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 intense 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 as a “living book.” He tells the story of the novel and the crises around independence and the partition of India and Pakistan. The story of the novel is about a person, a child who is bom the day independence came to India—his identity tied to the country. It was a great experience on a personal level, when the students were very present and very engaged.

Midnight’s Children author Salman Rushdie, left, with dramaturgy Simon Reade in SIPA’s Altschul Auditorium.

"I 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 began the process of melding the novel and screenplay together for the stage. "Tim and Simon were more faithful to the original book than the stage," Rushdie said.

The lessons culminated on April 11, 2003, when 1,200 students from New York City boroughs in four New York City boroughs received by the class. "These 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 what the high schools are like. The students were very present and very engaged," Rushdie said.

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"It was a brilliant moment in the play seemed impossible, but Rushdie and Reade 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," said Rushdie strongly disagreed, arguing that the novel was about a person, a character that everything in history revolves around him. He felt the moment was critical, 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 in its own, explained Rushdie, with all of India in the mix.

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 to help ground the production in 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 colleges 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 scripts, although 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.