



The Opera Group: *Babur in London* at Sadler's Wells

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19:45

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London
Babur in London

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Babur in London
(Rushton)

The Opera Group

John Fulljames, Director
Sarah Beaton, Set Designer
Omar Ebrahim, Baritone
Kishani Jayasinghe, Soprano
Annie Gill, Mezzo-soprano
Amar Muchhala, Tenor
Damian Thantrey, Baritone
Tim Murray, Conductor

Babur in London is the latest production from pioneering opera company The Opera Group, and it provided a thought-provoking evening. A collaborative venture between British-born composer Edward Rushton and New Delhi-based librettist Jeet Thayil, the new work has already toured Switzerland, and arrived in London following dates in Basingstoke, Oxford, Leeds and Birmingham. It tells the story of four young terrorists who are plotting to carry out jihad, when their plans are interrupted by the magical appearance of Babur, the first



Mughal Emperor from the 16th century. An iconic and contradictory figure in Indian cultural history, Babur (portrayed charismatically by Omar Ebrahim) is famous for both his bloodthirsty regime and his literary prowess: he is widely acknowledged to have written the first ever autobiography. The introduction of the ghostly dictator into the lives of the four young extremists not only inflames the tensions between them, but is also an unlikely – and welcome – source of comic relief throughout the opera's exploration of the dark themes of suicide and religious fanaticism.



The production, directed by John Fulljames, begins atmospherically: young Muslim extremist Saira (played with conviction by the rich-voiced Annie Gill) explains that she regularly goes to the river edge to observe the intoxicated figure of Babur in the misty morning. She is accompanied by co-plotter Faiz (baritone Damian Thantrey, who gave a strong and controlled performance), whose unease, initial scepticism and anguished love for Saira is instantly palpable. The action takes place before an oppressive wall of empty plastic bottles, with Sarah Beaton's striking design conjuring up the paraphernalia of liquid bomb-making as well as evoking urban decay: a great contrast to the opulent world of Babur, clothed in magnificent golden robes and intermittently smoking an opium pipe.

The cast of this production was flawless, both dramatically and vocally. From his first entrance, Ebrahim instantly connected with the audience, conveying the mercurial, almost child-like mood-swings of the Emperor whilst still exuding exotic authority. Mo, played by powerful tenor Amar Muchhala, bristled with the abrasive certainty and fire of an angry young fanatic, while shimmering soprano Kishani Jayasinghe played his wife, Nafisa. Jayasinghe's solo "dust" arias were particularly effective, with the simple unravelling of her headscarf conveying her descent into a kind of voluptuous madness. Thayil's vivid poetical exploration of mortality and Rushton's poised vocal writing conjured up her character's complex feelings of nostalgia, regret, and mourning. Fulljames' direction imbued the longer "background-narrative" solos of each character with a captivating mixture of generous storytelling and pensive introspection.

Rushton's magpie-like collection of musical styles (including lyrical arias, inventive use of percussion and excerpts from the German national anthem) lent an air of unsettled urgency to the action, eloquently reflecting the disagreements and discord between the young fanatics. Intriguingly, the bomb's explosion was rendered in silence, meaning that the conflicts between the characters registered as the climax of the work. Conducted convincingly by Tim Murray, the on-stage ensemble (consisting of an unusual but well-balanced mixture of cello, double bass, electric guitar, flute and percussion) wrought a complex variety of textures. Special mention should go to Nicola Romanò for his virtuosic cello playing. If the instrumental ensemble slightly overpowered the singers towards the end of Mo's argument with Babur, the balance was generally ideal, with the venue ringing with the singers' strong vocal performances and clear articulation.

Aside from occasional moments of confusion – it was only through reading the libretto that I realised that I had missed a key plot revelation with regard to the switching of bomb-laden rucksacks – and the absence of wine glasses in the final scene despite the Emperor's reference to them, this was a compelling production, with subtle lighting (Matt Haskins) and video projections (Ian William Galloway) throughout demonstrating the expressive versatility of fringe opera.



At 80 minutes' running time, this work is a compact and absorbing exploration of sensitive contemporary issues with a refreshingly original twist. If anything, certain aspects of the plot, such as the fleeting romantic union between Faiz and Saira, or the relationship between Mo and Nafisa, might have enjoyed greater exploration. Although the figure of Babur provides levity, Rushton and Thayil's opera does not shy away from the serious questions it addresses. *Babur in London* is a highly creative meditation on the ancient parallels with our own era of political turbulence and religious extremism, and casts light on a fascinating historical figure. Performed by quality singers and musicians, Fulljames' latest production is also a testament to the benefits of international patronage (*Babur* was supported by the British Council, the Swiss Arts Council, the Jerwood foundation, and many others). Let us hope that The Opera Group continues to be supported in its production of stimulating and intriguing new opera.

Submitted by **Sophie Rashbrook** on 27th June 2012

