



[East is East](#) at Octagon Theatre, Bolton

Directed by Ben Occhipinti

Reviewed by [Johanna Hassouna-Smith](#) , March 2018

Ayub Khan Din's play, ***East is East***, is a comedy about an Anglo-Pakistani family living in Salford in the 1970s. Produced in the mid-1990s, the play was one of the first mainstream theatre productions to deal with Asian culture. The 1999 film adaptation garnered critical acclaim and became one of the most successful British films of all time.

So how did this hugely successful play fair in Greater Manchester's neighbouring town of Bolton? It felt like it was coming home to where it belonged!

The Octagon is one of only two theatres in the North West which is built in the round, so it is always a pleasure when entering the auditorium to see the staging utilising all sides. This was indeed the case with *East is East* as we were greeted by two living room spaces of the Kahn residence, laid out for the audience to view before the lights went down. The stage floor, covered in magazines of the 1970s, automatically set the era of the piece, which was a really simple but effective design choice by designer **Amanda Stoodley**.

The colourful floor set of the drab 1970s furniture of the Khan residence creating the contrast between the conflicting values of tradition and modernity in the play. The use of the Kahn siblings to move around the stage set, including wheeling in a full (and very impressive!) chip shop counter was a device cleverly used to set the increasing pace of the story. As Mr Khan's grasp of his family's cultural identity unravels to near-farcical levels, Director Ben Occhipinti's scene changes become more expertly executed.

The play's theme of the culture clash between East & West is represented most prominently through Pakistani Mr George Khan and Ella, his Irish-Catholic second wife. The biting wit of their bickering was invigorating to witness along with the nuanced energy of their affection for one another, coupled with the veiled misery of their long relationship brought great pathos to the characters. These are incredibly demanding roles and both **Kulvinder Ghir** (*Goodness Gracious Me* BBC, *Still Open All Hours* BBC) and **Jane Hazlegrove** (*Casualty* BBC, *The Sewing Group* Royal Court) portrayed them with fierce stage presence and razor-sharp comic timing.

The complex relationships between the six Khan siblings was also deftly portrayed, balancing the serious issues of sibling rivalry and their shared resentment for forced cultural standards, whilst always maintaining a playful camaraderie. What really shone through in the younger generation of Khans was a sense of solidarity. They want to be British but they didn't want to be disloyal to their family. Despite the obvious competition for stage time that playing five brothers would bring, each performer created a strong and unique role in the unfolding story. Their characterisation was rounded, subtle and instilled empathy for their frustrations with the Khan family home.

Playing the only female sibling amongst the five brothers, **Shila Iqbal** (*Citizen Khan* BBC, *Emmerdale*

ITV) has a charming rapport with her male counterparts throughout and as her boyish character is forced to wear a sari, Shila's reactions are a comic high-point amongst many. If there is one thing that the Khan siblings have in common, it is their relentless mockery of their youngest brother Sajid Khan. Sajid, played alternately by the young Octagon Company actors,

Rohan Macleod

and

Daniel Zahir

both hold their own alongside the professional cast with clear comic timing and youthful energy in their performances, which provide a unique child's perspective on ethnic and cultural identity.

This was a thoroughly entertaining evening of theatre which offered escapist pleasures whilst also being thought provoking.