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THE INDEPENDENT

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Babel, Sadler's Wells, London Political Mother, Dome, Brighton The Merchants of Bollywood, Peacock Theatre, London

By Reviewed by Jenny Gilbert

'Babel' has drive, dazzle and laughs, but more editing is called for in this melée of words, music and movement

According to the book of Genesis, when God decided the Babylonians were getting above themselves, he "confused their languages and scattered the people throughout the earth".

The verbal fallout of that punishment is the subject of Babel, the latest from Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui, whose own mixed heritage (Flemish/Moroccan, Roman Catholic and Muslim) gives him an inside view. The piece is a first commission from the Dash Arabic Series, set up to promote Arab/Western understanding.

As you'd expect, Babel is not a thing of quiet contemplation, but of wild gesticulation and competitive jabber. Organised as a series of sketches - some spoken, some purely physical - it ranges far and wide with mock lectures on neuroscience and sardonic observations on cultural imperialism. English is obviously the "best" language, a slick New York real-estate salesman informs us, because it's got the most adverbs, while a long-haired Frenchman waxes lyrical about the lingo of love and romance, morphing comically back and forth between grunting Cro-Magnon man and Paris sophisticate. Some of this is very funny, some of it tries too hard, but the whole thing cries out for sharper editing. Similarly with the movement, with too much pell-mell rushing about.

Yet the best ideas are dazzling: a frieze of interleaved bodies, heads and arms angled just so; a slo-mo brawl, performed to unaccompanied song; a kooky set piece from the porn-doll-like Ulrika Kinn Svensson, whose po-faced lecture about the death of eloquence is accompanied by an exquisite hand ballet of steely precision and hummingbird delicacy. Yet this performer is so over-used in the course of 90 minutes that you end up wanting to throttle her.

All these faults can be fixed by the time Babel returns to Sadler's Wells (as it surely will). What's unimpeachable is the contribution of artist Antony Gormley: five glinting steel frames which, manipulated by the dancers like giant dice, tilt into place as buildings (that Tower of Babel), prisons and Venn diagrams, herding the per

formers into overlapping groups. Just as pitch-perfect is the onstage music, a living Babel of medieval, north African and Japanese influences.

And lo, hot on the tail of this Arab-tinged diversity-fest comes the Israeli view, in a major new work from Hofesh Shechter at the Brighton Festival. Its title, Political Mother, isn't giving much away, but political

this surely is - more powerfully, if obliquely, than any of Shechter's earlier hits (and that includes the riveting Uprising, which presented the modern male as a creature of dangerous pack-instinct).

Again, live music is central to the experience, and at times on Thursday's opening night proved too much for some, overwhelmed by the five onstage electric guitars, heavy-metal vocal rant and five drummers at full thrash. Those delicate souls should have sat it out, though, because the volume was not gratuitous, it was part and parcel.

Apocalyptic is a word too loosely used these days, but the 65-minute vortex that is Political Mother left this critic shaking. Like all the best art, trying to pin down a single precise meaning can only diminish it, but this is clearly about war - any war, all war - and the blinding, relationship-splintering impact of it on ordinary human lives. In terms of movement, the "Shechter scuttle" is out in force, both sexes crouched and twitchy like hobgoblins, then breaking loose in muscular circle dances like wild-eyed revellers, though the dominant emotion (whether triumph, or terror, or sense-blotted numbness) is impossible to pin down.

Suffice to say that Political Mother contains sounds and images that are truly terrifying, both of themselves and in what they portend. As Newsnight commented in a TV item that same evening: Hofesh Shechter looks set to do for dance what the YBAs did for art, which is to propel it from an élite periphery into the mainstream, and connect it with a younger audience. And I say aye to that.

The potential meltdown of the human race couldn't be further removed from The Merchants of Bollywood, for which the burning question is: can Mumbai's answer to Cheryl Cole make it back to Rajasthan to make peace with her dying grandpa and marry her childhood sweetheart, who she'd somehow forgotten about in the course of becoming a rich and famous Bollywood producer? Of course she can, though it takes a riot of hyperactive chorus numbers to get her there. Don't expect subtlety from this Mumbai pantomime: it's big on energy, sequins, and the colour pink.

'Political Mother': Sadler's Wells (0844 412 4300) 14-17 July; 'The Merchants of Bollywood': Peacock Theatre (0844 412 4300) continues to 5 June.

Next Week:

Jenny Gilbert prepares to get spaced as Rambert revives the late Merce Cunningham's spirit-of-the-Sixties *Rainforest*, complete with helium-balloon designs by Andy Warhol

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