

3.5

Presented by **Stephen House**

Reviewed 1 December 2021

In this world premiere, this poetic one-man show leads its audience on a reflective, unpredictable and often harrowing journey into a dangerously beautiful, hidden New Delhi world.

The audience is introduced to the show's protagonist on stage as calm Indian music plays in the background, similar to what you might hear in a hippy yoga studio as the clientele relax into their savasana pose. We learn that this protagonist is a current resident at the Ajoona Guest House; an Indian back-lane guest house inhabited with colourful characters whose stories we soon dive into. In our protagonist's words, "the place is bit of a dump, but it has cheap rates and a lot of character", and this description could also work for those housed inside.

As the narrative continues, the audience is teased with little drops of information here and there regarding both the protagonist's and other house guests' past lives. Drugs, sex and happiness seemed to fill their younger years while working as extras in Bombay for the Bollywood film industry. With age, their worlds have changed, and now, although drugs and sex are still involved, the most important element – happiness – seems to be missing. While some prostitute themselves for money in order to buy 'brown sugar' heroin that is destroying their bodies, others, such as our protagonist, try to steer away from that life, but is it truly something he can escape?

This work was created and performed by award-winning playwright, poet and actor, Stephen House, who was inspired by his time in India. An early draft was written while House was on his Asialink Literature Residency several years ago. As can be seen in his works, he tends to focus on those living on the edges of society, and the voices often un-heard and stories often un-told, and tends to perform solo, embodying the many characters in his narratives himself.

The Ajoona Guest House is the final play in a trilogy of stand-alone monologues that House has created in cities around the world. It follows his widely seen and highly acclaimed *Appalling Behaviour*, a journey into the dirty alleyways and lost

soul-filled world of the homeless in Paris, and *Almost Face to Face*, a darkly funny and brutal journey into an underworld of Dublin.

The audience is sure to admit finding similarities in the beginning of **The Ajoona Guest House** to the beloved, light-hearted film, *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*, but, as the production progresses, the differences between the two become more striking. Despite both narratives focusing on Westerners of an older generation staying together at a somewhat dilapidated, but still charming, accommodation in exotic India, these characters head down very different life paths.

House's production also delves into some of the darker elements within Indian society, similar to that seen within *Slumdog Millionaire*. In one scene, the audience discovers that a small young girl with a scarred face, who had been taken under the wing of the protagonist, had in fact been purposefully maimed with acid when she was a baby so she could be a more effective street beggar. In another horrifying scene, the protagonist describes a drug-dealer's den in which a diseased street dog licks the face and mouth of a dirt-covered baby as it plays calmly next to a potentially dead body.

The set is nothing more than a black stage with black walls, a black box towards the back of the small stage, a couple of red silk saris, and a bowl of water (utilised in the beginning for a type of religious act). As you can tell, there isn't much, but that's so all eyes can be firmly set on House and his character-shifting form (under the direction of renowned SA director, Rosalba Clemente) of storytelling. This extremely simple set design also provides the audience with a black, blank canvas upon which they can project their own imaginative world, guided by House's descriptive sentences.

The Ajoona Guest House is a bit of a slow burner, plus you have the bare set, so it is recommended that you go in with your attention at the ready and imagination ready to be utilised. Once in House's Indian world, although filled with rather horrifying scenes and actions, it's hard to step away from. Where others have failed in performing a one-man show, House succeeds with his fascinating narrative, engaging acting, successful embodiment of multiple characters and obvious stage confidence – this is where he belongs.

Reviewed by **Georgina Smerd**

Bookings: <https://www.trybooking.com/events/landing?eid=824827&>

Rating out of 5: 3.5