**Audio Introduction to the 2023 Royal Shakespeare Company production of The Empress, by Tanika Gupta.**

These notes consist of five tracks.

**Track 1** is a brief Introduction

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Please note that these introductory notes were recorded early in the play’s run. Any changes will be incorporated into the live introduction, which will be delivered 15 minutes before the performance begins.

**Introduction**

Welcome to this introduction to the Royal Shakespeare Company’s new production of **The Empress**, written by **Tanika Gupta** and directed by **Pooja Ghai.**

The performance lasts for approximately three hours including a twenty minute interval. The audio describers, in order of speaking, are Gethyn Edwards and Julia Grundy.

Tanika Gupta's play explores the parallel relationships and experiences of four main characters - Queen Victoria and her servant Abdul Karim; and Rani Das, an Indian ayah and Hari, a lascar sailor. Spanning thirteen years over the ‘Golden Era’ of Empire, this story also blends the experiences of Indian ayahs and the lascars who worked on the ships carrying trade goods, alongside the story of Dadabhai Naoroji, the first Indian politician to be elected as a Member of Parliament. This epic tale reveals how socially diverse and complex the Asian presence was in nineteenth century Britain.

**Settings and Props**

The thrust portion of the Swan Theatre’s stage extends into the audience, with seating on three sides, and diagonal walkways stretching from the front left and right corners of the stage.

The back portion of the stage lies through a high, proscenium-like opening of bare brickwork.

The front and back halves of the stage are also separated by an enormous ring that frames the large opening. It extends to the full height and width of the performance space, has an antique, frosted-glass quality to it and is actually illuminated from within. It changes colour constantly throughout the play to help build and enhance the mood of the various scenes. At times it’s the gently rippling blue of the sea or the electric lightning flashes of a storm; at other times it becomes purple, or a cool silver grey or the rippling oranges and reds of dancing flames. Its design is intended to evoke a range of qualities – including a sense of the compass, community, collectiveness, connected-ness and journeys across the globe.

As well as being split front and back, the action is also divided vertically.

A mezzanine level, roughly ten feet off the stage, runs along the back wall and a square platform is built out towards us from its centre over the rear half of the stage, supported on straight wooden legs. This front platform is accessed from the stage by a wrought iron spiral staircase to its right. A tall ladder rises straight up from the stage to the left of the platform, leading out of sight high above.

Although other characters do appear there now and then, the mezzanine level is mostly where the activities of Queen Victoria and her household take place, with everyone else living out their lives on the stage below. Additionally - at this same, high level - there are square openings in the walls facing us, one to the left and right of the stage, each surrounded by substantial picture frames like something from a museum. Victoria and her lady-in-waiting appear in voids beyond these frames at various points in the play, seated in quiet conversation as the story unfolds on the stage below, creating an impression rather like living oil paintings.

The stage itself appears constructed of long, broad, dark brown boards like the deck of a ship. Indeed, at the start of the play, two lengths of ship’s rigging are tethered to the stage to the left and right, coming together as the apex of a triangle high above. There are two, six foot runs of square grilles to the centre-rear and -front of the thrust. Some of the grilles are hinged, and open like trapdoors as if into a ship’s hold.

A final feature is the low, secondary stage that can be rolled forward between the legs of the platform and functions as a smaller, self-contained interior set – open on the front and sides, with a curtained window, and sometimes gas lighting and framed pictures on its papered back wall. By turns, it serves as a captain’s cabin; as Lord Oakham’s study with a Persian carpet, desk and wooden chairs; as a parlour in an Ayah’s Home, furnished with wooden benches; and as Dadabhai Naoroji’s office with an armchair, steamer trunk and a desk cluttered with paperwork.

There are many props in this production, small and large. There are desks and elegant, dainty tables draped with fine tablecloths of patterned silk or of lace. Parlours and offices have chairs, formal and informal. The scenes on ship - at the opening of the play, and in Tilbury docks later on - are peppered with crates, barrels, ropes, luggage, lanterns, a canvas tarpaulin, strings of Union Jack bunting, even an entire elephant tusk. Lascar Sally’s boarding house adds tankards and beer bottles to the mix and Rani carries her meagre possessions with her in a faded red shoulder bag.

There are a matching pair of simple wooden steps – rather like a short, open-sided flight of stairs, the top step coming to around knee height - that are moved about by the cast in various scenes to act as impromptu furniture to be sat or stood upon. Offices have books and piles of papers; the Queen is served from a silver tea set and reads correspondence stored in a neat red box with a hinged lid; the life and bustle of India is evoked with a chai seller’s hand cart, piles of bright fabric, garlands of orange flowers, wide platters piled high with spices and other delicacies; a statue of a Hindu deity.

Towards the end of the play, Queen Victoria walks with a silver tipped, ebony cane or is pushed in a wooden, wheeled chair, a tartan blanket over her shoulders – and our last glimpse of the Queen is in a glass-sided, open coffin set on a wheeled table concealed by a skirt of white satin.

**Characters and costumes**

The story begins in the final years of the nineteenth century. Wealthy gentlemen wear frock coats, with cravats or ties. Their ladies’ silk dresses have tightly corseted bodices, and full skirts down to the floor. Working men wear heavy wool trousers with shirts or vests, and soft caps. Dresses are out of reach for poorer women; they wear blouses and skirts in wool or cotton, with shawls and scarves.

At the start of the story **Queen Victoria** has been on the throne for over fifty years and she sets the tone for the country, sober colours and sober behaviour, on the surface at least. The Queen is 67, four feet, eleven inches, with a rounded figure, corseted into her habitual dress of black silk glittering with jet, the clothes of widowhood that she had adopted ever since the death of her husband the Prince Consort many years before. Her face is slim, her eyes bright and shrewd, her grey hair parted down the centre and drawn back into a bun. A lace cap with a short veil, either white or black, perches on her head. For public appearances, a blue silk sash across her chest adds a splash of colour, along with diamond rings and insignia, and a glittering coronet. The Queen’s usual expression is humourless, not to say grumpy, but in private her face lights into unexpected smiles, with bursts of laughter, often to the surprise of her courtiers.

Her principal lady-in-waiting, **Lady Sarah**, is in her middle years, tall, with perfect deportment, looming alongside the Queen. Her chestnut hair is immaculately coiffed and her gaze severe. Her dress is of shimmering crimson silk, with a bustle and short train, far showier than Victoria’s. A brooch glitters on her breast, and a purse hangs from a gold belt at her waist as well as keys and a dainty watch. Outdoors she dons a velvet jacket.

**Abdul Karim**, has arrived on the ship from India, a gift from the Viceroy, intended to wait at table on the Queen. He’s a tall young man with chiselled features, and a neatly razored beard. He first appears, well-dressed in a long blue jacket over blue shalwar kameez and white leggings, with a scarlet turban. A crisply folded cream stole, with a delicate check pattern, falls over one shoulder. His correct manner and ingenuous smile are mixed with an air of quiet confidence. Finding favour with the Queen his clothes become ever more splendid, impressive in white and gold, or scarlet, adorned with the Queen’s VR insignia.

Another passenger on the incoming ship is **Rani Das**, a sixteen year old ayah to a homecoming British family. She has a fine-featured face, her dark eyes big with wonder and curiosity at all the new sights, ready at her mistress’s call with cheerful efficiency, darting with birdlike swiftness. Her glossy black hair is tied in a single plait down her back. She is tidily dressed in a white sari edged in green, her bare feet in sandals.

Rani is befriended by **Hari**, one of the lascars who crew the ship. He’s a little older than her, of medium height with a broad chest, and ruffled dark hair above an open face with stubble across his jaw. His engaging smile is all part of his generally cheerful demeanour. He’s dressed like the other lascars, in shabby blue linen tunic and loose white trousers.

The Hindu politician **Dadabhai Naoroji** is also a passenger. He’s in his sixties, a slim man with iron grey hair. His broad face is partially hidden under his long thick grey beard, and he wears round wire-rimmed spectacles. Naroaji dresses in a brown frock coat, waistcoat and trousers, with a silk cravat at his neck. The young lawyer **M K Gandhi** is in awe of the older man. Gandhi is slim with a bright eyes in a narrow face. His wavy black hair is cut short and he has a wispy moustache. He is smart in a three-piece light brown suit edged with crimson ribboning, and a cravat.

Arriving in London, the docks are filled with sailors, workmen, traders, and prostitutes. **Lascar** **Sally** is the proprietor of a boarding house cum brothel for the lascar sailors. She’s a slender woman with a slim face under a bird’s nest explosion of chestnut hair. She and her houseful of prostitutes leave nothing to the imagination, displaying in their underwear; skimpy chemises, corsets, bloomers and stockings. Shawls and scarves provide minimum cover. A swathe of scarlet patterned silk is stretched across Sally’s shoulders; it unfolds into a dressing down. When necessary Sally tones down her appearance, in a subdued blouse and skirt.

**Firoza** is another ayah, in her thirties, her black hair drawn back into a neat bun from her oval face with dark eyes and an easy smile. She has adopted western dress, a white blouse above a beige patterned skirt, a brown shawl drawn round her shoulders.

**Georgina**, smartly dressed and with her hair well-dressed is the brisk housekeeper to **Lord John Oakham**. Oakham is a well-built man of medium height, his mid-brown hair parted down the centre, with a full beard. In his study, he wears black waistcoat and trousers over a full white shirt.

The **Lascar sailors** all wear the same uniform, faded and worn blue linen tunics with a narrow white zig zag pattern across the chest and back, tied with belts at the waist. Their loose white trousers are grubby and creased. They wear round caps, shabby turbans or strips of fabric wrapped round their heads. The Lascars are controlled by the **Serang**, a brutal, angry man; stocky and broad-chested with a shaven head. His clothes are smarter, and he enforces discipline with a heavy stick.

The European sailors on board are better treated and better dressed, in uniform of blue tunics with square collars above wide bellbottom trousers.

Among the others characters are, **Mrs Susan Matthews**, Rani’s employer, a small neat, smartly-dressed lady with an imperious gaze. **William**, **Mary** and **Charlotte** are philanthropists and supporters of Dadabhai Naoroji. They are all dressed in sober black. Young politician **Jinnah** is of medium height with an open face. He wears a dark suit and the black astrakhan hat that would become symbolic of his appearance in later years. The portrait painter **Rudolf Swoboda** has a full beard. Rani’s daughter **Asha** is a teenager with wavy black hair and a rounded face.

All other parts, including palace servants, ship’s passengers, soldiers, sailors, prostitutes, ayahs and Londoners are played by members of the cast.

**Cast and Creatives**

Queen Victoria is played by **Alexandra Gilbreath**, and her lady-in-waiting, Lady Sarah, by **Francesca Faridany**.

Queen Victoria’s Hindu companion and teacher, known as The Munshi, Abdul Karim, is played by **Raj Bajaj**.

Rani Das, a young ayah, is played by **Tanya Katyal** and Hari, the lascar sailor who befriends her, by **Aaron Gill**.

Other passengers on board the ship to England are politician Dadabhai Naoroji played by **Simon Rivers**, and young lawyer M K Gandhi by **Anish Roy**

In England Lord John Oakham is played by **Oliver Hembrough** and his housekeeper Georgina by **Miriam Grace Edwards**

LascarSally is played by **Nicola Stephenson** and **Firoza**,an ayah, by **Avita Jay.**

Lascar sailors are played by, **Joe Usher, Nicola Stephenson, Anyebe Godwin, Premi Tamang,** and **Anish Roy**;the **Serang** is playedby **Anyebe Godwin.**

Mrs Susan Matthews is played by **Sarah Moyle.**

William, Mary and Charlotte are played by **Oliver Hembrough**, **Sarah Moyle** and **Miriam Grace Edwards**

Jinnah is played by **Chris Nayak**, the painter Rudolf Swoboda by **Oliver Hembrough**, andRani’s daughter, Asha by **Lauren Patel**

All other parts are played by members of the company, including **Tom Milligan.**

The Designer is **Rosa Maggiora**

With Lighting by **Matt Haskins**

Music and Sound, **Ben** and **Max Ringham**

Movement **Wayne Parsons**

Fights and Intimacy **Rachel Bown-Williams** and **Ruth Cooper-Brown**

Music Director **Hinal Pattani**

Voice & Dialect **Gurkiran Kaur**

And the Director is **Pooja Ghai**

**A Synopsis of the play**

Sixteen year old Rani Das is travelling to England on a boat from India, looking after the children of an English family on the voyage. Her bright and caring personality is noticed and admired by a young lascar - Hari and by fellow travelers Abdul Karim and Dadabhai Naoroji. When they step off the boat at Tilbury docks Rani is cruelly dismissed by her employers. Distraught, she seeks comfort with Hari and takes shelter from the streets of London with him in a boarding house run by Lascar Sally. Early next morning, Rani leaves Lascar Sally’s and Hari desperately searches for her, to no avail. Hari is forced to fulfil his contract with the clan line and reluctantly sets sail to work on trade ships transporting goods across the Empire.

Interspersed with Rani's story, the play follows the relationship between Abdul Karim and Queen Victoria. When Abdul steps off the boat he is destined to serve the Queen as a breakfast waiter, but an unusual friendship develops between the pair. Abdul becomes Victoria’s closest confidante and she gradually elevates his position to that of Munshi (teacher). This growing friendship is closely scrutinised by a horrified Lady Sarah and members of the Queen's Court.

Destitute and alone, Rani heads to the docks to try and beg passage back to India where she meets the eccentric and highly experienced ayah – Firoza. Following Firoza’s advice, Rani touts her domestic servant's wares and eventually gets the attention of a housekeeper – Georgina, who employs her as an ayah for Lord and Lady Oakham. At first, Rani looks as if she has landed on her feet, until she meets Lord Oakham who takes advantage of her. Rani falls pregnant with Lord Oakham’s child and is unceremoniously thrown out of the house – destitute and alone on the streets of London once more. Fortunately, Firoza and Lascar Sally find her and give her and her baby shelter.

Aldgate, Home for Ayahs, 1891. While boarding in the home for ayahs Rani meets Dadabhai Naoroji again. Far from the Rani he first met on the ship, now she has a child - Asha, and has educated herself. She tells Dadabhai that she wants to support his campaign to be elected to parliament. Dadabhai employs Rani as his assistant and the two become as close as father and daughter. In 1892 Dadabhai is elected to be the first Indian member of Parliament representing the constituency of Finsbury.

Never forgetting Rani, Hari learns to read and write and writes to the only address he has for her, Lascar Sally's. We see Hari’s journey across the globe, working on the ships which carry cargo between the British colonies. He is badly treated by the English Captains and becomes a leader of the disabused lascars. Through a chain of characters Hari's letters finally reach Rani.

Rani and Dabadhai stand at Tilbury docks ready to board the ship to India. Abdul Karim boards the ship, dismissed and returning home after the death of his royal companion.

Reunited with Hari, Rani does not board the ship. After 13 years separated by oceans connected only by thoughts of one another, Rani, Hari and Asha start a new chapter in their epic story, waving off the ship from the gangways of the docks.

That concludes this audio introduction to **The Empress**.

To request audio notes to future RSC productions, please call 01789 331275 or email [access@rsc.org.uk](mailto:access@rsc.org.uk)