

Theater Review

Rasa among the Remains

Indian Ink's unusual setting contributes to a heightened sense of delight

INDIAN INK

By Tom Stoppard
Quantum Theatre
Allegheny Cemetery, Lawrenceville
Through August 25
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By Gabriel Davis

Using the love affair between a British poet and an Indian painter as its canvas, Tom Stoppard's *Indian Ink* explores the dynamics of re-establishing Indian identity in the wake of British imperialism. Like Stoppard's Pulitzer winner *Arcadia*, this play connects past to present, with scenes set in the 1930s and the 1980s running in parallel.

Driving the central action, which is set in the 1930s, is Flora Crewe, a terminally consumptive British poet who has traveled to India in hopes that the climate will help to extend her life. A vivid character, Crewe cares not a wit for the mores of society, yet easily plays in its upper echelon, flirting with princes in India and counting H.G. Wells among her friends back home. She is described by her sister as typically treating men like batteries: When one goes flat she simply "sticks another one in."

Then she meets Nirad Das, an Indian painter with potential to be more than a Duracell to her. A lover of all things British, including her, Das's weakness as a painter — and as a love interest — may be that he has too much esteem for the culture of Stepmother England and not enough for his own.

Meanwhile, half a century later, Crewe's sister, Eleanor, has two guests for tea and cake: One is Das's son Anish, who, like his father, struggles with an identity that has both British and Indian influences. The other is Eldon Pike, a would-be Flora Crewe biographer, who tries to piece together her life — but who, we know, inevitably will get it all wrong.

In using the Allegheny Cemetery as a performance space, Quantum artistic director and founder Karla Boos has chosen a risqué but also highly evocative playing area. One might feel a bit uneasy initially as actors dance over and around genuine graves, including that of Earnest Guest, a four-year-old boy who passed in 1903. On the other hand, there may be a sense of satisfaction in seeing actors — a group historically denied burial in cemeteries alongside family — now welcomed into one to do a show.

In any case, the cemetery connects instantly to the atmosphere Stoppard conveys in his text. Set on a hill, actors emerge from behind tombstones in the distance, dancing down toward the audience, ghosts of the past emerging to live their story. Fire torches light the hillside, casting shadows and blending seamlessly with Todd Brown's understated lighting design.



Robin Walsh's Flora and Sanjit De Silva's Nirad create erotic intrigue in *Indian Ink*.

The feel of untamed, natural surroundings in a small Indian village where Crewe stays is made so much more palpable for the audience as real cicadas hop down from the trees above. At one point, they jump from one startled audience member to the next. For a moment this distracts from the action onstage — but then heightens identification with it.

Sound designer Elizabeth Atkinson brilliantly merges the genuine music of nature with her own synthesized version, using the cicadas' buzzing song — a thematically relevant mating call — to rhythmic effect. As Atkinson builds the cicada song louder and louder, the lovers must adjust to be heard, becoming louder themselves. Finally, dual mating calls merge into one melodic sound, and the night itself seems to pulse with passionate repartee.

Director Roger Henderson's often poetic stage pictures build erotic intrigue, bringing the romantic feeling between Crewe and Das to a slow, low boil. Nudity is never displayed onstage, but its suggestion is always more powerful. At one point, Das glimpses the bare outline of Crewe's form as she disrobes within her leafy hut.

The acting is solid all around. Robin Walsh heads the cast as Flora Crewe. Delivering her speeches "trippingly on the tongue," she keeps Stoppard's often highly cerebral text in the realm of the emotional. Her character's love, Nirad Das, is given a poised, intensely ruminating quality by Sanjit De Silva.

The comically brilliant, but also dramatically effective Sunil Malhotra is at his funniest when attempting to seduce Crewe. Some of the warmest scenes in the play are due to the interaction between actors Susan McGregor-Laine and Rajesh Bose, who play Eleanor and Anish Das, respectively. Their arc from antagonism to empathy mirrors the arc Flora Crewe and Nirad Das take. Tien Domin delivers a short but memorable performance as a young Eleanor and, like her character's sister, also finds love in India.

Throughout the play, there is a quest for "rasa," which Silva (as Das) describes as "the emotion which the artist must arouse...a state of heightened delight." Thanks to the efforts of this talented group, the production is filled with moments that arouse just that.