

Salman Rushdie, Simon Reade Offer Insights into Adaptation of *Midnight's Children*

BY KRISTIN STERLING

Midnight's *Children's* journey from an award-winning novel to the stage began in the late 1990s, when author Salman Rushdie adapted his novel into a five-part television series for the BBC. Ten days before filming was to start in India, the government refused to offer permission for the shoot. Determined to see the project through, Rushdie found a replacement location in Sri Lanka. With sets fully designed and locations arranged, again just days before the project was to commence, in the midst of political upheaval, the Sri Lankan government rescinded permission and asked the crew to leave the country in one week.

"It was like a plane crashing at the end of the runway," Rushdie recalled during a *Midnight's Children* Humanities Festival event. "The worst thing of all is wasted work... what is a script that doesn't have a film?"

The disappointment shortly turned into opportunity, when Rushdie's British publisher put out a paperback version of the screenplay. In 2001, inspired by the screenplay and interested in continuing to commission new versions of classical works, the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) commissioned an adaptation for the stage.

Rushdie, director Tim Supple and dramaturg Simon Reade then began the process of melding the novel and screenplay together for the stage.

"Tim and Simon were more faithful to the original book than I was," said Rushdie, acknowledging that they also helped

refresh his knowledge of the book in the process.

Rushdie particularly enjoyed working with the RSC because the actors approach the text with seriousness—not as a starting place. The director instructs the cast to really look at how the sentences are written and adhere to the text and punctuation—not to

run short sentences together. "Tim pays the writer a compliment by offering the same treatment as a Shakespeare soliloquy," said Rushdie. "The great richness of the British theater is that it is a writer's theater."



RECORD PHOTO BY EILEEN BARROSO

Midnight's *Children* author Salman Rushdie, left, with dramaturg Simon Reade in SIPA's Altschul Auditorium.

run short sentences together.

Although it wasn't the case with *Midnight's Children*, SOA Dean Bruce Ferguson said "The history of the journey from printed page to dramatic presenta-

tion—whether from a screenplay to screen or a book to the stage—is filled with fraught stories in which writers bemoan the losses of words, directors and producers fire writers in a cavalier style and actors try to serve these many masters simultaneously."

What conflicts arose during the adaptation process? Surprisingly

few said Rushdie and Reade. Although Reade admitted there were minor disagreements over the length of the play and a critical scene involving the birth of the protagonist, Saleem Sinai. In terms of the length of the play, they discussed possibilities ranging from a 5-11p.m. event to a three-hour play. To Rushdie, the idea of cutting another two hours from the five-hour BBC screen-

play seemed impossible, but Reade and Supple felt that a three-hour show would be "pretty close to the audience's tolerance limit," according to Reade. In trying to find the right balance during London previews, they cut another 15-20 minutes. The end result by the New York run—3 hours, 15 minutes.

The second sticking point came

when Supple suggested, purely for the practical reason of saving 10-15 minutes, that they remove a key moment in the play when Saleem "collides with history."

Rushdie strongly disagreed, arguing that the novel was about a person with absurd conceit that everything in history revolves around him. He felt the moment was critical, as a precursor to later events.

"It was a brilliant moment in the novel," conceded Supple. "I stupidly suggested we cut it."

With Saleem's strong connection to the history of India, does the audience need to be well-versed on the subject?

No, said Rushdie. In creating the production they assumed that the audience only knew what they saw on stage. The story should be complete on its own, explained Rushdie, with all of the culture included.

To help the audience sift through decades of history, the production included a large on-stage screen that projected critical images of India and Pakistan's history—from uprisings to the famous words of Gandhi. To help prepare New York audiences, a series of four Humanities Festival events on "Colonialism, Independence and Beyond" offered context on the colonial conditions and nationalist legacies of British rule in India to the 30-year period of the novel and the crises around independence and the partition of India and Pakistan.

For Rushdie and Reade, it is very fitting that *Midnight's Children* came to the stage in New York at this particular time, as war began in Iraq. They think that international events added to the impact for the audience.

While watching images of war broadcast on television is slightly impersonal, for Reade, seeing the scenes on the stage—characters waiting for bombs to fall on their heads—is very moving. "Then you understand the meaning of collateral damage," he said.

Rushdie added that *Midnight's Children* is different from other stories, because characters that you deeply care about are killed in war. "As Saleem feels the loss of his beloved family, so does the audience," he said.

Teaching Artists Help 1,200 High School Students Put *Midnight's Children* in Context

BY KRISTIN STERLING

In preparation for a special high school performance of *Midnight's Children*, students at 20 City high schools may have been expecting another history or literature lesson. But the teams of teaching artists from Columbia and the Royal Shakespeare Company had a very different lesson plan in mind.

Instead of launching into a lecture about the history of India or post-colonialism, teaching artists began the sessions by engaging the students—asking them to write three things they knew about India. When the students responded that in India people speak Hindi and English, the teaching artists asked why they spoke English. The answer—because India was a British colony until 1947—launched the class into an interactive discussion of Indian history and provided context for the setting of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*.

In *Midnight's Children* the protagonist, Saleem Sinai, sees himself closely aligned with the history of India—his identity tied to the country, since he was born at the exact moment India gained independence from Britain. Throughout the play Saleem uses stories to tell his own life history. Building on these themes, the teaching artists tailored creative writing exercises, having the

students write about their own lives and how they are connected to history, or creating a character connected to a major world event, and sharing it with the class. Many reflected on September 11, while others wrote about events ranging from World War II to medical discoveries.

As the students wrote, the teachers worked with them individually, offering attention that these students rarely receive.

"Having the students share their writing was a great vehicle to engage those who don't usually talk in class," said Joanne Straley, SOA'04. "It was nice being a visitor, you were able to offer praise for work well-done."

One of Stephen Johnson's, SOA'04, sessions brought many of the issues of the play to forefront—one of the students who was in the Reserves had received the call for active duty that morning.

"With the war going on, and their classmate called to serve, the students had a clearer image of what it is like to be in the middle of history," said Johnson, who found that the writing exercises were well received by the class. "These students don't often have the chance to do creative writing, and some were very poetic," he said.

As part of Columbia's enhanced commitment to the arts, teams of teaching artists visited high schools in four New York City boroughs where significant numbers of Mom-



RECORD PHOTO BY EILEEN BARROSO

Students were initially challenged by teaching artists to list three things they knew about India.

inside Heights and Harlem students attend. They worked with classroom teachers to determine specific topics and exercises that would be most suitable to the individual classes. Teaching artists either made two-45 minute visits or one-hour and a half visit to the schools, working with 1,200 students.

The lessons culminated on Tuesday, March 25, in a special high school student matinee performance of *Midnight's Children* at the Apollo Theater.

"The students' reactions to the performance were overwhelmingly positive," said Premila Reddy of the Double Discovery Center, which helped market the program to high schools. "The audience responded to everything happening on stage—erupting in laughter during the comedic dialogue, gasping at the violence and applauding the cast's efforts with a partial standing ovation."

During intermission several students sought out the teaching artists to express their gratitude and point

out references to topics they discussed in class.

The program was beneficial to the teaching artists as well.

"It was a great experience on a number of levels," said Straley. "Both the teaching experience and being out in New York and seeing what the high schools are like. The students were very present and very interested in learning about Rushdie and India. It was a great feeling to be part of Columbia University and the community."