

“Lhasa is a dark comedy which deals with complex issues that for many Tibetans continues to be a very real struggle - I wanted to bring this to my audiences”



Interview with Bettina Gracias

Lhasa MON 14 MAY & FRI 18 MAY 7.30PM

We talk to Bettina a mixed heritage Indian/Austrian playwright, born in Austria, raised in London about her upcoming dark comedy *Lhasa* and what the play's eclectic mix of characters signify...

Q. What inspired you to create *Lhasa*?

I spent some time in Dharamshala in India (the home of His Holiness the Dalai Lama) where the Indian government gave the exiled Tibetan community refuge. I was teaching English to monks there and became very interested in their history. During the time of the Olympics in China in 2008, many Tibetans felt it an opportune moment to highlight their cause. I was very lucky to be commissioned to do a Fact to Fiction with BBC Radio 4 at that time and even luckier that they agreed to my writing about Tibet. The characters of Ama and her son Karma first appeared in this short radio drama, which I later adapted and extended to stage.

Q. The War Plays season focuses on high profile and contemporary conflicts such as Iraq or Afghanistan, why Tibet?

Tibet is not an official or high profile war, but for many Tibetans it is an ongoing struggle which has been neglected by the rest of the world.

Q. Who is your favourite character?

I love all my characters but if I had to choose I think Ama, a Tibetan lady who owns a guesthouse but doesn't want any guests and stubbornly believes in tradition. Then we also have the Chinese monk who is obsessed with football and troubled about his negative feelings towards the Chinese. Karma, Ama's son, is the calm voice of reason.

Q. What inspired the troubled monk?

The troubled monk was initially inspired by one of the monks I taught in Dharamshala, he admitted to me that he felt a great anger towards the Chinese whilst still in Tibet, but when he came to India and met the Dalai Lama, his holiness told him that he shouldn't be angry with the Chinese people as they suffer too. This is one of the foundations of Tibetan Buddhism, to accept that all beings suffer and to develop a wish that all sentient beings be happy. The troubled monk in my play found it hard to let go of his anger. There is this stereotype in the West of Buddhist monks praying and meditating, but

they are still human beings with histories and emotions. Many become monks for a variety of reasons, which is quite different from the Catholic church for example. So I suppose I wanted to use the character of this troubled monk, at an intellectual level to question the concepts of Buddhism and what is the right way to behave in a situation of violence and suffering - in an understated way he raises these questions.

Q. What do you want to communicate to the audience through *Lhasa*?

I'm not interested in telling people what to think but I am interested in throwing something in the air for people to catch. I try not to come down on any one side as a writer, but I like to look at issues from different perspectives and hope that the audience will do the same through the characters.

Q. How have your background and experiences influenced your choices of what to write about?

I am inspired by characters and people. I meet people in life, hear their stories and feel inspired to write about them. Some of them are political, romantic, some real, some fictional. When I'm sitting on the tube I sometimes look around and think about how many stories and interesting encounters we are missing out on by not talking to each other.

Lhasa, directed by Rosamunde Hutt