

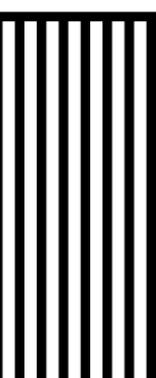


GUARDS AT THE TAJ

BY RAJIV JOSEPH



DRAMATISTS
PLAY SERVICE
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The world premiere of GUARDS AT THE TAJ was presented by Atlantic Theater Company (Neil Pepe, Artistic Director; Jeffory Lawson, Managing Director) in New York City, opening on June 11, 2015. It was directed by Amy Morton; the set design was by Timothy R. Mackabee; the costume design was by Bobby Frederick Tilley II; the lighting design was by David Weiner; and the original music and sound design was by Rob Milburn and Michael Bodeen. The cast was as follows:

HUMAYUN Omar Metwally
BABUR Arian Moayed

GUARDS AT THE TAJ was developed at the Lark Play Development Center, New York City.

CHARACTERS

HUMAYUN

BABUR

PLACE

Agra, India

TIME

1648

Note: Actors should not use a dialect.

GUARDS AT THE TAJ

Scene 1

Agra, India. 1648. Night. Humayun, a young Imperial Guard, stands watch. Brilliant stars dot the sky, but there is no moon. Crickets chirp. The distant call of a crazed bird. Otherwise, silence.

Another guard, Babur, hurriedly enters, very much disheveled, late to his post. He awkwardly sets up in guard position a few feet away from Humayun, trying to get properly dressed. Humayun doesn't move — but he's clearly irritated by Babur.

Finally Babur is set. He stands at attention like Humayun.

HUMAYUN. Wrong hand. *(Babur switches his sword to the proper hand, holding the blade perfectly upright, against his body. A long beat. They stand guard. Crickets. The same crazy bird calls out. Aaarixah!)*

BABUR. *(Imitates.)* Aaarixah!

HUMAYUN. Shhhh!

BABUR. Which one is that?

HUMAYUN. Shhhh! *(Crazed bird again. Aaarixah!)*

BABUR. I don't know them like you know them. The birds. Which bird is that one? Chickadee? Sandgrouse? Thick-knee?

HUMAYUN. Shut up!

BABUR. You always know the birds, I don't know any birds or —

HUMAYUN. Would you be quiet?!

BABUR. I'm just saying ...

HUMAYUN. "Imperial Guards of the Great Walled City of Agra, Sworn to the Eternal Dominion of His Most Supreme Benevolence Emperor Shah Jahan ... *Do Not Speak.*"

BABUR. You just spoke.

HUMAYUN. "Among the Sacred Oaths of the Mughal Imperial Guard Is to *Never Speak*."

BABUR. You keep talking about not talking.

HUMAYUN. "In silence, we are vigilant."

BABUR. Swearing an oath to Not Speak: *contradiction!*

HUMAYUN. Babur! Stop! You have to be careful!

BABUR. Okay!

HUMAYUN. I'm serious!

BABUR. Okay.

HUMAYUN. They'll release us from this Honored Fleet without a second thought! The tiniest of infractions will see us both gone, quick-stuffed to the lowliest gullies of Agra.

BABUR. You won't tell on me.

HUMAYUN. Well, I won't lie.

BABUR. Come on! We're brothers, you and me.

HUMAYUN. We're not brothers, we're just friends.

BABUR. That's insensitive. That makes me sad. I think of you as a brother. As a bhai. You call me bhai. I call you bhai.

HUMAYUN. Don't make me lose my job.

BABUR. Hah! You?! And who is your father? Only simply the highest of high command in the All-On-High Imperial Guard.

HUMAYUN. My father yearns for my defeat. Always has. You know him.

BABUR. Sons are sons. Fathers are fathers. And one day you'll be Chief Top Boss-Man of the Imperial Guard just like him.

HUMAYUN. That will never happen. He thinks I'm soft. Stop talking. Stand guard. (*Beat. Other bird sounds. Then quiet.*)

BABUR. You know what I wonder about?

HUMAYUN. No. Shut up.

BABUR. I was wondering ... When will we get to guard the Imperial Harem?

HUMAYUN. Ha.

BABUR. I'm serious, when?

HUMAYUN. Guards of the Imperial Harem are tip-top guards. Seniority. Best position in the fleet. We are not tip-top. We get the Dawn Watch. We'll both be gray and toothless before they let us guard the Harem.

BABUR. But your father ... maybe he could ...

HUMAYUN. That will never happen.

BABUR. Never?

HUMAYUN. Absolutely never. (*Beat.*)

BABUR. Man, I want to see the Harem.

HUMAYUN. It's supposed to be pretty boring.

BABUR. (*Skeptical.*) *Really.*

HUMAYUN. It's not so salacious a venue as the gossip would have you think.

BABUR. It's a *Harem*.

HUMAYUN. It's a government department, like any other office. It's where the emperor does his most confidential work. Thus, only the Mahaldar, the concubines, and eunuchs are allowed within the walls ... and the two most trusted Imperial Guards who are, decidedly, *not us*.

BABUR. (*Marveling.*) But I mean ... Surrounded by naked women!

HUMAYUN. It's not like that!

BABUR. Okay.

HUMAYUN. It's not some depraved house of sluts!

BABUR. Okay.

HUMAYUN. It's not some hotbed of wanton lust!

BABUR. *Okay.*

HUMAYUN. It's just ... You know ... A place the Emperor goes ... to work. (*Beat; both guys imagine what goes on in the Harem. Humayun clears his throat.*) Let's stand guard.

BABUR. Okay. (*They stand guard. Babur starts thrusting his pelvis, slowly, but gaining in force and eros.*) Harem ... Duty ... Harem ... Duty ...

HUMAYUN. Stop. STOP! Babur, that's messed up, man, stop it! (*Babur stops.*)

BABUR. I want to see that Harem before I die.

HUMAYUN. Well, you can improve your chances by showing up on time and shutting your seditious mouth.

BABUR. "Seditious"?

HUMAYUN. You heard me.

BABUR. How is that *seditious*?

HUMAYUN. It just is.

BABUR. I was making a joke.

HUMAYUN. Mild sedition.

BABUR. *Mild?* According to who?

HUMAYUN. According to the King! If you had paid attention in training, you would know that sedition is recognized at three levels in accordance with His Most Supreme and Benevolent Monarch. You just made a humorous commentary at the expense of the King's

most beloved bureaucratic office. Punishment for Mild Sediton: 40 lashes with a whip and a shaved head. Yes. And Medium Sediton carries a sentence of blinding. Extreme Sediton: Being sewn into the hide of a water buffalo and left in the sun for seven days. And in the case of Treason: Death by elephant. All of which is to say, Babur, *shut up*. Imperial Guards are Not To Speak!

BABUR. Okay! (*They stand guard. The crazed bird calls out again, although maybe a little less crazed. Aaarixah ...*)

HUMAYUN. Red-breasted jibjab. That's what it is. The bird.

BABUR. Ah! You're good, Huma.

HUMAYUN. Now please. Quiet. (*Long beat.*)

BABUR. Huma? Do you ever wonder ...

HUMAYUN. No.

BABUR. All these celestial luminations that mark our sky ...

HUMAYUN. What of them?

BABUR. The stars: What are they?

HUMAYUN. Determinations of our fates and futures.

BABUR. But what ARE they? Are they like fires in the distance? And if so, if you get closer to them, do they become, you know, brighter and hotter? And if so, how far away are they exactly? In the mountains you can determine the closeness of a point, but in the sky, there are no such methods of orientation. (*Long beat.*) Humayun. Humayun. Humayun. Humayun.

HUMAYUN. WHAT?

BABUR. One day? Thousands of years from now? I bet there will be a sort of palanquin that can soar into the stars like some giant bird.

HUMAYUN. A giant palanquin bird.

BABUR. Yeah.

HUMAYUN. Palanquins are for women.

BABUR. Not this one. This one will be for everyone. Except, rather than men, or elephants, this will be carried by some unfound-as-of-yet force — up to the stars! And in this palanquin, one might track those little fires in the sky.

HUMAYUN. You and your fantasies.

BABUR. Not fantasies; predictions. And you like them. You've always liked them.

HUMAYUN. Fairy tales for children. Not Imperial Guards.

BABUR. And this flying palanquin will be fast. Faster than any horse, or any bird. *Tuff-tuff! Tuff-tuff! Fast!* You understand, Huma? And, so, *tuff-tuff*, you will be able to get closer to those fires in the sky.

HUMAYUN. And then?

BABUR. They must be leading us somewhere. If they are determinations of our fates, then they must be arranged by some grand conspirator.

HUMAYUN. Allah.

BABUR. Yeah. Allah.

HUMAYUN. Allahu Akbar.

BABUR. Yeah. Sure. But something else, too, right?

HUMAYUN. Blasphemy. Come on, don't say that.

BABUR. It's only something I wonder about.

HUMAYUN. It's not meant for us to know.

BABUR. But maybe it is! If there is something to see and, therefore, something to think about, and therefore something to wonder about ... then there's something to go towards.

HUMAYUN. Like a moth to a candle or a tiger to a trap.

BABUR. No.

HUMAYUN. Then what.

BABUR. I think God wants us to learn more and more things. I mean ... Look what is about to be revealed behind us!

HUMAYUN. No. Don't. Don't look. Imperial Guards are Not To Move.

BABUR. They say it will be the most beautiful thing in the world.

HUMAYUN. Yes, well, His Supreme Highness has specified that it *should* be, and so it *will* be.

BABUR. What do you think it will look like? (*Beat.*)

HUMAYUN. They say it's white.

BABUR. Yeah, but just white? Is it skinny? Is it fat? I mean, what shape will it be? All we know are those protective walls that have hidden it these past 16 years.

HUMAYUN. The city within the city.

BABUR. It's crazy! 16 years in the making! Since we were kids, they've been building this! And yet we have no idea what it will look like! Because within the walls, where Tajmahal is built: Another city, a secret one, with strange men who have lived a different life than anyone else!

HUMAYUN. His Most Supreme Emperor Shah Jahan decreed that no one shall see it until it is fully completed.

BABUR. But *why*?

HUMAYUN. There need not be a reason, it is a Royal Decree! *The construction of Tajmahal is not to be seen by anyone except the masons, laborers, and slaves who exist within those walls.*

GUARDS AT THE TAJ

by Rajiv Joseph

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In 1648 India, two Imperial Guards watch from their post as the sun rises for the first time on the newly-completed Taj Mahal — an event that shakes their respective worlds. When they are ordered to perform an unthinkable task, the aftermath forces them to question the concepts of friendship, beauty, and duty, and changes them forever.

“Absorbing ... GUARDS AT THE TAJ raises potent questions about the human price paid throughout history for the caprices of the mighty, even when they result in architectural wonders that ultimately give pleasure to the masses.”

—**The New York Times**

“In his strikingly original drama GUARDS AT THE TAJ, Rajiv Joseph entrusts the romantic legend of the Taj Mahal to two lowly palace guards. Meanwhile, the playwright’s amusingly anachronistic idiom ... keeps us entertained — and totally unprepared for some shocking plot turns.”

—**The New Yorker**

“Rajiv Joseph gives us plenty to admire in his play ... He hooks us quickly. He surprises with tonal shifts, jumping from The Odd Couple breezy to Game of Thrones ghastly. He creates compelling and sympathetic characters.”

—**New York Daily News**

“Beauty doesn’t come easily in Rajiv Joseph’s wildly unsettling GUARDS AT THE TAJ. Things begin comfortably ... By its second scene, GUARDS has veered savagely from its funny, gently puzzled, Waiting for Godot-ish beginnings into grotesque brutality, inspired by a legend of the Taj Mahal’s creation: Imagine Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead as written by Martin McDonagh, then add a whole lot more blood.”

—**Time Out New York**

Also by Rajiv Joseph

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