

SEPTEMBER 26 - NOVEMBER 4, 2018 | STIEMKE STUDIO

Play
Guide

GUARDS at THE TAJ

By **Rajiv Joseph** | Directed by **Brent Hazelton**

The Stiemke Studio Season is presented by: **Ed Seaberg
& Patrick Smith, Four-Four Foundation, Inc.**

Executive Producer:
Robert Burrell

Photos of actors courtesy of The Atlantic Theater Company's world premiere production of *Guards at the Taj* directed by Amy Morton. Left to right: Omar Metwally and Arian Moayed. Photo by Doug Hamilton.

The Rep
MILWAUKEE
65TH ANNIVERSARY

www.MilwaukeeRep.com | 414-224-9490

SEPTEMBER 26 - NOVEMBER 4, 2018 | STIEMKE STUDIO

GUARDS at THE TAJ

By **Rajiv Joseph**
Directed by **Brent Hazelton**

Play
Guide



Mark Clements
ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

Chad Bauman
MANAGING DIRECTOR



PLAYGUIDE WRITTEN BY
Lindsey Hoel-Neds
Content Writer

Auburn Matson
Contributing Writer

PLAYGUIDE EDITED BY
Jenny Toutant
Education Director

Auburn Matson
Education Administrator

Lisa Fulton
Chief Marketing Officer

GRAPHIC DESIGN
Jeff Meyer

Table of Contents

<i>Brief Summary.....</i>	3
<i>Creative Team.....</i>	3
<i>Characters.....</i>	3
<i>Taj Mahal: Beauty Beyond Compare</i>	4
<i>Taj Mahal: The Legends Behind the Landmark</i>	5
<i>Taj Mahal and Guards at the Taj.....</i>	6
<i>Imperial India: A Brief History of the Mughal Empire</i>	7
<i>Glossary.....</i>	8
<i>Playwright Rajiv Joseph on Guards at the Taj.....</i>	9
<i>Featured Artist: Jef Ouwens.....</i>	10
<i>About Our Production.....</i>	11
<i>Resources.....</i>	12

This production contains blood, violence and brief partial nudity. **It is recommended for ages 12 and up.**

BRIEF SUMMARY

Guards at the Taj follows several days in the lives of two imperial guards in Agra, India in 1648. Humayan and Babur are the night guards for the Taj Mahal before it is unveiled to the world. The two of them are not allowed to gaze upon its beauty, only guard it with their backs turned towards the towering edifice. The two lifelong friends spend their nights bantering, dreaming, and scheming about what more their lives could be. They both hope for more standing, more impressive roles within the imperial guard. They are offered a way up the ranks, but the ramifications of their actions may haunt them forever.

This play explores the limits of the human spirit, the lengths we will go to for greatness, the strength and fragility of friendship, and the power and peril of beauty and its destruction.

CHARACTERS



Yousof Sultani

Humayan is the son of the leader of the Imperial Guard and he longs to make his father proud and rise in the ranks. Humayan is the more practical of the two men, believing in the realities of their lives and the things they must do to change their circumstances. He is often the more responsible of the two friends, looking out for Babur and caring for him when he struggles.



Owa'is Azeem

Babur is an idealist, a man who serves in the guard, but questions everything. He is contemplative and introspective, and these qualities make him wonder why he does what he does and what costs he must pay for greatness. He struggles to find purpose in his role and longs for beauty and more than his life has afforded him. He is less mature than Humayan and feels less duty-bound to his role.

CREATIVE TEAM



Rajiv Joseph
Playwright



Brent Hazelton
Director

Scott Davis
Scenic Designer

Alison Siple
Costume Designer

Noele Stollmack
Lighting Designer

Barry G. Funderburg
Sound Designer & Composer

Blake Dava
Fight Director / Captain

Prasenjit Neel Guptasarma
Dramaturg

Frank Honts
Casting Director

Richelle Harrington Calin
Stage Manager

Kira Neighbors
Stage Management Fellow

BEYOND BEAUTY Taj Mahal COMPARE

Agra, India

Agra is a city in western Uttar Pradesh state in northern India. Agra is best known as the site of the Taj Mahal, the visual centerpiece for *Guards at the Taj*. Agra served as the Mughal capital during several periods of the empire. Agra is the home to many important cultural sites such as the Taj Mahal, the Agra Fort, Pearl Mosque, and the Great Mosque.



Taj Mahal

The Taj Mahal is the setting of *Guards at the Taj* and the inspiration for Rajiv Joseph's play. Taj Mahal was built between the years of 1631 and 1648 by 20,000 artisans and the main architect, Ustad-Ahmad Lahori. Shah Jahan, Mughal Emperor, built it as a mausoleum for his favorite wife, whom he called "Mumatz Mahal" or "Chosen One of the Palace."

Mumatz Mahal died after the birth of their fourteenth child, while traveling with her husband as he went out with his armies to subdue a rebellion. Legend says that with her dying breath Mumatz Mahal secured a promise from her husband that he would build her a mausoleum more beautiful than any the world had seen before. Shah Jahan set out to create just that for his dearly departed wife.

Over the next sixteen years, over 20,000 stonecutters, garden designers, sculptors, inlay artisans, dome designers, masons, calligraphers, and laborers worked to create the striking tribute to a fallen empress. The end result was something that is described in the play as "the most beautiful thing in the history of everything that has ever existed."

"The Taj, as an experience, is simply an extraordinary building," says art historian Milo Beach. "The proportion of the Taj, the workmanship of the Taj, the effect of the Taj in the landscape of the garden, the effect of light playing over the surface of white marble . . . From every angle, the Taj is a building of extraordinary physical balance. Whether you know anything about India or Indian architecture at all, it's a beautifully crafted building."

"The Taj is the synthesis of many religions, many architectural forms, many artistic traditions," says art historian Shobita Punja. "That's why it's so perfect. It's a symbol of perfect love and of great beauty."

Today, millions of people visit the Taj Mahal every year and it is considered one of the world's greatest wonders. In 1983, UNESCO named the Taj Mahal a World Heritage Site.



Photo Credit: Patricia Alberth, UNESCO.



Photo Credit: PBS.

mahal



The Black Taj

Legend speculates that Shah Jahan built a Black Taj for his own mausoleum as a foil to the gleaming white Taj Mahal built for his late wife. The stories suppose that the Black Taj was built across the river from the original Taj Mahal and the two buildings were connected by a bridge. Hers was a symbol of love, his a symbol of his pain in mourning. Archaeologists and scholars have refuted the existence of this legendary structure.

40,000 Hands

Another pervasive legend about the Taj Mahal is the story of the 40,000 hands. Legends says that Shah Jahan so wanted Taj Mahal to be the most beautiful thing in the world that he would not allow the artisans to create anything that could rival its beauty. His solution to this problem? Cut off the hands of all 20,000 artisans and workers who created the Taj Mahal. Again, historians have refuted this story.

The Poison Detector

The museum at the Taj Mahal displays dishes that are said to have poison detecting properties. The story goes that during the time of the Mughal emperors, the royal family was served their food on plates, bowls, and such that changed color if poison was present. These dishes do not exist.

Italian Architect

There was some speculation that an Italian named Geronimo Veroneo designed the Taj Mahal. While a man with that name lived in Agra for several years, all evidence indicates that he was simply an excellent jeweler who happened to live there at the time.

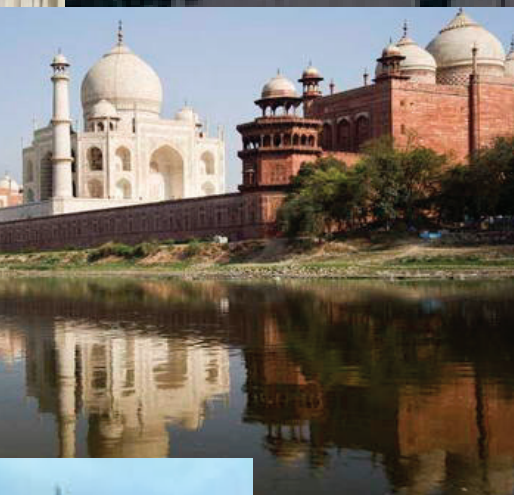


Photo Credit: Patricia Alberth, UNESCO.



THE LEGENDS BEHIND THE LANDMARK

Background image photo Credit: M>herin-Wiese, UNESCO.

Taj Mahal & GUARDS AT THE TAJ

While it may be evident from the title that the play *Guards at the Taj* centers on two Taj Mahal guards, the influence of the Taj Mahal on the play itself is larger than just the title.

Playwright, Rajiv Joseph, said of the Taj's influence on his development of this play:

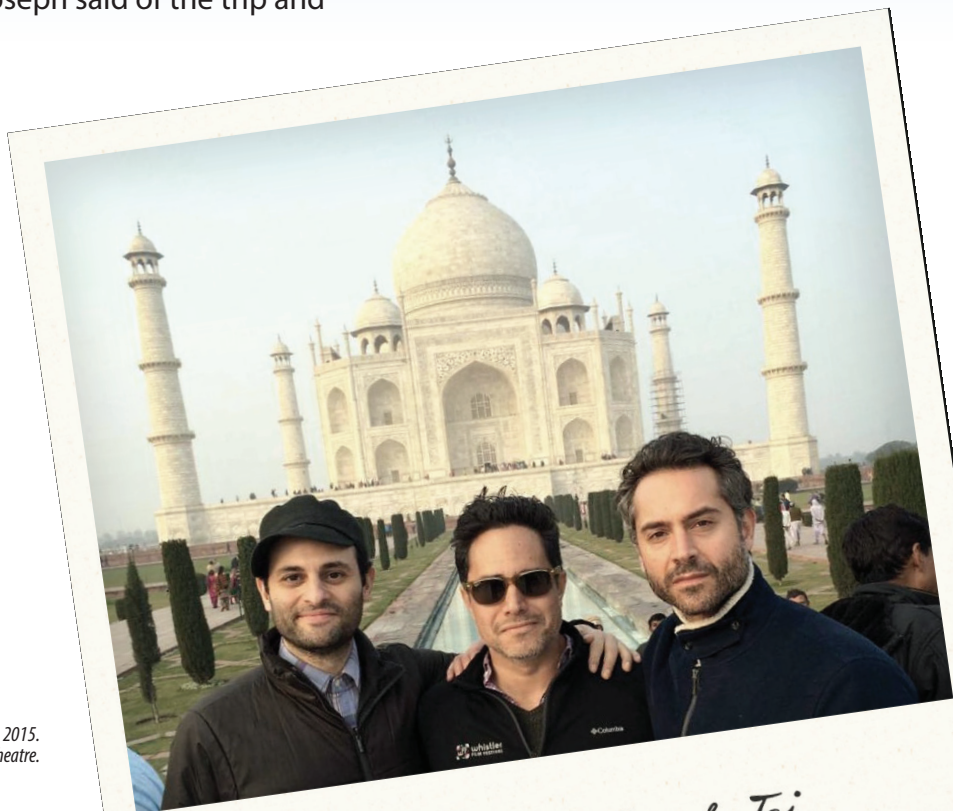
"It's [the play is] something I was developing for a while. My father is from India, and I've been to the Taj Mahal several times - we first visited when I was 10, and I think that's when the idea initially pierced my imagination. It was the myths and legends associated with it - the building of it and the reasons behind it. That stayed with me for many years.

Then after graduate school I started writing something for lots of actors, this epic, sweeping play that involved the emperor and the architect, and it was quite boring. It became this huge mess, so I threw it away. Later I realised the two most interesting characters were the two guys on the side, commenting on the action - these two guards."

Joseph developed the play alongside the two original actors to play Babur and Humayan, and the three actually traveled to the Taj Mahal in preparation for the world premiere production at Atlantic Theater Company in New York. Joseph said of the trip and seeing Taj Mahal, "So much of the emotional impact of the play revolves around them seeing it for the first time—I thought it would be really great if they did."

This impact was not lost on the actors. Omar Metwally, who played Humayan, said of the experience: "The way it triggers the imagination and makes this stuff real is invaluable. There's this divide of centuries and culture, but suddenly we were there walking around in these places, and it became much more immediate and much more accessible for us."

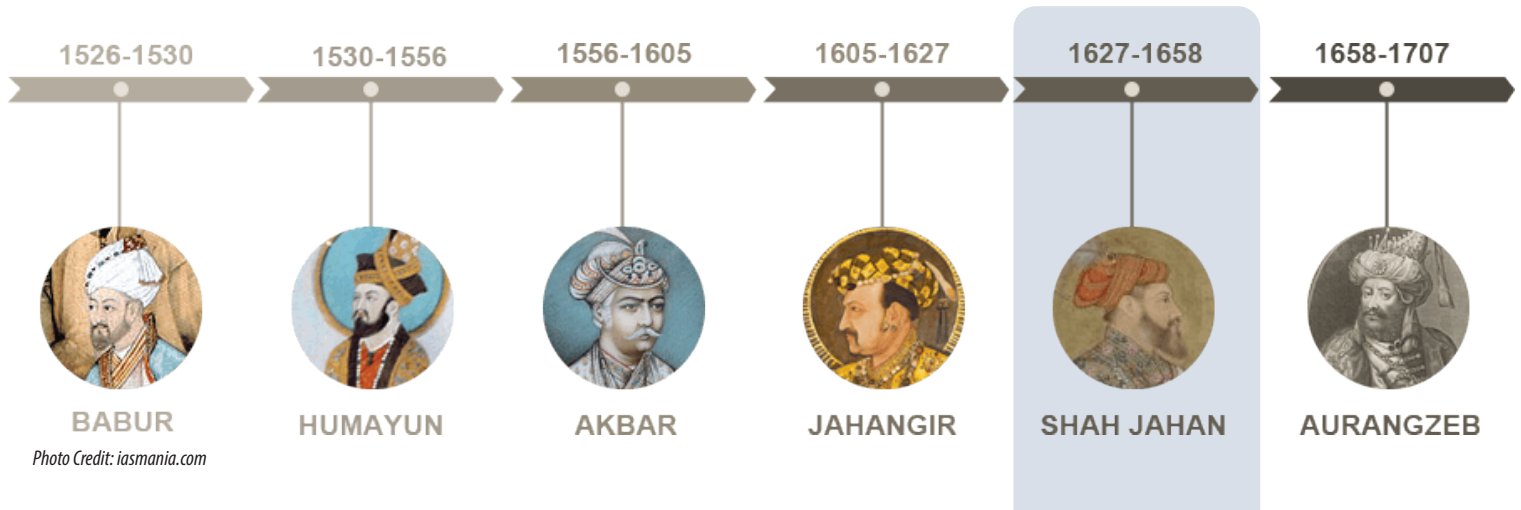
*Arian Moayed, Rajiv Joseph, and Omar Metwally at Taj Mahal, 2015.
Photo Credit: American Theatre.*



Taj Mahal & Guards at the Taj

Guards at the Taj - PlayGuide

IMPERIAL INDIA: a BRIEF HISTORY OF THE MUGHAL EMPIRE



Shah Jahan. Photo Credit: PBS.

Shah Jahan, the Emperor who built the Taj Mahal and is a central part of *Guards at the Taj*, came from a long dynasty of rulers. He was descended from the Mongol invader Ghengis Khan as well as Amir Timur, whom we know as Tamberlane in the west.

By the 1500s, the Persian Empire stretched thousands of miles from Syria to parts of China, but a young prince known as **Babur the Tiger**, sought to stake his own claim on part of the empire. Babur was a skilled warrior and was able to conquer part of what is now northern India, establishing the beginning of the Mughal empire in 1526.

Babur's son, **Humayan**, became the second Mughal emperor. He was not such a warrior as his father and almost lost the kingdom, but was able to keep it until it was passed down to his son, **Akbar the Great**. Akbar firmly established Mughal dominion in India and brought the empire to the height of its wealth and power.

Akbar's son, **Jahangir**, was a patron of the arts who enjoyed all of the pleasures of the prosperous empire. In 1627, after Jahangir's death, Shah Jahan became Emperor. He ruled until 1658, when he fell ill and his son, **Aurangzeb**, declared himself Emperor.

During the time of the first five Mughal rulers, India thrived in wealth and power, as well as in the arts, literature, and architecture. All of the emperors from Babur to Shah Jahan were patrons and lovers of the arts, bringing great beauty into the world through their patronage. With the ascension of Aurangzeb, the focus on the arts changed and the empire began to lose its power, coming into an age of turmoil, many different rulers, and finally the fall of the empire to the British in the mid-1850s.



Extent of the Mughal Empire. Photo Credit: PBS.

glossary of terms

BHAI - Hindi word meaning “brother.”

HAREM - The harem was a place where the emperor’s wives, concubines, female relatives, and children lived. Hundreds or thousands of women lived within the harem’s confines. The harem was considered a sacred space where only the emperor, his most trusted staff and guard, and the women were allowed to go.

MAHALDAR - The Mahaldar was the chief officer of the imperial harem, tasked with keeping order in the large community of women. She was the emperor’s eyes and ears in the harem and was held in the highest esteem for her services.

PALANQUIN - A palanquin is a vehicle without wheels that is carried by servants, often used by the royal women of the harem and other high-class individuals.

HINDUSTAN - Hindustan was a Persian name for India and the area ruled over by the Mughal emperors.

RAZAI - A razai is a sort of bed covering similar to a comforter or duvet, often made out of silk, velvet, or other fine fabrics.

PARATHAS - Paratha is a flatbread that originated in India.

AEROPLAT - Babur’s word for the airplane-like invention of his imagination.

MANSABDAR - Mansabdars were members of a complicated bureaucratic system in the Mughal empire. Mansabdars commanded troops or held civil posts.

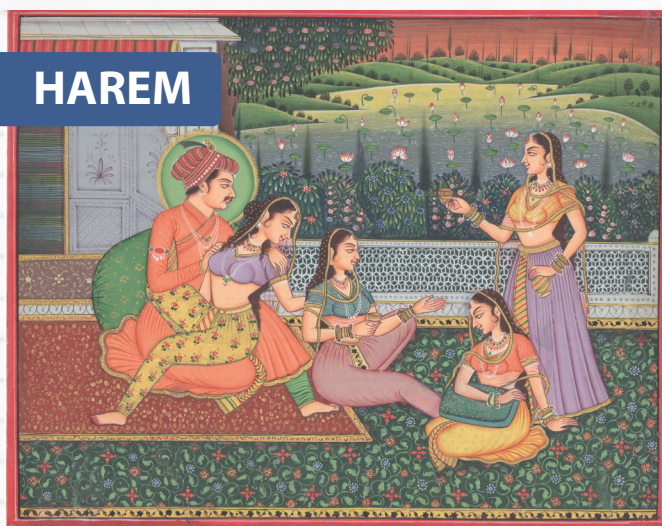


Photo Credit: eBay.com

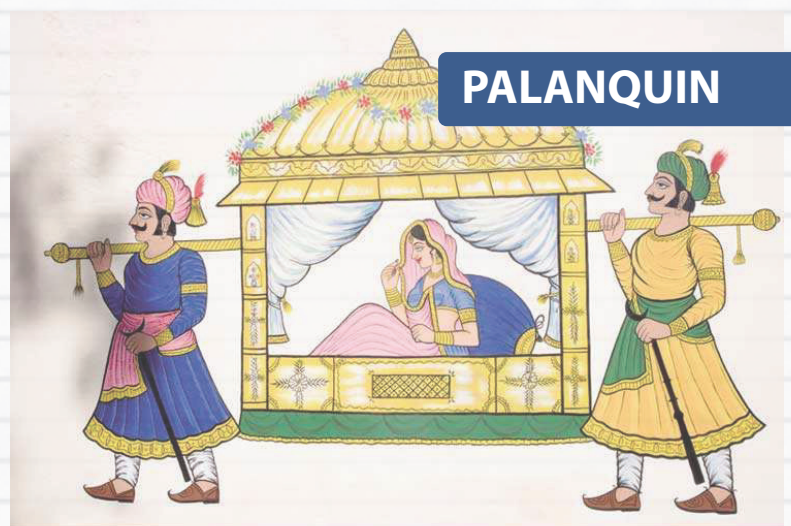


Photo Credit: Yourdictionary.com

A close-up portrait of playwright Rajiv Joseph, a man with dark, curly hair and glasses, smiling warmly. He is wearing a blue patterned shirt. The background is softly blurred, showing what appears to be an indoor setting with warm lighting.

PLAYWRIGHT RAJIV JOSEPH ON GUARDS AT THE TAJ

"I think that this play deals with the tension between ordinary people and authority and I think that is a consistent issue in the world we live in."

"I want them [audiences] to fall in love with these two young men and enjoy their journey. I think there's a lot of comedy in this. I hope they laugh. I also know that it's a very dark play, so I hope that people are able to experience it and think about it and think about how it might be interesting and relevant for the world of today."

"It's a darkly funny, visceral experience. My hope is people are deeply moved by this friendship, and can leave thinking about the way that power affects our personal relationships in life."

"For me what was important about this play was the friendship between these two men - that's the center of it. It's this bond and the testing of it, all the trials and tribulations that come their way. Sometimes that's humorous, sometimes it's painful."

Discussion Questions

What ends would you be willing to go to raise your station in life?

How do you express your love to others? How do you pay tribute or respect to those whom you have loved who have passed away?

What is the nature of power? Who deserves to have power? What are the qualities of a person who should have power?

What are the intersections between love and pain? How can love be destructive?

What makes something beautiful? How is beauty present in your life? What are acceptable reasons to destroy beautiful things?

"The one thing I knew from the get-go is they're old friends who were already starting to be separated by the authority of the adult world - one of them perceives that authority with more reverence than the other. That's a common conflict that happens in our lives; as we grow up, one grows up faster than the other, or one starts to abandon imagination and creativity in favour of meeting the expectations of the dry adult world. That can be heartbreaking."

Photo Credit: BraodwayWorld.com

FEATURED ARTIST

Jef Ouwens

MASTER TAILOR AT THE REP



Meet Jef Ouwens, a veteran tailor whose work spans 27 seasons here at The Rep. He began his career studying art at UW-Madison, where he got his first experience in the theater working as a set painter. From there Jef took an interest in costuming and enrolled in an independent study in the costume shop to learn the intricacies of tailoring. That experience sparked his curiosity and marked the beginning of a decades-long love of the art of costuming.

Senior Draper and fellow Rep colleague Alex Tecoma had nothing but praise for Jef's skill, "Wait a minute! I want to tell you about Jef. Jef in the past 15-years has really honed his skill and has become a Master Tailor, where his skills are *unequal* in this state." Alex has worked collaboratively with Jef in the costume shop for 22 years, "Jef doesn't only work here. Designers in Chicago, Minnesota, Delaware, and in theaters all over the country ask Jef to tailor suits and coats for them." Jef is known for his use of traditional techniques, historical patterning, and an understanding of theater that not all tailors know today.

A tailor might own a tailor shop, and be asked to build a suit, but what they build would be a contemporary suit. Unlike these tailors, Jef has used the resources at The Rep and historical research throughout the years to build a vast knowledge of tailoring unparalleled and in demand. "He is good, he is meticulous, beyond meticulous. As a designer, there is no one that I would rather make a man's suit than Jef," boasts Alex.

A tailor can mean different things in different shops. Sometimes, they just do alterations on men's wear, but Jef can build from scratch. He uses research to make the design meet the historical needs and then adapts it for the modern body. "Our modern bodies do not fit some of the equations from tailoring manuals that show us how to draft things in their historical measurements. So sometimes you cannot input modern measurements into those equations, because they will turn out very strange," describes Jef. There is more mass to the modern body, we are taller and made with more muscle and fat, and this is a challenge that Jef faces when working with historical patterns and measurements. "Some actors tend to like to bulk up, so there is more upper body. I've worked with 18 inch biceps that would not have existed a 100 years ago," he adds, "I have an added skill where the designer will now have more freedom to say 'I would like to have this built' verses to have that actor order something made from a costume house, or buy modern suits and then alter them to make them more period."

In *Guards at the Taj*, Jef specifies, "the designer wants these costumes to look traditional, without all the demands of what would make these pieces traditional, because it may impeded the action on stage." His challenge is to make these costumes look traditional to the point where the audience won't be able to tell that they have been made to fit the actor, and be constructed to allow the actor to move and endure the needs of the production. They also must meet historical accuracy. "The closures of the jackets will be left over right which means that these men are Muslim and not Hindu." This is one of many elements that earn the attention of a Master Tailor in this production.

As Jef and Alex solve the curiosities of *Guards at the Taj*, they are already looking to the future on constructing pieces for The Rep's upcoming production of *Miss Bennet: Christmas at Pemberley*. "My experience is more of an educationally closed loop: I have been given the chance to expand my knowledge of my craft while working on different shows. The more I do here at The Rep, the more I learn," Jef says. Alex doesn't hesitate to add, "Jef is an unsung hero in this costume shop that people do not realize is rare, and his skill is valuable to us. It is unique and a luxury that we have a tailor on staff."

ABOUT OUR PRODUCTION

"It's a deceptively simple looking play. The play starts with just these two young men guarding outside the Taj Mahal. It's a comedy . . . It's such an interesting roller coaster ride." - **MARK CLEMENTS, MILWAUKEE REP ARTISTIC DIRECTOR**

"I also feel like I want the costumes to add to the sense of beauty spoken of in the play. I like the idea that even the uniforms for the low ranking guards who stand at the wall are beautiful. During the reign of Shah Jahan there was a shift to using more floral patterns and less geometric designs in textiles and interiors. I wanted the color, texture and pattern of the guard uniform pieces to echo the beautiful interior of the Taj Mahal." - **ALISON SIPLE, COSTUME DESIGNER**

"The average turban is 11 1/2 to 19 1/2 feet long when unwrapped. We bought 70 yards of fabric to build all the multiples of the base costume pants and shirts." - **ALISON SIPLE, COSTUME DESIGNER**



"It eventually unfolds and reveals itself to be a play as much about what happens when you wind up being ruled by someone with a great deal of power and very little humanity. There is much more to it than political intrigue, it is really a personal journey." - **BRENT HAZELTON, DIRECTOR**

"It is exciting to design out a show based around the idea of ultimate beauty, as well as how horror and deeply human relationships play with and against one another. It's also a myth that is super interesting in terms of its tradition and lore. Fascinating to delve into that world." - **SCOTT DAVIS, SCENIC DESIGNER**

"It is a very contemporary piece in terms of vernacular, rhythm, and topic. The story exists within a time. We wanted the piece to have a lyrical contemporary sensibility while being submerged in the history and the myth." - **SCOTT DAVIS, SCENIC DESIGNER**



GUARDS AT THE TAJ RESOURCES

***Guards at the Taj* and Rajiv Joseph**

<https://www.americantheatre.org/2015/04/29/rajiv-joseph-did-nt-just-write-guards-at-the-taj-he-took-them-there/>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ApgMWTQR6-k>

<https://www.broadwayworld.com/westend/article/BWW-Interview-Playwright-Rajiv-Joseph-On-GUARDS-AT-THE-TAJ-20170330>

<https://www.broadway.com/buzz/181337/guards-at-the-taj-playwright-rajiv-joseph-on-comic-book-inspiration-and-writing-during-the-dim-hours/>

Agra, India and The Taj Mahal

<https://www.britannica.com/place/Agra>

<https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/252>

http://www.pbs.org/treasuresoftheworld/a_nav/taj_nav/main_tajfrm.html

<https://www.wonders-of-the-world.net/Taj-Mahal/Legends-of-the-Taj-Mahal.php>

<http://www.tajmahal-agra-tours.com/history-legends.html>

<https://www.travelogyindia.com/taj-mahal/taj-mahal-myths.html>

Mughal Empire

<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Shah-Jahan>

https://www.huffingtonpost.in/rita-banerji/the-awfully-unromantic-ta_b_6589586.html

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mughal_Harem

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/mansabdar>

Pattern on Page 2 designed by visnezh / Freepik.

Photo “Taj Fort 1” on Page 3 obtained under CC 3.0 from Sam Hawley on Flickr.com.





VISITING THE REP

Milwaukee Repertory Theater's Patty and Jay Baker Theater Complex is located in the Milwaukee Center downtown at the corner of Wells and Water Streets. The building was formerly the home of the Electric Railway and Light Company.

The Ticket Office is visible on the left upon entering the Wells Street doors. The Stiemke Studio is located on the first level.

THE REP VALUES YOUR SUPPORT

Financial support enables The Rep to:

- ★ Advance the art of theater with productions that inspire individuals and create community dialogue;
- ★ Provide a richer theater experience by hosting Rep-in-Depth, TalkBacks, and creating PlayGuides to better inform our audiences about our productions;
- ★ Educate over 21,000 students at 150+ schools in the greater Milwaukee area with Rep Immersion Day experiences, student matinees, workshops, tours and by making connections with their school curriculum through classroom programs such as Reading Residencies;
- ★ Maintain our commitment to audiences with special needs through our Access Services that include American Sign Language interpreted productions, captioned theater, infrared listening systems and script synopses to ensure that theater at The Rep is accessible to all;
- ★ Educate the next generation of theater professionals with our EPR Program which gives newly degreed artists a chance to hone their skills at The Rep as they begin to pursue their theatrical careers.

We value our supporters and partnerships and hope that you will help us to expand the ways Milwaukee Rep has a positive impact on theater and on our Milwaukee community.

Donations can be made on our website at www.MilwaukeeRep.com or by phone at 414-290-5376.

THE REP RECEIVES SUPPORT FROM:

The Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation
The Richard & Ethel Herzfeld Foundation
The Shubert Foundation



**National
Endowment
for the Arts**



CAMPAC