European playwrights, at a time when political turmoil, scientific breakthrough and social upheaval were changing the face of society. The term 'Theatre of the Absurd' was coined in 1962 by Martin Esslin in a book of the same name.



Absurdist Theatre is preoccupied with the mysteries of the human existence. It borrows from existentialism to purport that human life has no meaning or purpose: man is born into nothingness, lives life through a series of acts, but inevitably ends with death, and back into nothingness. But instead of being *about* the absurdity of the human condition, it merely presents absurdity, concretely on stage.

Famous examples of Absurdist plays include:

- *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett
- *Rhinoceros* by Eugene Ionesco
- *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* by Edward Albee
- *The Dumb Waiter* by Harold Pinter

The main characteristics of Absurdist Theatre:

- Plots are illogical, non-linear or cyclical, often ending where they began
- Deliberate lack of conflicts and action
- Broad comedy, often mixed with horrific or tragic images
- Characters in hopeless situations, often forced to do meaningless or repetitive actions

### Discussion

In what ways does *Guards at the Taj* fit the description of an Absurdist piece of theatre and in what ways is it different?



## Exploring unrequited love and destruction through spoken word

Curriculum links: Drama & Performing Arts, English Literature, Music

Time: 45 minutes to 1 hour

Resources: Open space, pens, access to YouTube, musical instruments

**HUMAYUN: Nothing so beautiful as Tajmahal shall ever be built again.**

This news saddens Babur and Humayun although he wouldn't admit it.

Both men, without sound, and without even knowing, begin to weep.

They are experiencing awe in the most biblical sense. It is fear, it is one of the fires in the sky, landed in their city. Humayun hits Babur's arm and holds on to it, as if to make sure they both aren't dreaming.

Although there is no explicit romantic relationship in *Guards at the Taj*, we see both Babur and Humayun having a moment described as an unrequited love with beauty. Babur and Humayun value beauty, but they both only cause destruction in the play.

### Discussion

Have a class discussion about things or

concepts or people that you love.

- How do you show your love for them?
- How can love sometimes be destructive or lead to destruction?

### Exercise

Write a 10 line poem describing your love for something in the form of a Ghazal and prepare it to perform for the class. The poem can be set to music if convenient.

## Meet Danny Ashok

### What attracted you to *Guards at the Taj* as an actor?

I think with any piece of work you look at various things that could interest you in taking it on. I first read this play in 2015 after auditioning for a production of it in San Diego and loved it then. I was unsuccessful in getting the part on that occasion, I'm sure for a litany of reasons, and looking back on it now I actually don't think I was ready to take it on back then. Two years later, the script lands back on my lap. Bizarrely it felt like it was meant to be and that, as an actor, I was more able and ready to take a role like this on.

The prospect of working with director Jamie Lloyd really appealed to me. The chance to work on a show as a lead character gratified my own ego. And the challenge of the play being a two hander certainly made me think that it would be an experience to learn from. The fact that the show is at the Bush Theatre was also a factor as I loved working there a few years ago.

In terms of the play itself, Rajiv Joseph has put together a story that would be hard for any actor to say no to. It's hilarious and heartfelt in equal measures. Rajiv has really achieved something special in the sense that the play covers several genres and emotions all at once but somehow doesn't feel contrived when it drifts from one form to the other. And the prospect of conveying that to an audience and have them feel for the characters was a challenge that also appealed to me.

### The play deals with questions of who has the privilege to access art and beauty. Do you feel that these themes are relevant in today's modern world?

For sure. I suppose an easy example to go to would be that of theatre itself. I have plenty of friends who don't go to the theatre because they feel like it's inaccessible and simply out of reach and that may be down to the content of the shows or the price of tickets etc. It's one of the reasons why it's so important that a play as good as *Guards* is on at the Bush; it removes the stigma of it only being for a privileged audience and opens it up to people who normally wouldn't think it their 'thing' to go see a play like this.

### Does dealing with historical context in theatre change the way you approach a role?

Yes and no. On one hand the historical aspect and setting of a play may very well dictate the actions and attitudes of your character but at the same time with any part you are striving to find the humanity of the character first. You need to connect to

them as people and find the similarities and/or differences from you as a person and that in turn ultimately helps you connect to the character.

### What do you do to prepare for a role?

I can't say that I have any step by step guide on how I prepare for a role but, as mentioned above, finding something to connect myself with the character is always an important thing to me and allows me to find some level of truth and understanding with what the character does. Another thing I ensure is that I have an open mind during the rehearsal process. It's about collaborating, having fun, playing with different ideas and working together to tell the story as it deserves to be told.



### Shah Jahan

The Famous People - Shah Jahan

Taj Mahal - Shah Jahan

Good Reads - Shah Jahan Quotes

### Guards at the Taj

American Theatre - Rajiv Joseph Interview

### Taj Mahal

BBC - Taj Mahal: Was India's 'monument of love' built out of guilt?

### Theatre of the Absurd

Study - Theatre of the Absurd

The Drama Teacher - Theatre of the Absurd

### Mughal Poetry

Preetk - For the Love of Poetry



Production and rehearsal photography by Marc Brenner.

**“One of the most experienced prospectors of raw talent in Europe.”**

– The Independent

**“When it comes to plays that capture the detail of ordinary lives and the still, sad and often wonderfully comic music of humanity, the Bush is in a class of its own.”**

– Daily Telegraph

**“In terms of number of seats to impact on the ecology of British theatre, there is no more influential theatre in the country than the Bush.”**

– Mark Shenton, Theatre Critic

**“I was no longer an outsider coming from a demographic that often believes itself to be marginalised, a source of ridicule knocking on a big middle class door: I was a writer being allowed a voice, being allowed to collaborate. I was seriously at home, and honestly, it was the best thing ever.”**

– Georgia Fitch, Writer

**“Right from the start something about the Bush got under the reviewers’ skin, and I don’t know who doesn’t look forward to going there.”**

– Michael Coveney, Theatre Critic

**“The Bush reeks of fertility -- its commitment to new work, its new play know-how, its engaged and vibrant audience -- all of these make it one of the most exciting places I’ve been in my creative life. There is no other way to put it: I adore the Bush.”**

– Ayad Akhtar, Writer, *Disgraced*

**“It’s hard to define what would be lost to British culture if the Bush had never been. A certain crystallization of talent... A panoply of plays which, viewed as a whole, form a body of work that is not only a cultural panorama, but an alternative history of Britain.”**

– Terry Johnson, Dramatist and Director

**“The Bush understands new writing and new writers, their passion and their peculiarities. I started working there in the 1980s and I’m still involved now – because what’s never changed is the commitment to the people who write the plays and that’s why writers love the Bush.”**

– Catherine Johnston, Writer

**“I have been privileged to see some of the most thrilling and significant drama imaginable. It is simply the best theatre in the world.”**

– Mike Bradwell, Artistic Director  
1996-2007