Reviews:Theatre

Relocated merchant has joy and insight

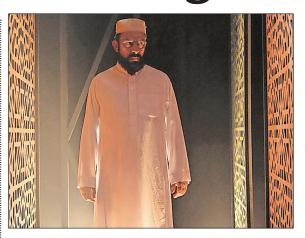
THE MERCHANT OF VEMBLEY COCKPIT THEATRE

ased on The Merchant of Venice Shishir Kurup's play in suitable iambic pentameters has been relocated to Wembley's Hindu community with remarkable success.

Jeetendra a Bollywood Star wants to marry his producer's daughter Pushpa who has been left an enormous fortune by her late father. Although she has resisted arranged marriage she is respecting his wishes to marry the man who will correctly chose one of three boxes

Jeetendra's friend Davendra will back his new film but must borrow the money as his ships have yet to come in. His businesses are doing well but he cannot put his hands on the cash. So he goes to Sharuk – a Muslim money lender who has just lost his beautiful daughter Noori when she eloped with an African. He is disgusted when he learns she has doffed her traditional dress in favour of a pink wig, fishnets and a miniskirt.

Sharuk makes Davendra sign



■ Emilio Doorgashingh as Sharuk picture: Shyamantha Asokan

a contract saying that if he cannot pay the money back he will forfeit a pound of flesh not from his heart but from a more intimate body part – making him unable to father non Muslims.

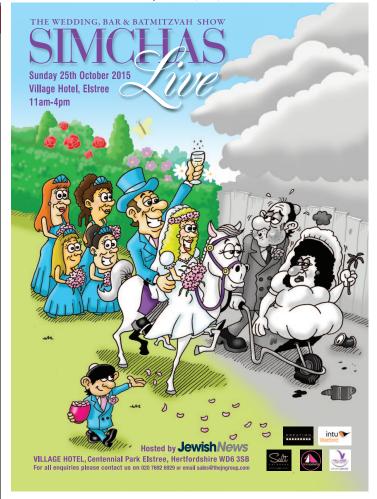
The title sounds like a comedy and indeed the first act is full of riotous humour. The drama lies in the second act and illustrates the hatred of Sharuk the Muslim and his desire for what he thinks of righteous revenge. As a minority group he says the more they were

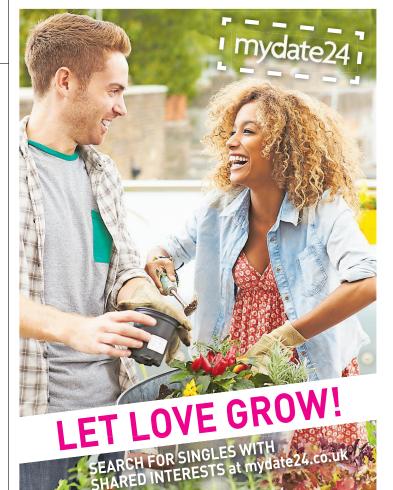
denigrated, the more extreme would be the vengeance.

The surprise of the evening is an enlightening, heartbreaking speech by Kavita, Pushpa's friend arguing for greater understanding between genders and religions, and espousing the Hindu faith's tenet of unconditional compassion.

An imaginative and unusual set blends a film of busy London with Asian carved screens, in Ajay Chowdhury distinctively directed show.

Aline Waites





A whimsical star vehicle

FARINELLI AND THE KING
DUKE OF YORK'S THEATRE

Make opera, not war. So urges composer-turned-playwright Claire van Kampen's featherweight historical star vehicle, elevated by husband Mark Rylance – in a tailored role showcasing his beguiling idiosyncrasies – and John Dove's sumptuous production.

Dove's Sumptuous production.
Rylance is 18th-century
Philippe V of Spain, whose
reign is threatened by
rumblings of war, an abdication
plot, and his descent into
debilitating depression. But
wife Isabella hopes celebrated
castrato Farinelli might restore
the king's spirits and sanity.
Though inspired by

Though inspired by real events, van Kampen's whimsical piece offers a reductive view of music therapy as magic cure for bipolar Philippe. More interesting, though bluntly spelled out, is the parallel between the "unnaturally" created sovereign and singer (whose ambitious brother butchered his genitals).



■ Mark Rylance as Philippe V of Spain picture: Simon Annand

Trapped by the greatness thrust upon them, the pair escape their fishbowl – yes, there's also a literal fishbowl – and return to nature

to nature.

The play's fascination
with oppositions – public
and private, court and forest,
power and helplessness, agony
and ecstasy – makes a virtue
of Farinelli's dissociative
portrayal, with Sam Crane the
mournful man and countertenor lestyn Davies his divine
voice. Davies' hypnotic arias
communicate more effectively
than words the soul-stirring
power of music. Truly "art for
all", though that exhortation
lands more ironically in the
pricey West End than at the

Rylance's mercurial monarch is at once petulant, threatening, listless and giddily impulsive, tormenting Melody Grove's steadfast carer Isabella. However, there's richer exploration of that dynamic up the road in The Father; here, it swerves into romantic melodrama. The intersection of medicine and faith is thinly sketched, as are most supporting characters, though Colin Hurley's grumpy librettist amuses.

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If not deeply illuminating, it is exquisitely candlelit, casting flickering shadows over Jonathan Frensom's brocade frock coats and oppressive regal portraits. Lavish but limited.

Marianka Swain