



A REVIEW: *LAST DANCE AT DUM DUM* BY AYUB KHAN-DIN
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When my father was a young man, in the mid nineteen-fifties, he organised dances for the Anglo-Indian community in Erode, a small railway colony in Tamil Nadu. These dances were not particularly grand affairs, even though he planned them, my mother tells me, with a fervent attention to detail. Everything had to be 'just so': the decorations, the fairy lights, and, most importantly, the music. While he mastered the basics of jiving, an almost mandatory skill for Anglo-Indians of his generation, my old man was not a rocker. He favoured middle-of-road instrumental music; music he could dance to. I can almost picture him, resplendent in a double-breasted blazer, immaculately pressed trousers, and highly polished black shoes, doing the foxtrot or twostep. One of his favourite tunes was 'Cherry Pink and Apple Blossom White,' a piece that features prominently in Ayub Khan-Din's latest play, *Last Dance at Dum Dum*. Unfortunately, 'Cherry Pink' was one of the few details in Khan-Din's play to strike a chord with me. And on the evidence of the preview performance I witnessed, *Last Dance at Dum Dum* could have benefited from the attention to detail my father bestowed upon his beloved dances.

Let's get one thing straight at the outset: the play, despite its author's claims to the contrary, is not really about Anglo-Indians. Rather, it uses a variety of Anglo-Indian characters to comment on contemporary Indian politics. More specifically, it offers a fairly heavy-handed critique of Hindu fundamentalism. As one of India's smallest minority groups, Anglo-Indians vividly dramatise the conflict between 'majority' and 'minority' interests on the sub-continent. Furthermore, Anglo-Indians, as the biological legacy of the British Raj, are, figuratively speaking, the embodiment of independent India's hybrid birth. While Hindu nationalists are loathe to accept the

fact, the modern nation-state of India is, for better or worse, the product of a 'mixed-marriage.' The British may have physically departed from India in 1947, but they left much of their cultural baggage behind: their language, literature, not to mention their civil and political institutions, which continue to exert an influence on modern India. This conception of independent India as a bastard child is most eloquently described by a wide range of contemporary Indo-Anglian novelists, most notably Salman Rushdie, Vikram Chandra and Allan Sealy.

Given that Khan-Din's first play, the highly entertaining *East is East*, dealt with the problems of a literal 'mixed marriage,' his interest in Anglo-Indians is not surprising. After all, the Anglo-Indian experience, in many ways, prefigures and parallels the experience of contemporary 'mixed-race' people, whose growing numbers are a testament to the fact that Great Britain is truly a multicultural society.

Sadly, Khan-Din's depiction of the Anglo-Indians is, for the most part, not nearly as interesting or convincing as his portrayal of the 'hybrid' family in *East is East*. This is largely because he unproblematically deploys a series of tired colonial stereotypes to reinforce the idea that Anglo-Indians are reluctant Indians, who remain confused about their 'proper' place in contemporary Indian society. Like their ancestors who were placed under siege with the British during the so-called Mutiny of 1857, the Anglo-Indians of *Dum Dum* take refuge from violent forces that threaten their very existence. It is no accident, then, that the play makes several references to the Mutiny, an event that looms large in Anglo-Indian history.

Last Dance at Dum Dum is set in an old colonial bungalow, the eponymous Dum Dum, in the early nineteen-eighties. The bungalow, like its decrepit Anglo-Indian inhabitants, is in a state of decay and disrepair. Indeed, its occupants have fallen on hard times; most of their relatives having emigrated to countries like Australia. Consequently, the old Anglo's are compelled to support themselves financially and emotionally. That their rent is heavily in arrears exacerbates their problems. What's more, Dum Dum is owned by the unctuous Mr. Chakravatty, a Hindu extremist, who plans to evict his tenants on the pretext that the Lord Krishna once stumbled across some rocks in the bungalow's garden. This recently discovered fact obliges Chakravatty to reclaim the garden as a holy site, and build a temple celebrating

Krishna's tumble. Chakravatty's plans are foiled, in the first instance, by the quick thinking Lydia Buller-Hughes, a 'pukka Memsahib' who 'stayed on' after the withdrawal of her British compatriots.

Buller Hughes, a recent addition to the bungalow's cast of colonial misfits, outwits Chakravarty while her Anglo-Indian counterparts remain either confused or hysterical. Indeed, the most disappointing thing about the play is this contrast between Lydia and the rest of the characters, given that the hapless Anglo-Indian, who could not remain calm in a crisis, was a stock figure in so much nineteenth-century colonial fiction (Kipling's short story 'His Chance in Life' is probably the best known example of this genre). In fact, the canonisation of Lydia undercuts some of the plays more subtle and ironic moments. For example, the relationship between the feisty, though almost senile, Muriel and her husband Bertie is complex, and potentially very moving if played with the requisite degree of understatement.

The play opens with the sound of martial music, accompanied by cries of 'Jai Hind'. Muriel, takes exception to this obvious display of divisive sectarianism by lobbing various objects over the bungalow's garden wall at the unseen revellers. Muriel, played somewhat uncertainly by the distinguished Indian actor Madhur Jaffery, is eventually calmed by her companions, but not before she has earned the wrath of Chakravarty. In the midst of this crisis, and with the threat of eviction hanging over their heads, the Anglo-Indians of Dum Dum organise a dance, a kind of 'Last Waltz,' as, Englebert Humperdinck, one of the community's favourite sons, might have put it, or sang it. Of course, the dance is an exercise in nostalgia. For example Muriel reminisces that:

As children, we used to get so excited when there was a dance. It was magical. Watching everyone arriving. The women looking so elegant in their beautiful dresses and all the men in black tie . . . I would always be allowed to help fasten my mother's necklace with my father, my hands in his.

The dance, alas, never takes place. Chakravatty's espousal of right-wing communalism inadvertently leads to his undoing. His enraged political adversaries riot, and Chakravatty is forced to take refuge with his Anglo-Indian tenants, who must once again contend with an angry, violent mob. After his house is torched, Chakravatty confronts the mob directly and is, presumably, killed. Meanwhile, Muriel,

who has collapsed in the arms of her husband during the commotion, dies just as the record player comes to life with a final blast of 'Cherry Pink.'

Now, despite the reservations I have outlined above, I think Khan-Din's script, which is essentially a variant of the old 'well-made-play,' is not without considerable merit. It often provides genuine insight into the plight of a specific segment of India's ageing Anglo-Indian community. And it does so, generally speaking, with wit, humour and a well-developed sense of irony. However, the production as a performance left much to be desired. For the most part the acting was tentative, histrionic, and generally unconvincing. Nicholas Le Provost's Bertie was particularly grating. Khan-Din makes a point of commenting on the Anglo-Indian accent in his stage directions, which specify that Anglo-Indians do not sound as though they've just stepped off the last train from Cardiff. Le Provost's attempt at reproducing the cadences and rhythms of Anglo-Indian speech was lamentable. He sounded like Tom Jones doing an impersonation of Peter Sellers doing an impersonation of an Indian doctor. Goodness Gracious Me! On the strength of Le Provost's performance, I'm tempted to suggest that Mr. Khan-Din retitle his play, *How Green was My Coriander*, after John Ford's famous 1941 cinematic tribute to Welsh coalminers, *How Green was My Valley*.

In short, the production was sloppy. For a play concerned with a community known for their love of dancing, *Last Dance at Dum Dum* had a very poor sense of 'timing.' Cues were missed, and the actors often seemed as though they were struggling for lines. In short, the cast did not perform as an effective ensemble. However, Paul Bazely's performance as Elliot, the former 'cabaret artiste' who functions as a kind of servant to his Anglo-Indian elders, was captivating. His Marilyn Monroe act was the highlight of the show. Indeed, it's a shame Khan-Din chose not to pursue Elliot's story, which would have provided him with more original material, for the story of the present generation of Anglo-Indians remains largely untold.

In all fairness, though, the performance I attended was a preview, and I'm sure the actors have already improved their performances. However, the poor set design and direction cannot be excused on the same grounds. The director, Stuart Burge, and designer, Tim Hatley, fail to exploit the potential of Khan-Din's script. The mis-en-

scene is best described as a loose melange of colonial cliches, while Burge's approach to directing can be most generously described as unobtrusive. I would like to see a bolder version of this play. I'm sure my long deceased father could have directed the play with more flair. Now, he was a man who really knew how to organise a dance.

Last Dance at Dum Dum runs until the end of August at the New Ambassadors Theatre in London before touring the UK.

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