

National Theatre Collection

Dara – Rehearsal Insights

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About

This pack supports the National Theatre's production of *Dara*, directed by Nadia Fall, which opened on 28th January 2015 at the National's Lyttelton Theatre in London.

These insights were prepared during rehearsals by staff director Ola Ince. They introduce the process of creating, rehearsing and staging this play.

Rehearsal Diary

Rehearsal Diary: Week One, history

Rehearsals for the National Theatre's production of *Dara* began on 1 December 2014. Staff director Ola Ince's rehearsal diary reveals how the process unfolded.

Rehearsals begin at ten o'clock in rehearsal room one. While we wait for NT staff and the company to arrive, I stick Katrina Lindsay's (the production designer sketches on the walls, along with images of Mughal architecture, art and portraits of the empire's inhabitants. When everyone is present, we form a huge circle and introduce ourselves. Nadia Fall, the director of *Dara*, explains how she came about the play and why it is so important to her. She talks about reconnecting with her ancestral history and deepening her understanding of familiar childhood stories about the Mughal empire. It is the first time that she has directed a play about India (where she is from, and the first time her father has taken an interest in her work as a director; her speech both inspires and tickles us.

Nadia directs us towards the model box. Katrina and Nadia talk through the configuration of each scene, moving the figurines around and adjusting the lattice screens so that we get a clear idea of how the staging works and what the visual language is. The cast ask questions about the set, such as, How steep is the rake? Will we be barefoot? What are the screens made out of?

We gather around four large tables and read the play aloud for the first time. Hearing all 22 of the actors read gives us a taste of the scale of the production. Some of the company will be playing numerous roles, which will allow us to populate the world of the play with over 44 characters!

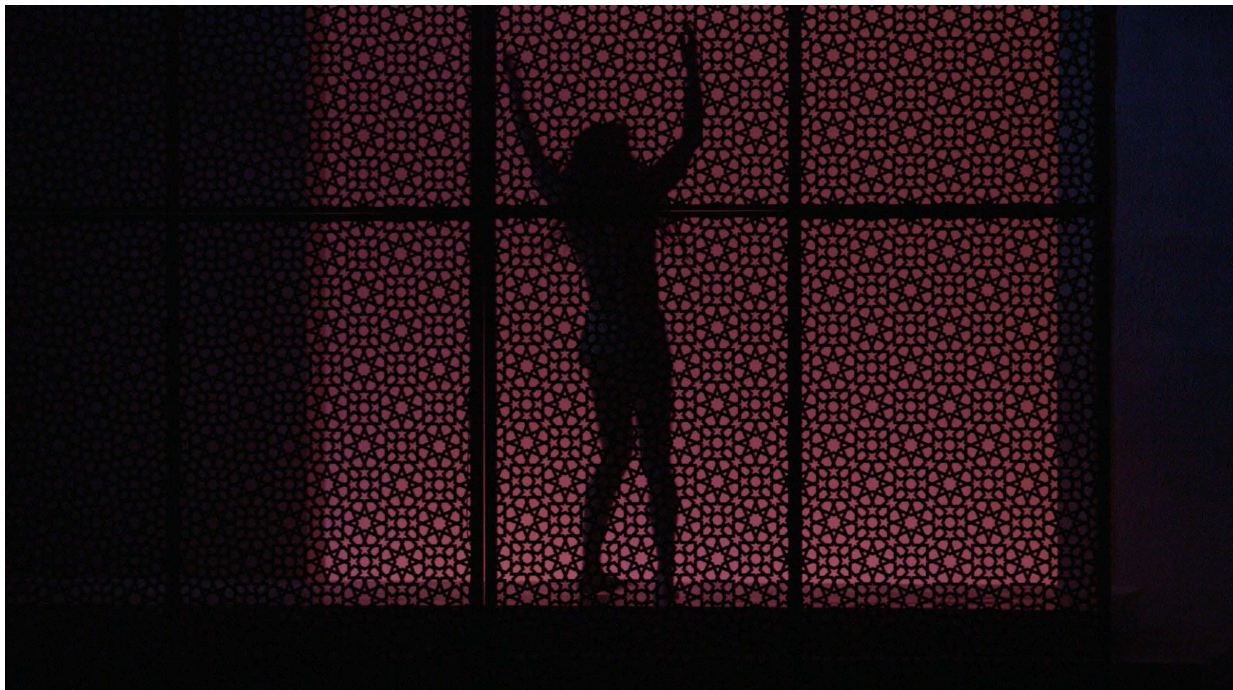
For the duration of the week we continue to sit around the table reading, dissecting and furthering our understanding of the play. One of the many ways we do this is by tracing the war of succession between Aurangzeb, Dara and Murad (as told in our first seven scenes on a map

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of India. Together we locate the Deccan, Bolan Pass, Agra, Delhi and Bengal, tracking the brothers' actions and tactics whilst reading extracts from *Emperors of the Peacock Throne* by Abraham Eraly, a history book about the Mughal empire. We also go through the play, listing facts and questions: Did Dara's wife commit suicide? Did she die of an illness? Our history book helps us to make informed decisions and play events more accurately.

To deepen the company's knowledge of the Mughal empire, Nadia sets each company member a subject to give a presentation on. The subjects are: Sufism, faqirs, Hinduism, Sharia law, harems and eunuchs, the Mughal family tree, Mughal emperors, the court, astrology, Mughal women, 'common people', art and culture, and architecture.

Throughout the week the company are introduced to movement by movement director, Liam Steel. They focus on being centred and working fluidly as a chorus. We also have our first music session with Japs [Japjit Kaur], the vocal music coach, who introduces us to qawwali music.



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Rehearsal Diary: Week Two, clarity

This week we hope to have rehearsed and gained clarity on the whole of act one and start to penetrate Act III, Scene 3, the courtroom scene. Nadia is keen for act one to be pacey, clear and slick so it will hook in an audience. She feels that if we don't draw them in within the first few moments we will never really have them engaged. We therefore spend a lot of time on details and on staging. For example, in Act I, Scene 2, we look at how Murad and Aurangzeb navigate the scene and make sure their psychology is clear. We try different things for Murad's entrance and explore him trampling through Aurangzeb's tent, whilst Aurangzeb welcomes him with warm and open body language, refusing to acknowledge Murad's insults. We even consider the way in which Aurangzeb drinks tea and how it should be served.

With each scene, we take into account the historical facts. Not all of the information we have gathered is helpful and we pick and choose which facts to use based on artistic decisions. One key historical fact is that all of the scenes in act one take place in a fragile, dangerous, fragmented and war-torn Hindustan. Conveying that danger and momentum is vital.

The courtroom scene is very important, as we learn a great deal about our protagonist and Islam. The scene is packed full of quick, witty and controversial dialogue, which lasts for about 30 minutes. It is essential that it is well rehearsed. To help with this, we break the scene down into smaller units.

Fight, singing, movement and voice calls take place simultaneously. There are more fights than we anticipated, which means that 'Kombat' Kate is very busy. After talking to Katrina and the costume department we decide to avoid blood and gore at the start of the show because of the beautiful white set and intricate costumes. Japs works with the actors playing Hira Bai, Dara and Shah Jahan, to teach them their solo songs. Liam spends his movement sessions figuring out how to transition from one scene to another. Kate Godfrey has created a

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recording – with the help of Nadia and her father – of some of the play’s names and locations, to help the company achieve uniform pronunciation.

Anjli, Anjana, Nick, Vincent and Esh share their presentations. They cover the Mughal emperors and how they ruled, Mughal art, daily routine in the Mughal court, the Taj Mahal and life beyond the palace walls. Unfortunately we don’t have enough time to listen to the other presentations, but hopefully the research the company have undertaken will filter through in their work.



Research Materials

*The Monetary System of the Mughal Empire by Syed Najaf Haider
(University of Oxford, 1997)*

‘The theory of interest in Islamic Law and the effects of the interpretation of this by the Hanafi School up to the end of the Mughal Empire’ by A.G. Muslim (PhD thesis, University of Glasgow)

Hindustani Music in the Time of Aurangzeb by Katherine Ruth Butler Brown (SOAS, University of London, 2003)

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Rehearsal Diary: Week Three, darkness

Day 13 – we arrive to a raked rehearsal room, with fully functional sliders. Over the last two weeks we have been using costume rails to give us an idea of how the real sliders will work. We can now get accustomed to the steep rake of the set and how to use the sliders that hang from the ceiling. However, before the company are able to play, the National Theatre's physiotherapist explains how to work safely on the raked stage.

Once we are let loose on the rake we work quickly and effectively throughout the week on the remaining 16 scenes: Itbar and Afia's unfulfilled love; Itbar's sexual insecurities (as a eunuch); Shah Jahan's constant rejection of Aurangzeb; rivalry between the royal siblings; Aurangzeb in love; Dara finding enlightenment in Mian Mir's dargah; Dara telling Shah Jahan that he wants to be a faqir; Hira Bai's death; Aurangzeb and his advisors formulating a plan to eliminate Dara; Dara's execution; Aurangzeb being haunted by his regret; and Aurangzeb on his deathbed. It becomes overwhelmingly clear how dark this play is and how many of the characters carry wounds inflicted upon them by their parents.

As we work through the play we make adjustments to the text, for example, changing the order of or cutting lines. We can only really make these decisions once we have rehearsed the scene and attempted to unlock each character's objectives. Each time we make a change, we make a note to double-check it with Tanya Ronder, the adaptor.

The narrative jumps backwards and forwards in time, and we need to help the audience to follow it. Nadia and I go through the play and suggest moments where we can project the date and place onto screens or the palace walls. The captions suggested are:

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- Act I, Scene 1 '1659, Hindustan border'
- Act I, Scene 3 'War camp. 50 km outside Agra'
- Act I, Scene 5 'The capital city. Agra Fort Palace'
- Act II, Scene 1 '30 years earlier. 1629 Agra'
- Act II, Scene 2 '15 years later'
- Act III, Scene 3 'Sharia court. 1659'
- Act IV, Scene 1 '20 years earlier'
- Act IV, Scene 5 '1659, Red Fort Prison'
- Act V, Scene 2 '1707'

The company start to learn the many different configurations of the screens and the rules regarding them. In order to embrace the cinematic style of writing, the screens are used to frame the action and to help the cast to appear and disappear, (instead of just walking on and off the stage to change scene).

A few of the cast take Kathak dance lessons to prepare for the party scene. Liam Steel also tries out some ideas for a surreal moment of story-telling, when we learn that Jahanara has been burnt. Liam experiments with some material called 'smoke', a bungee cord and real fire. Kombat Kate visits us again to look at some more fight sequences, particularly focusing on the courtroom where we have replaced some of Tanya's moderately violent stage directions with some horrific brutality.

It has been a very busy week!

Research Materials

The Mughal Empire (The New Cambridge History of India) by John F Richards (Cambridge University Press; New Ed, 1996)

The Empire of the Great Mughals: History, Art and Culture by Annemarie Schimmel (Reaktion Books; New Ed, 2006)

Mughal Architecture and Gardens by George Michell and Amit Pasricha (Antique Collectors' Clud Ltd, 2011)

Architecture of Mughal India by Catherine B Asher (Cambridge University Press, 1992)

Jahangir: A Connoisseur of Mughal Art by Sanjeev P Srivastava (Abhinav Publications, 2012)

Islamic Mystical Poetry: Sufi Verse from early Mystics to Rumi by Mahmood Jamal (Penguin Classics, 2009)

The Gift – poems by Hafiz the Great Sufi Master by Hafiz, translated by Daniel Ladinsky (Penguin Books Australia, 1999)

Rehearsal Diary

Rehearsal Diary: Week Four, Christmas

It's Monday 23 December 2014 – two days until Christmas – and we are in our fourth week of rehearsal. We won't be rehearsing on Christmas Day or Boxing Day and our rehearsal time is cut even further as almost half of the cast are unavailable as they are in performances of *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*, a production running in the Olivier Theatre, set in a Mumbai slum. However, we manage to use this week to work on scenes that haven't previously been populated. For instance, we work on act four scene six, in which Roshanara throws a party to celebrate Dara's death sentence. We look at adding religious men into the courtroom scene – their presence helps to highlight the danger and controversy of the debate. We also run the majority of act four, which tells us about the tone of the play.



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Research Materials

Moth Smoke by Moshin Hamid (Penguin, 2005)

Mistress of the Throne by Ruchir Gupta (Srishti Publishers, 2014)

Empire of the Mughal: The Tainted Throne by Alex Rutherford (Thomas Dunne Books, 2013)

Empire of the Mughal: The Serpent's Tooth by Alex Rutherford (Thomas Dunne Books, 2013)

Rehearsal Diary

Rehearsal Diary: Week Five, revision and music

We start 2015 having roughly staged the whole play and established the dynamics between characters. The play is so large and new to us, and many of the cast have been preoccupied with performing in other shows, that it's important to remind ourselves of the work we have already done. We spend the majority of the week re-visiting scenes and making sure that we are psychologically connected to the characters. One of the many challenges for the cast is to establish their character's objectives, relationships and to convey the atmosphere – all of the scenes begin in the middle of a discussion and are short and precise, which does not allow an actor to warm up into it.

This week we concentrate on getting the language and tone right in acts one and two. Nadia encourages the actors to think of the play as a piece of Greek theatre and create vivid imagery with language in order to successfully recount events that have taken place either outside the palace walls or on the battlefield. She also reminds the company of the difference between our contemporary ideas about religion and a Mughal perspective. All of our characters believe in a god who decides whether you will spend your after -life in heaven or hell.

On days when Behind the Beautiful Forevers performances prevent us from having the full company, Nadia schedules in one-on-one time with the actors. These sessions are designed to cover every detail of character and are greatly rewarding for the cast and for the production, as the acting becomes much more nuanced and less general.

Singing calls and movement sessions continue to help finesse the language of the play and the musicality of the movement. Not all of the company have dance experience, so these sessions can take some time (counting music doesn't come naturally to all!). Liam carefully selects music from the selection Niraj Chag has sent us. He notes changes that he thinks will benefit the movement and the story-telling.

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Now that Liam has created a large chunk of the transitional material – movement of screens and choreography between scenes – Niraj Chang and Carolyn Downing need to make the music and sound work with it. The easiest way to do this is to send a recording of how it looks in the hope that Niraj can compose something to fit the mood and tempo. Towards the end of the week Nadia, Liam, Carolyn and Niraj discuss how the music and sound can best serve the production.

In preparation for the arrival of our amazing musicians, Nadia and I try to figure out how they will feature in the production. Should they be visible throughout the entire show? Will they be playing live? How easy is it for the musicians to transport their instruments?

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Research Materials

The Trial of Dara Shikoh by Akbar S Ahmed (published as Akbar Ahmed – Two Plays: Noor and The Trial of Dara Shikoh, Saqi Books, 2009)

Dara Shikoh by Danish Iqbal

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Rehearsal Diary: Week Six, current affairs

In the penultimate week of rehearsals, we revisit the latter half of the play, which is very dark and macabre. We look at act four – in particular act four scene eight, in which Itbar delivers Dara's head to Shah Jahan and Jahanara. After watching their grief, and in spite of Afia's best attempts to stop him, Itbar kills himself. In order to tell this story clearly and subtly, we have to split the scene into three parts. The first part is Itbar delivering the box; in the second Itbar sits with Afia and contemplates his life; and in the third Afia finds Itbar after he has hanged himself. We devise some more screen choreography and allocate people to move the screens. Allocating people can sometimes be tricky as not all of the cast have a 'base' (neutral costume). Furthermore, some people are unavailable as they are either in the scene or in the following scene – or doing a quick change of costume.

On 7 January, in the middle of our rehearsal week, we learn that there has been a terrorist attack in Paris involving Islamic extremists, which results in the deaths of several members of a satirical newspaper. This news deeply saddens us all. As our play deals with Islam we are very aware of how sensitive an audience may be when watching the production. As a company, we have a discussion about the incident and agree that our play is respectful, honest and accurate in its portrayal of Islam. We agree that we are serving the historical facts as well as shining a bright and positive light on an aspect of Islam that a lot of the Western world may be unaware of. *Dara* is essentially a historical play about two brothers and their contest for the throne.

As is the nature of new writing, changes to the script are made throughout the week. Sections are cut and then sometimes reinstated, which can throw actors. Therefore, whenever I run lines with actors, I like to clarify what is being said and which version of the staging we are using on that particular day.

At the end of the week we do a staggered run of acts one, two and three

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so that the company can put things together: where they enter and exit from; when they are off stage; when they need change their costumes and wigs; when they will be on stage but moving a screen; and what their character's trajectory is. Some of the characters seem to have a limited emotional journey, and this is because their objective remains the same for the duration of the play. Others, such as Aurangzeb, go on an emotional roller-coaster and continue to grow and change throughout the production. Nadia encourages the actors not to force unnatural trajectories on to their characters, but instead to trust in the play and the story we are trying to tell.

We welcome three new members to the team – the musicians. They are put to work immediately and join the rest of the cast in Mian Mir's dargah and at Roshanara's party. With their presence, the play suddenly comes alive and feels authentic and real.



Research Materials

Anarkali directed by Nandlal Jaswantlal (1953)

Humayan directed by Mehboob Khan (1945)

Jahan Ara directed by Vinod Kumar (1964)

Jodhaa Akbar directed by Ashutosh Gowariker (2008)

Mughal-e-Azam directed by K Asif (1960)

Mumtaz Mahal directed by Kidar Nath Sharma (1944)

Pukar directed by Sohrab Modi (1939)

Taj Mahal directed by M Sadiq (1963)

Taj Mahal: An Enternal Love Story directed by Akbar Khan (2005)

Waris Shah:Ishq Daa Waaris directed by Manoj Punj (2006)

Aurangzeb directed by Atul Sabharwal (2013)

Rehearsal Diary

Rehearsal Diary: Week Seven, putting it together

We have reached our final week in rehearsal room one and everyone is anxious to pull all of the elements of the production together. To gain a clear perspective we spend the majority of the week running sections of the play. After running a section, Nadia shares her thoughts with the cast. She suggests areas of improvement and then works on these with the company.

Running sections takes a lot of time, because each involves some sort of fight – in order to run a fight, you must first rehearse it separately, for health and safety reasons. The sections also mean moving the screens, which can take the company a while to get their heads around – each transition has a different tempo and configuration. Some of the transitions include choreographed movement, such as the journey of the head in the box and the journey of Shah Jahan's prized sword, Alamgir.

After our first full run, the show comes in at two hours and thirty minutes. The first half runs at one hour and forty minutes, and the second half at fifty minutes.

On Tuesday we run the play and Nick Hytner, the National Theatre's current Director, comes to watch. Nick loves the play and is very pleased with the company's achievement. In particular he loves the courtroom scene, which he thinks is the most exciting scene in the play. He does, though, advise Nadia and Tanya to cut twenty minutes from the first half of the play. Tanya and Nadia work through the night to figure out where we can lose time without losing the heart of the story. The next morning, during notes, Nadia breaks the news to the cast, who are very receptive and understanding. We spend the rest of the week running the play with the changes. On Friday we start our first day of technical rehearsals.

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Research Materials - Documentaries

Warrior Empire – The Moghuls (History Channel)

The Great Moguls (Channel 4)

National Geographic documentary: Secrets of the Taj Mahal

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Rehearsal Diary: Technical Rehearsals and Previews

Everyone who walks into the Lyttelton Theatre on Friday morning is greatly impressed by the beautiful set that Katrina has designed. The aim of the week is to make sure that the play matches the set's intricacy and beauty. It's a huge ambition, but we're keen to achieve it. With only eight technical sessions in which to do lights, mics and establish all of the cues we have very little time. Yikes!

As the actors arrive on to the stage in wigs, make-up and costume, the Mughal Empire grows before our eyes. Everyone looks gorgeous. Both the men and women are bejewelled and robed, each turban fits like a crown and each pearl and piece of gold twinkles under Neil Austin's beautiful lighting. Nadia keeps a watchful eye on our colour palette and the men's beards – she is wary of alienating our audience with comedy beards and too much decadence – and wants to make these characters relatable and real. She reminds the cast not to play the epicness of the stage or their costumes, but instead keep the dialogue real, immediate and conversational.

We work tirelessly through technical rehearsals into preview week, constantly adjusting the play. Every morning the actors come in for notes and then rehearse technical elements before they perform in front of a paying audience.

During the week we cut huge sections of scenes until they are almost unrecognisable, we also relight the end of the play to make it darker and more surreal. We change characters' costumes; remove characters from scenes; shorten quick-changes; remove our surreal story-telling about Jahanara being burnt; add projected titles to almost all of the scenes; add faceoffs between Dara and Aurangzeb to make their rivalry and different schools of thought clearer; add older versions of each of the royal children to act two scene one; shorten the journey of Shah Jahan's sword to Aurangzeb, so that it is only transported by two actors (we

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originally had five); and restage act five scene one to make it feel more claustrophobic. All of these changes should make the storytelling clearer and keep the audience better engaged.

The company work very long days, which leads to fatigue and the occasional injury, but we soldier on until we are confident and satisfied with our work.



Understanding the Characters

Characters: The Royal Family

During rehearsals, the company of *Dara* made decisions about the background and journey of each character. For historical characters, these ideas were rooted in real-life events and stories; for the additional characters, backstories had to be created.

- ❖ **DARA** is the first born son of Shah Jahan and Mumtaz Mahal. He is the heir to the Mughal throne. Shah Jahan favours Dara – as a term of endearment, he calls him a watermelon. Dara does not want to inherit the throne and would prefer to be a faqir. When Dara's brothers, Aurangzeb and Murad, go to war he stays with Shah Jahan, writes Sufi poetry and translates non-Islamic texts with the ambition of finding a commonality between religions to unify India. Dara is forced into a war of succession with his brothers, which results in his wife's death as well as his own capture, imprisonment and death. Dara is brave, peace loving, naïve, spiritual, a father, and a husband. Dara is also arrogant and not a strategic thinker.



Understanding the Characters

- ❖ **AURANGZEB** is the second son of Shah Jahan and Mumtaz Mahal. As a peace offering after their father's rebellion, at the age of eight Aurangzeb is sent to live with his alcoholic grandfather, Jahangir, along with Dara. Aurangzeb seems to have been greatly affected by the time spent with Jahangir, and avoids alcohol. Aurangzeb has a turbulent relationship with his father, as Shah Jahan believes Aurangzeb to be a threat to his rule and treats him accordingly. Aurangzeb is a clever and strategic thinker, which works to his advantage in the war of succession when he manages to trick his brothers and win the throne. Aurangzeb is a strict orthodox Muslim and goes to great lengths to convert the whole of Hindustan. Under Aurangzeb's rule, the Mughal empire becomes less tolerant and the arts diminish. Towards the end of his life, Aurangzeb regrets the harsh decisions that he made as a young man. He dies aged 89.
- ❖ **SHAH JAHAN** is a son of Jahangir, the fourth Mughal Emperor. To become emperor, Shah Jahan killed his competition; all of whom were relatives. Shah Jahan is the father of Dara, Jahanara, Aurangzeb, Roshanara and Murad. He is stubborn, selfish, superstitious, stern, proud, vindictive and loving man. He enjoys a loving marriage to Mumtaz Mahal, and is devastated when she dies giving birth to their fourteenth child. It is said that Shah Jahan was so depressed that his hair turned grey and he lost his eyesight from crying so much. In memory of his beloved wife, Shah Jahan builds the Taj Mahal. When he recovers from his wife's death, Shah Jahan becomes addicted to sleeping with the women of the harem. It has also been suggested that he has incestuous relationship with his favourite daughter, Jahanara, as she greatly resembles her mother. During the course of the play we see Shah Jahan at his most powerful and his most vulnerable. The power he enjoys is stripped away by Aurangzeb and he is imprisoned in his own fort.
- ❖ **JAHANARA** is the eldest daughter of Shah Jahn and Mumtaz Mahal. She is kind, courageous, maternal, a devoted daughter, sister and Sufi. Her mother dies when she is seventeen, and she becomes 'First Lady of the Empire'. When she is thirty, Jahanara's clothing

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catches fire, burning her and killing some of her attendants. Jahanara narrowly escapes death. Jahanara spends a lot of her time and energy trying to reason with the men in her family. She considers herself to be kindred spirit of Dara.

- ❖ **ROSHANARA** is the second daughter of Shah Jahan and Mumtaz Mahal. She is highly intelligent, a strategic thinker, ambitious, power hungry and vengeful. Roshanara is frustrated by the limitations put on women and resentful of Dara and Jahanara for being their father's favourites. She helps Aurangzeb win the throne in order to seek her revenge.
- ❖ **MURAD** is the youngest son of Shah Jahan and Mumtaz Mahal. In the play, Dara and Aurangzeb refer to him as 'baby brother'. Murad is a skilled soldier and an alcoholic. He is captured by Aurangzeb and sent to Gwalior Prison.
- ❖ **SIPIHR** is Dara's teenage son and an accomplished soldier. He desperately tries to protect and preserve his father's life, but is unsuccessful.
- ❖ **AZAM** and **KAM** are two of Aurangzeb's sons. They have a fractured relationship due to their rivalry for the throne.

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Characters: Servants, Advisors, Politicians

- ❖ **ITBAR** is born in 1611 to peasant parents. At the age of eleven, he is sold into slavery, castrated and becomes a eunuch. His position and status grow throughout the play. He is first seen as the children's nanny, then as a general aide to the family. Lastly he becomes Aurangzeb's right-hand man. Itbar is in love Afia, a servant girl at the palace, but as a eunuch cannot romantically invest in their relationship. He has mixed feelings about the Mughal family's cruelty to one another. After being forced to contribute to Dara's death, Itbar commits suicide.
- ❖ **IMAD** is Aurangzeb's trusted aide. Throughout the play Imad's tasks grow in size and stakes. He is asked to serve tea, kill and capture the opposition, and generally attend to Aurangzeb's every need.
- ❖ **AFIA** is a servant girl who works as lady-in-waiting to Jahanara and Shah Jahan at Agra Palace Fort. She is a widowed mother of two; her mother takes care of her children while she financially supports them. Afia is in love with Itbar, but this love goes unfulfilled.
- ❖ **MALIK JIWAN** is an Afghan chieftain. He has previous history with the Mughal family, and was almost crushed to death by Shah Jahan's elephant until Dara saved him. Malik Jiwan is a wealthy and greedy man, who betrays Dara for money.
- ❖ **HIRA BAI** is a young Hindu concubine who engages in a passionate and loving relationship with Aurangzeb in 1653. She dies of consumption, which leaves Aurangzeb devastated.
- ❖ **THE FAQIR** is a Muslim Sufi ascetic, a wandering dervish who teaches Islam and lives on alms. The Faqir enjoys showmanship – when he meets Shah Jahan he gets carried away with trying to impress him, putting himself in a vulnerable situation. He is forced to disclose information about a young Aurangzeb by Shah Jahan,

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something he continually regrets. The presence of the Faqir antagonises Aurangzeb throughout the play and he is eventually put to death because of it.

- ❖ **DANISHMAND, MIR KHALIL, GOVERNOR KHAN and MULLAH FAROOQ** are Aurangzeb's civil servants and give him political advice. Danishmand is a philosopher; he is peace loving and tolerant. Governor Khan is a politician and an opportunist who is keen to embrace the benefits of Aurangzeb's rule. Mir Khalil is Aurangzeb's relative and is a newly appointed civil servant. He is keen to prove his worth and impress Aurangzeb. Mullah Farooq is a religious man who disagrees with Dara's ideas.
- ❖ **PROSECUTOR TALIB** is an educated and religious man. He believes in an orthodox and intolerant form of Islam. The prosecutor has previous history with Dara – as teenagers they had their fair share of disagreements, which makes his involvement in the sharia court both political and personal. It is his job to ensure that Dara is found guilty of apostasy.
- ❖ **QAZI SAYED** is a fair and thorough judge who rules in accordance with Islamic religious law. Aurangzeb appointed him to judge the trial.
- ❖ **MIAN MIR** is a Sufi saint from Lahore, who helps to enlighten Dara. Mian Mir is credited in history as being Dara's spiritual instructor.
- ❖ **ITBAR'S PARENTS** are elderly and poor. They sold him into slavery for money so they could survive. Years later they try to visit the palace in order to reunite with him.

Interview – Tanya Ronder

Interview with Tanya Ronder, Adaptor

What drew you to the play?

I loved how epic it was, how big a story, and that it was an exploration of a religion. That it tried to look at the heart of Islam by going back to its roots to understand how these two brothers, who were so devout, each in their own way, had such a different view of that religion.

How did you go about adapting the original play?

I read quite a lot around the events of the play. In particular, I read a really beautiful book – which I loved – by Abraham Eraly, *Emperors of the Peacock Throne* – one of my favourite history books. The more I read, the more I realised that there was just a handful of accounts from that time and that, over the years, people have interpolated them in different ways. There is a limited amount of actual material from that period of history and once I had become familiar with them, I felt equipped enough to start making the story we wanted to tell, constructing scenes out of those characters' dilemmas and conflicts.

How much of Shahid Nadeem's original play exists within your adaptation?

The original play was absolutely brilliant in that it pinpointed exactly this fight between Dara and Aurangzeb. The original play was performed in Pakistan, which has such a different theatrical environment to London that, beyond the structure of the play, we departed quite far from it. The things we have kept are the three sets of relationships: Dara and his son; Shah Jahan imprisoned in a fort with his daughter, Jahanara; and Aurangzeb and the other sister, Roshanara. Those three sets of people are absolutely central to Shahid's original play and to our production, my adaptation. We have ended up starting the story before Shahid's story begins and finishing it several decades later and have added in, because I think our audience really need to hear it, this big trial scene which really allowed me to explore the idea of religion.

Interview – Tanya Ronder

What is the world of the play and how does it differ from your other adaptations, for example, *Vernon God Little*?

Well it differs hugely which is partly what I love about adapting from source material – it allows me to enter into a completely different world. I knew very little about the Mughal empire and about Islam, and it was thrilling to learn about both of those things. I hope it will be very exciting for an audience, as we've seen so little about the Mughal empire on our stages, it really is an unexplored world, hugely rich, hugely dramatic. The lengths they went to to get what they wanted makes such amazing drama – it's easy to think that they're characters in a play, but these people really did these things to one another.



What has been the most challenging thing about writing *Dara*?

I think possibly the most challenging thing is how sensitive the subject of Islam is. I have tried to be as respectful as I could possibly be, but I wanted to really explore the roots of it and try to look at how these fights that people have over it exist. That was challenging, and continues to be challenging. The last thing I would want to do is upset anybody at all over anything religious within the play. I hope, too, that it brings people's attention to the beautiful sides of Islam rather than highlighting the

Interview – Tanya Ronder

perceived narrow-minded aspects of it. There were challenges in adapting Shahid's original play because Lahore is so different from London and our audiences are so different. I knew I had to structure, by and large, a new play. It was a lot of work, but most of it was fun and we had a brilliant research trip to India and Pakistan, which was amazing. I would have felt illequipped to write the play had we not done that.

What do you hope an audience will take away from this version?

Two things really: for people to be amazed at that world; and for them to come away and say, Wow, I had no idea. Hopefully they will leave feeling more informed and with a broad-mindedness which might come with thinking about Islam, because they've seen the other parts of it that we look at in the play and which aren't as accessible to us in everyday life, here.

Interview – Nadia Fall

Interview with Nadia Fall, Director

When were you introduced to the play?

In 2012 Nick Hytner was approached with a version of the story of *Dara*. He put it in front of me as a possible play for the NT. We both thought it had legs as a drama because it was a history play about two brothers competing for the throne in the middle of the Mughal empire. It was an opportunity to tell a great story from a history and culture most western audiences wouldn't know much about. The one thing it did need was for someone to adapt it because in its raw form it was really built for Asian audiences and it needed to be reworked for theatre as we [in the UK] know it – more of a psychological story with scenes. That's where Tanya Ronder came on board as our adaptor.

Is the story of Dara and Aurangzeb new to you?

My family are Indian so I knew who the Mughals were. I had some kind of anecdotal idea of the Mughal empire and visited Mughal ruins and buildings, like the Taj Mahal, as a child and a teenager. The culture of north India, where my family are from, is very much influenced by the Mughals, but I didn't know all of the facts or the details. One of the biggest problems Tanya and I had was how to distil it – there are so many threads, so much information and so many stories that choosing always felt at the expense of another piece of story.

How have you staged this production?

It's quite epic because it tells the story of a royal family. Emperors, princes, palaces and battles are talked about, but mostly it's done in quite a 'Greek' way. Battles are recounted but not seen – as are incidents on the streets and in parades. Generally we see life within the palace walls. The set goes through so many transformations – a tent in a war camp, a fort in Agra, a palace in Delhi – and needs to change location quickly. Katrina Lindsay has designed a plain platform which we can transform into different places and change the architecture, but mostly it's an open stage. The architecture is hinted at using screens and light. Costumes provide more of the aesthetic.

Interview – Nadia Fall

How are music, sound and movement used in this production?

We've taken some creative licence. An early decision was to transcend the idea of having Indian or Asian accents – we wanted it to have an older world, more universal feel. The cast's English voices would be the same as their Persian or Urdu voices. The movement is expressionistic. We were inspired by music of the culture and the time. Sufi music is really important to the story because our main protagonist, Dara, is a Sufi and explores the more spiritual side of Islam. Sufi qawwali music is a big part of that and we have a qawwali band to give an authentic sound. It isn't a carbon copy of how things were and gives an expressionistic take on the music, poetry and costume. It is not about being forensically accurate; it's about evoking feeling. It's our take on that world.



What has been the most challenging thing about directing this production?

One of the most challenging things has been logistics, because the National Theatre had a very ambitious and noble idea of sharing cast with another big south-Asian story, *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*. We have the best south-Asian actors in the country in both plays, but then when it came to rehearsal and performances, it was really hard to find

Interview – Nadia Fall

time where we could work in the same room, together. Another challenge has been getting the right temperature for each scene, because Tanya has a very unique voice. On one side everything seems epic, and the language is quite robust and feels like a Greek play, but there are also cinematic close-ups, where it feels naturalistic with intimate scenes between two people. It's about getting the balance right so it is truthful, without being overly domestic or seeming like it is happening in a flat in south London. We have to embrace the fact that we are talking about blue blood and an empire, and we can only get to the nub of that by doing runs and seeing things piece together.

What do you hope audiences take away from your production?

If they don't already know about it, I hope they will be introduced to a culture and moment of history which is so rich and interesting that they want to find out more, or visit the big Mughal cities of Agra, Delhi and Lahore. For two and a half centuries there was a strong, vibrant and enigmatic Muslim empire. Through the play, people will see that culture and also get to understand more about the faith of Islam, which can feel secretive or get a particular rap in the press because of current world politics and events. This is an opportunity to delve into a certain point in history where we can look with some perspective at a faith which is fascinating and has many aspects to it – including a mystical and inclusive side – which people might not even know about. It's a kind of celebration of that culture and faith, which I hope people find out more about by seeing this story.

Interview – Katrina Lindsay

Interview with Katrina Lindsay, Designer

How did you approach recreating the Mughal Empire?

First of all Nadia and I met and talked through the play and the world in which the story is set. It felt important for it to have an authentic Indian aesthetic and reflect the richness of the empire. I then started researching into this world and gathering a lot of visual references of Agra Fort, the Red Fort in Delhi, the Taj Mahal, and many other amazing architectural structures overseen by the emperors. We talked about the materials used to create these structures and their scale. There are also a lot of beautiful Indian paintings from the time that were a brilliant reference for the colours and costumes, and the real people within the story. I had a contact in Delhi with whom I consulted on the exact details of the clothes worn and their meaning, and could source fabrics from India to create as authentic a feel in the costumes as possible.

How did you start your design process?

The starting point is going through the play and finding the rhythm of the structure because that determines how you might get in and out of the scenes. I looked at the themes and main story and researched around them. Using all the visual material I'd found, I started to work in the model box, trying out ideas. Gradually things started to form and the elements that we needed became apparent in meetings to go through the model and the script.

Your design is very simple, why did you choose this aesthetic?

It was clear to Nadia and me that it would be impossible to recreate the spaces too literally, mainly because within the structure of the play the scenes move constantly between locations and timescales. There needed to be fluidity in the way we told it. It became important to create one space that could contain the piece and had the aesthetic of the world, but where the changes of location could be suggested and shifted easily. Marble felt important as a material as it was often used within the palaces and gave the grandeur needed. In our references, Islamic screens and window carvings stood out as an interesting way of dividing

Interview – Katrina Lindsay

space. Steps also appear a lot in the palaces and became a useful tool to give us height and different levels to work with. We needed somewhere that could become a throne room and a tomb, but would mainly frame the characters, sometimes abstractly in an unidentified place and at other times in the courtyards and rooms of palaces.



Where did your inspiration come from?

The inspiration is always from the story being told and the emotional narrative. I am interested in the individuals and how the action plays out. Then, after researching and gathering visual references, ideas start to spark, or a particular reference may feel right and the world is built from that. Mughal paintings were a great source of inspiration, especially for the costumes and colours as well as seeing images of the real buildings and objects.

What is the difference between this design and *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*, which you are also responsible for?

Behind the Beautiful Forevers and *Dara* are almost polar opposites, even though they are both based in India and deal with true stories. *Behind the*

Interview – Katrina Lindsay

Beautiful Forevers is set in a modern-day Mumbai slum near the airport, and deals with the reality of life for the rubbish-pickers. *Dara* is a historical piece, also dealing with true stories, but against the backdrop of the impressive Mughal empire with all its wealth and cultural detail. *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* takes place amongst the rubbish and slums, with dirt, dust and the smog of Mumbai. *Dara* is set in palaces, with the almost mathematical visual elegance of Islamic art and architecture. For both designs I had to find ways of moving the locations on without having scene changes that felt too laborious or halted the story-telling. Being involved in two plays set in India has enabled me to understand much more clearly the complexities of the different religious identities within the country and how this is reflected in what people wear and how they live their lives. I have, of course, only scratched the surface of understanding all of the layers but also, being involved in *Dara* has given me the historical context of it all and why that still permeates through the society today.