

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



***Tamburlaine*, presented by the Royal Shakespeare Company at the Swan Theatre,
Stratford-Upon-Avon, August 16-December 1 2018**

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Directed by Michael Boyd. With Mark Hadfield (Mycetes, Soldan of Egypt, Almeda), David Sturzaker (Cosroe, King of Fez, Sigismund, Governor of Babylon), James Tucker (Meander, Governor of Damascus, Basso, Baldwin, Perdicas), Edmund Wiseman (Theridamas), Ross Green (Ortygius, King of Tunis, Frederick, Captain of Balsera), Raj Bajaj (Ceneus, King of Argier, Calyphas), James Clyde (Menaphon, King of Morocco, King of Jerusalem), Sam Pay (Mycetes' spy), Jude Owusu (*Tamburlaine*), David Rubin (Techelles), Riad Richie (Usumcasane), Sagar I. M. Arya (Bajazeth, King of Trebizond), Ralph Davis (King of Arabia, Agydas, Orcanes,), Salman Akhtar (Capolin, Amyras), Rosy McEwen (Zenocrate, the adult Callapine), Debbie Korley (Zabina, King of Syria), Vivienne Smith (Ebea, Virgin of Damascus), Yasmin Taheri (Virgin of Damascus), Aaryan Dassaur / Dev Prabhakar / Haresh Raguram (Young Callapine, Captain's son), Naveed Khan (Kasap), Shamia Chalabi (Turkish messenger), Anton Cross (Celebinus), and Zainab Hasan (Olympia).

There have probably not been many productions of *Tamburlaine* which have included Tommy Cooper jokes (I bet David Rubin was delighted when he discovered that he was going to be made King of Fez), but Michael Boyd has produced a riveting combination of bravura, bonhomie and butchery, delivered at a spanking pace and with sparkling style and energy. Jude Owusu was quite simply magnificent in the title role, showing a facility for verse speaking which requires him to be cast in another Renaissance play some time very soon. His seduction of Theridamas was so compelling that half the audience would probably have got up and followed him if asked; certainly his appeal to the front row about whether they would like to be kings was met with vehement nods (some of these actors were with the late lamented Propeller, and have brought with them

Propeller's penchant for audience participation; my colleague was given the Persian crown to hold).

However impassioned and visionary Tamburlaine was, though, we were also forcibly reminded of the suffering he causes; although the text was cut to compress the two parts of the play into a minute over three hours, Bajazeth and Zabina in particular were given full weight (two stupendous performances from Sagar I. M. Arya and Debbie Korley), and every aspect of their torment was watched sadly by a young Callapine (here their only child). In the second half, small Callapine swapped roles with Rosy McEwen, who started the play as a dignified and thoughtful Zenocrate, but after her death morphed into the adult version of Callapine. Role-swapping was in fact a recurrent feature of the production, and made the underlying structure of the play amazingly clear: as soon as Tamburlaine disposes of one group of opponents another group rises up – here often literally, with some actors dying often enough to rival Sean Bean. 'Yes, I'm now the Soldan', confirmed Mark Hadfield to the audience at one point (he had started the evening as Mycetes, and was still to return as Almeda), and the sense of carnage was underlined by the fact that any character who sustained a wound kept the bloodstains in their next role (or if they had their neck broken, wore a brace thereafter). As a result the action never faltered: whether it was Bajazeth's cage being kicked about, Tamburlaine's 'horses' drawing him round and round the stage, or Callapine escaping from a wire box pulled up from the stage while a desperate Almeda tried vainly to cling onto it. It is hard to imagine how any production of the play could be more entertaining or illuminating than this one was.