

RIVERSIDE

NATIONAL THEATRE  
OF PARRAMATTA

Education Resource

# Guards At The Taj

by Rajiv Joseph

Directed by Bali Padda



Image by Noni Carroll

# ABOUT THE PLAY

**What happens to a life-long friendship when two ordinary men are ordered to do the unthinkable?**

At the grand opening of the Taj Mahal, the most beautiful building in the world, the Emperor decrees that nothing more beautiful shall ever be built again. To ensure this, he orders two imperial guards to perform a horrendous task.

The guards are best friends. Humayun is a loyal civil servant with complete trust in the authorities, while Babur is a dreamer, and deeply distressed by the order that has been bestowed upon them. He plans a revenge that will put these two best friends at odds.

Featuring a heartbreakingly funny friendship put to the ultimate test and existential banter reminiscent of Beckett and Stoppard, *Guards at the Taj* mixes witty black comedy with the bloodiest deeds of Greek tragedy.

## PERFORMERS

Akkshey Caplash  
Idam Sondhi

## CREATIVE TEAM

**Playwright** Rajiv Joseph  
**Director** Bali Padda  
**Production Designer** James Browne  
**Lighting Designer** Kate Baldwin  
**Sound Designer** Me-Lee Hay  
**Fight & Movement** - Scott Witt

## CREW

**Production Manager** - D. Andrew Potvin  
**Stage Manager** - Caitie Murphy



# A NOTE FROM OUR DIRECTOR



## Bali Padda

I have long had a conflicted relationship with authority. Perhaps the yin-yang of a Gemini's personality: the pressure to please and follow rules, against the strong urge to shift the status quo. This internal conflict has existed

within me for as long as I can remember. Rather than resist, I try leaning into this paradox. To remember who we are. As a community. As a society. As an (apparent) democracy. Each time we exercise our power or allow authority to decide how it holds power over citizens, over the people in their care, there's an impact, even on the simplest of relationships with our closest mates. Who are we aligning with and why? For what gain? We may be blinded by the blood of those we cut away in order to maintain this rotting status quo. It's time to wash the blood out of our eyes and remember that no person is an island.

I was first introduced to the wit, intelligence and contrasts of Rajiv Joseph's *Guards at the Taj* in late 2016. It's stayed with me since, and made itself known in my subconscious, popping up again and again like a prairie dog in the thick-dense-grassy-plain-of-a-brain-space of mine. Rajiv has a way with drawing out the intricacies of male friendship so exceptionally. You can just see how he gently tugs on a stray yarn that effortlessly unravels an entire tapestry.

Our first presentation to audiences in 2022 was my directorial debut and it coincided with Russia's invasion of Ukraine. A war that caused ripples across the world, both emotionally and economically. In 2024, that conflict still continues, and we are witnessing devastation in Palestine. All driven by patriarchal power to destruct for the most dehumanising of causes. For me, this play resonates so much with the impact of patriarchal authority on the human experience - from a ruler's impact on a nation, to a humble guard seeking approval from an overbearing father.

I loved creating this production. It was humbling, soul-fortifying, and anxiety-inducing. I have taken something from each director, performer, and acting coach I've ever worked with and poured it out of my heart and onto this stage. Thank you! Special thanks to Joanne Kee and the team at NTofP, my creative production collaborators, and the exceptional gentlemen on stage that audiences get to soak up, Akkshey and Idam. What a dream team! Extra special thanks to my parents and the opportunities afforded my siblings and me by raising us on Dharug land, and to Adam, Winnie and Peggy for the unconditional love and joy I receive.

**"Do not gaze upon the human condition as though you are apart from that condition. Gaze as though you are a mother gazing [at] her infant. Then, see how you are moved to act."**

**- Dr Jaiya John, Author**

# INTERVIEW WITH A PRODUCTION DESIGNER



## James Browne

### What is your design process?

Obviously, I begin by reading the script over and over to understand what the writer's intentions are and what the script requires technically. From there I will

come up with an overall concept for the projection which presents the 'world' of the show. And where the characters can inhabit. This will be done in collaboration with the director. It is important to storyboard the locations in the script and allow the design to develop from there.

### When designing for a story with historical ties, where do you draw creative inspiration?

Any production with historical or cultural settings will require a great amount of research. And this may come from the internet but it is also very important to look at films set at the time and place, also art works from the time and also looking at the motivation and inspiration the writer had at the time it was written. This can be an interesting place to start the creative journey. It was discovered through research that there was very little documentation of what the guards of the 1600s might have worn and indeed what underworld catacombs beneath the Taj Mahal look like so we had creative licence to imagine what these would look like.

### What factors need to be considered when designing a set for a touring production?

Things to consider when designing a set for touring is the diversity of the theatres it will go to as it has to fit onto each stage on the tour.

The other consideration is the size of the vehicles the set will travel in and also the access sizes of doorways into the venue as some set elements may need to be built in a way that breaks down in smaller pieces and assembled once inside the theatre.

Then consider how long the assembling of set elements will take as sometimes there is very little time between the set arriving at the theatre and the first show.

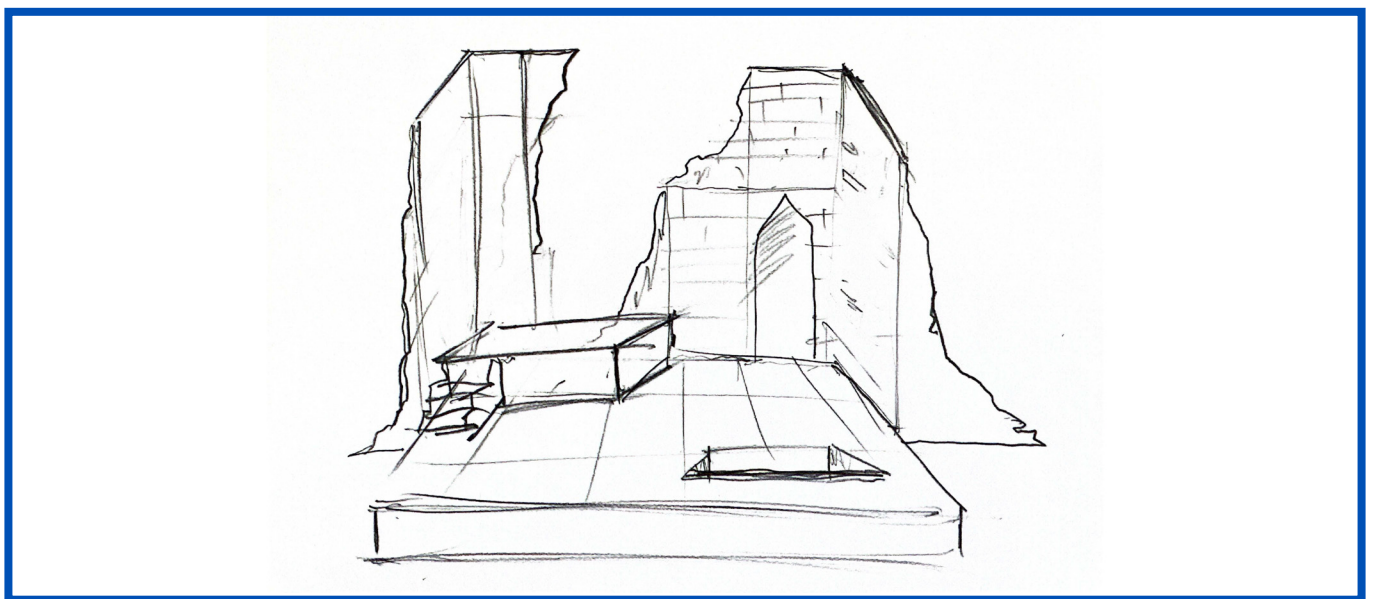
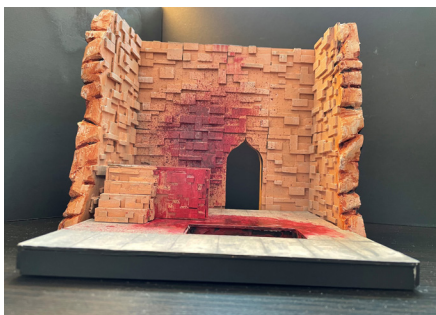
### What do you like most about being a Production Designer?

It is very rewarding to see all of your ideas come to life on stage. It's satisfying to know that the journey of working with a team has resulted in a production that works to challenge and entertain the audiences watching it.

### What advice would you give a young person looking to become a Production Designer?

Immerse yourself in every opportunity that is presented to you. The more you learn the more successful you will become. Always remember to be creative and original in your ideas but remember these great ideas are one big part of an overall collaboration.

# PRODUCTION DESIGN IMAGES BY JAMES BROWNE



# CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

## Preparing for the Theatre:

**To introduce your students to ideas about theatre or to extend their knowledge and understanding, complete the following activities.**

Have a class discussion about what a theatre is. Ask your students to work in small groups to complete the following questions and tasks:

- What do you know about theatre?
- Name some of the jobs that people have when working in the theatre. Explain what they do.
- What questions do you have about theatre?
- Where can you find more information about theatre?
- Ask each group to feed back to the class.

**You might like to show your class some Google images of theatres, stage spaces or theatre performances.**

Ask your students to identify some of the similar features of theatres and stage space seen in the images. Ask your students to follow the thinking routine See-Think-Wonder using the prompt questions provided.

- See – What do I see in this image?
- Think – What do I think about what I see?
- Wonder – What questions do I have about what I see?
- Ask your students to share stories about times they have been to the theatre or stories about plays or performances they have participated in. They might do this in small groups or with a partner. As a class, share some of these stories.

- Have a class discussion about going to the theatre and how this type of entertainment might be different to watching television or a movie. Create a list of similarities and differences between watching a play in a theatre, watching a film in a cinema and watching a film on television at home.

## Responding to the Production:

**This activity asks your students to respond critically to the work they have seen at the theatre.**

Break your class up into small groups and give each group one of the below areas to explore:

- Set and Costume
- Music and Sound
- Directing
- Performance
- Themes of the story

Ask each group to brainstorm reflections and comments on their area of the production. When done, ask each group to share their responses and discuss these comments together as a class.

# Storytelling through culture and history:

Guards at the Taj tells a story that is connected to a moment in cultural history. The play draws elements from this time in history and culture to tell a new story that connects with audiences.

**This task asks your students to conduct research and use this information in thinking about the elements of storytelling.**

Break your class into small groups and ask the students to talk to each other about their family's cultural history. Have them decide together on a culture to focus on and use in a new idea for a story for a theatre production.

Have the students research their culture of focus, with respect to the following prompts:

## **Cultural historical events:**

- What historical events occurred?
- When and where did these take place?
- What were they about?

## **Cultural traditions. What traditions does this culture have with respect to:**

- Clothing – what colours, fabrics and clothing types are there?
- Language – what makes the use of language unique?
- Storytelling – what is the history of storytelling in this culture?
- Music – what is unique about music tied to this culture? Are there any instruments linked to this culture?
- Landscape – nature and architecture.

After researching, have the group decide on what story they will tell for an audience that incorporates elements of their research. Ask them to think about the following:

## **Narrative:**

- Where and when is this story set?
- How are you telling the story?
  - Will you use dance, poetry, or singing?
- Who are the characters involved?
  - What does the audience need to know about them?
  - What is their relationship like?

## **Set and Costume:**

- What would the set look like?
- What would the costumes look like?
- What colours are used?

## **Sound:**

- What would you hear?
- Is there music or soundscape?
- How would you create these sounds?
- What instruments would be used?

# ABOUT NATIONAL THEATRE OF PARRAMATTA

Riverside's National Theatre of Parramatta (NTofP) is creating and presenting transformative and inspirational professional theatre experiences that reflect the world around us and the diversity that is contemporary Australia.

Hence our tagline, *Putting the Nation on Stage*.

We commission, create, produce, present and tour work. We are equally committed to capacity building and nurturing talent by providing opportunities for theatre practitioners both on and off stage to develop their craft. We are creating communities, access, visibility and infrastructure that supports and builds capacity for performance in our region and beyond.

Our location and leadership makes us a natural hub for inclusivity. We play an important leadership role in the sector.

Producing theatre that resonates with our audiences is the core of our work.





RIVERSIDE  
NATIONAL THEATRE  
OF PARRAMATTA

Production images by Noni Carroll

RIVERSIDE'S NATIONAL THEATRE  
OF PARRAMATTA

Corner of Church and Market Streets  
Parramatta NSW 2151

+61 2 8839 3385

[www.nationaltheatreofparramatta.com.au](http://www.nationaltheatreofparramatta.com.au)