



Indian adaptation of A Doll's House plays on colonial themes

TANIKA GUPTA'S VERSION OF IBSEN CLASSIC EXPLORES FEMINIST THEMES DURING THE RAJ

by AMIT ROY

MENEKA DAS has done an excellent job of directing Tanika Gupta's adaptation of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, getting fine performances from her cast.

The only problem for me was getting to the Questors Theatre at 12 Mattock Lane in Ealing, west London. It was meant to be a seven-minute walk from Ealing Broadway Tube station – so quick to reach on the fantastic Elizabeth Line – but it took me nearly 45 satnav minutes and help from His Majesty's Constabulary to find. Still, I was glad I got there just in time for a 7.45pm start.

Meneka has done films before but this is her first attempt at directing theatre. As we filed out at the end of the performance just after 10pm, a member of the audience said to Meneka: "This deserves to go to the West End."

Another English woman added: "This is the best play I've seen for a long time."

Actually, I go along with those sentiments.

Ibsen's play, set in Norway in 1879, premiered at the Royal Theatre in Copenhagen, Denmark, on December 21, 1879, having been published earlier that month.

Tanika's adaptation is set in Calcutta (now Kolkata) in 1879, a couple of years after Queen Victoria was proclaimed Empress of India. This means it's a couple of decades after the "Indian mutiny" of 1857 (India's "first war of independence") and the British are firmly in charge of the country which they believe they will rule for ever.

She has very cleverly taken the couple in Ibsen's play – Torvald Helmer, a newly promoted bank manager, and his wife, Nora Helmer, a mother of three – and made them a mixed couple. Thus, the husband is an Englishman, Tom Helmer (played by Tom Hilton), who has acquired immense power as the just-promoted head of tax collection, while his wife, Niru (played by British Nepali actress, Rushma Thapa), is an Indian.

What this achieves is add an extra layer to Ibsen's feminist play, which is about a woman's right to assert her independence. Nora goes from being treated like a doll in her father's house to a doll in her husband's house. I am not giving away any state secrets by revealing at the end, she takes the courageous decision to walk out of her marriage.

In Ibsen's play, Nora's widowed friend is Kristine Lind, who becomes Mrs

Krishna Lahiri (Premi Tamang). Kristine had given up her true love, Nils Krogstad, in order to marry a moneyed man so she could look after her sick relatives. The Krogstad character is Kaushik Das (Anoop Jagan), who has fallen on hard times and faces dismissal from Tom's staff for alleged dishonesty.

Tom has a close friend, Dr Rank, who is terminally ill. He remains Dr Edward Rank (Charlie McRoberts) in Tanika's version, a man who reveals he has long been in love with Niru.

Anne Marie, the nanny in the Helmer household, becomes Uma di (Yvonne Monyer) in Tanika's play, which stays more or less faithful to the basic plot development in the original.

What threatens Niru's world is the disclosure that she had once borrowed money from Kaushik when Tom was dangerously ill and had to be taken to Darjeeling for expensive medical treatment. But in order to take the loan, she

had forged her dying father's signature. Kaushik now threatens to blackmail her unless she intercedes with her husband to save his job. Tom, however, is determined to get rid of the man.

Meneka has reflected on a line from Nora – "I believe that before anything else I need to learn to value and think for myself" – and observed in her director's notes: "Ibsen's Nora still resonates today. Her journey of self-awakening and empowerment shocked the theatre world when it opened, and will continue to resonate across cultures, continents and time."

For me, much of the fun in Tanika's version comes from the examination of what it means to be an Indian in a colonised country. The exchanges on the morality of British rule in India are also very entertaining.

The English audience hear this conversation between Krishna and Niru. Krishna: "The English can be so self-important – think we Indians are far beneath them in every way."

Niru: "They don't all think that way, Krishna."

Krishna: "Forgive me. I'm sure your husband is one of the few exceptions."

Niru: "Tom loves this country and he loves me."

In Tom's study, there is more of a debate about British rule. Edward is browsing through a newspaper, *The Bengali*, which has a new firebrand editor, Surendranath Banerjee.

Edward: "You should read this article Tom, it's interesting. He argues the case for bringing Hindus and Muslims together for political action."

Tom: "I don't like the sound of that."

Edward: "It talks about India as a political unit."

Tom: "Rather brazen of him."

Edward: "He's got a point. It is a country." Tom: "National pride is an important ideal. It's just that it often goes hand in hand with stirring up anti-British feeling."

Edward: "If I were an Indian, I would be anti-British."

Some of Edward's arguments appear almost to have come from Indian MP and former diplomat Shashi Tharoor's book, *Inglorious Empire: What the British Did to India*.

Edward: "What exactly do we do here Tom? What is our gift to Indians? And don't say civilisation."

Tom: "Spreading culture and knowledge, trade, communication between the states, new infrastructure, access to the rest of the world through the language of English... the girders for every bridge, the track for every mile of railway was carried her by ships from England."

All that from Tom could have come from Kartar Lalvani's pro-British rejoinder to Tharoor in the Vitabiotics chairman's book, *The Making of India: The Untold Story of British Enterprise*. Edward: "Banerjee claims we have brought slavery, famine, prison, battle and an undermining of the Indian psyche. He says that the railways have been built to transport troops around the country to quell rebellions and to transport food out of productive regions for export."

Some of these arguments were aired during the Black Lives Matter demonstrations in 2020 in the UK when Edward Colston's statue was toppled in Bristol and Sir Winston Churchill's in London's Parliament Square was daubed, "Racist".

In many ways, Tom is a decent man who does not agree Indian women should be kept only as concubines and never taken as wives. But he reveals his deeper thinking when Niru expresses her determination to walk out on him.

Tom is livid when he learns how Niru had forged her father's signature. Tom: "Don't say a

PARALLEL PATHS: Tanika Gupta; (above, from left) Rushma Thapa with Anoop Jagan, Premi Tamang and Tom Hilton in scenes from the play; and (inset below) Meneka Das



word. Be quiet. You have the same blood as your father. His irresponsible, fraudulent ways. I should have known better than to overlook his criminal activities. For

you, I did it for you. And yet you're the same. No religion, no morals. "I thought by converting you to Christianity, you would change. But there's no changing the way of the savage heathen. This is my reward."

Tom offers to forgive his wife after Krishna persuades Kaushik to return the document with Niru's forged signature.

Niru speaks without fear for the first time: "You said you had gone against your nature by marrying me. Perhaps I went against my nature too. Or against nature itself. This is not your land. It is not your home. You live here as strangers."

These are powerful words. But they do beg the question: Are Asians similarly strangers in Britain? Of course, we are not here as rulers as the British were in India. But can this ever really be our home, our land?

Perhaps one can hope that Tom and Niru made up one day and found real love – and that Tom settled in India as an Indian Brit.

Meneka has done very well to bring out the subtleties in Tanika's adaptation of Ibsen's play.