

Audio Introduction to the 2024 RSC production of *The Buddha of Suburbia* adapted for the stage by Emma Rice, with and Hanif Kureishi

Introduction

The Buddha of Suburbia is a new play based on the 1990 novel of the same name by Hanif Kureishi, adapted for the stage by Emma Rice with Kureishi.

Set amid the strikes, shortages and racism of suburban South London of the late 1970s, the play is a joyful exploration of love, heart-break, sex, family, friendship and belonging which follows three years in the life of 17 year old Karim Amir as he begins to find his way in the world.

The performance lasts for 2 hours 50 minutes including a 20-minute interval.

Due to some of its more adult content, the age guidance for the play is 13+ - a full list of the content advisories can be heard at the end of this introduction.

The audio describers for this production are Gethyn Edwards and Emily Magdij.

Settings and Props

The Swan Theatre's stage thrusts into the auditorium with seating to both sides as well as in front and with two walkways that extend diagonally forwards through the audience from the front two corners of the stage.

Rachana Jadhav's set conveys a blend of 70s aesthetics, combining domestic interiors – all oranges and tan browns and G-plan style, teak wood tones - with the scaffolding, pavements and power lines of an urban building site.

The stage floor blends smoothly from orange-toned floorboards in its front right quarter into the worn, grey flagstones of pavement for the remainder of the space.

In the centre of the stage is a boxy, orange settee with a pale blue crocheted blanket thrown over the back and couple of matching cushions and a third floral one.

The settee is on wheels and can be moved about as required and the back folds down to quickly convert it into a bed.

Behind the settee is the core of the set, which cleverly creates a flexible series of multi-level, interior and exterior spaces using raised, staggered platforms, each of a different material and at a different height. There are hardly any walls in the set and what walls are there are transparent. There's a sizeable apron of stage in front of the platforms and plenty of space either side.

From the stage, a flight of domestic carpeted stairs with a broad, orange-and-brown foliage pattern, rises from left to right, the seven treads arriving at the first platform at roughly shoulder height. The stairs themselves are constructed from perspex so present a very thin side profile.

To the right of, and behind the foot of the staircase, there are square-panelled, open wooden trellises, of roughly a door's width, stretching from the stage to the platform above, giving the impression of internal walls or room dividers.

At the top of the stairs, the first platform's floor is made of layers of steel mesh. Multi coloured lighting is hidden beneath it, able to turn it into a flashing, chequerboard, disco floor when the need arises.

A red, obscured-glass front door is set roughly centrally on the first platform's rear edge. It's furnished with a knocker and bell but is styled after a 1970s telephone box. In fact, a phone-box telephone is fixed to a bracket just to the door's right.

A door's-width wall of multiple opaque, glass bricks is set to the left of the door at the back of the disco platform, rising from the stage to roughly half-way up the door. The leaves and tendrils of ivy can be made out through the hazy glass.

A step up of a foot or so from the rear right of the first level takes us into the garden and onto a patch of neat lawn. From the side, exposed layers of muddy soil and pale roots are revealed beneath the manicured grass. The lawn area can also be reached by going through the red front door - and the left-hand edge of the lawn actually butts up against the door's hinge side. A brass, outdoor tap with a screw-thread spout is fixed to the back face of the same bracket that supports the phone-box telephone.

The garden level steps up and away from us onto a white walkway running left to right across the stage at the rear of the set. The walkway's surface gives the impression of a modernist, polished concrete construction.

To the right, the walkway allows access offstage via the theatre's first balcony.

To the left, the walkway extends across to the final level of the set, rising up two further steps, and allowing characters to step back down towards us onto a final platform that evokes a bedroom-cum-loft area. While entirely open to the rear and left side, the front left third of the loft is enclosed by a tall, perspex window, and the right hand edge has a full perspex wall pierced by an open white window frame in the middle. A ladder runs from beneath the window frame down to stage level and a similar, second ladder descends from the back left corner of the loft area.

The entire set of platforms are supported by scaffolding poles, some of them with oval, building site bulkhead lamps attached. More scaffolding poles form diagonal safety rails along the back edge of the walkway.

Below the garden level, under front right-hand corner, is a doorway-sized, grey metal roller-shutter. The shutter is covered in half-removed, spray-painted graffiti, including the words "go home". A second roller shutter is located under the disco floor, facing to the left.

Beyond the set, the back wall of the stage has been left as bare brick. A fridge-sized, boxy black electricity transformer hangs on the wall, with power cables looping off it. To the left, the cables run to the three cross beams of a full-sized wooden telegraph pole from which they loop across the front of the left-hand balcony to the truncated, top six feet of a similar telegraph pole, fixed high up on the front of one of the auditorium's wooden pillars.

Scenes take place all over the set – sometimes simultaneously - and characters come and go from all four corners of the stage as well as along the high walkway, up and down the ladders, through the window frame, under and alongside the platforms and out from behind the roller shutters.

A record player and hi-fi system is set up on the balcony to the right of the stage. When songs are played at key points during the performance, a member of the cast displays the relevant album before placing the record on the turntable and lowering the needle to start the tune.

There are all manner of props and furnishings in the show that enhance the sense of time and place – from the loft space with its beanbag, orange-brown, rounded standard lamp, record player and LP collection; to Anwar and Jeeta's shop with its shopping trolley, fruit & veg and basket of canned goods; and the low, wheeled drinks cabinets and pair of white ceramic leopard lamp stands of Matthew Pyke's swanky London flat.

Karim takes a soak in a white, claw footed roll-top bath. An old greaser rides a racer-style drop-handlebar bicycle, Auntie Jeeta puts out black bin bags of rubbish that a fox puppet (brought to life by a cast member) rummages through. Puppeteered pigeons also assist the cast with scene changes. Three large disco mirror balls descend above the stage for party numbers and colourful balloons litter the floor at the start and end of the play, a microphone stand set among them.

Characters and Costumes

Vicki Mortimer's glamorous costume design is straight out of the 1970s, bringing together desi style and the individualistic, lurid styles and patterns of 70s Britain. Characters wear outfits and style themselves directly from the era, with flared jeans and cords, wide-neck shirts and thick, Burt Reynolds style moustaches. There is a colourful joy to the costume work, carrying the optimism of the time and play despite the difficulties the characters endure.

Karim, played by Dee Ahluwalia

We meet Karim as a 20 year old man in a pink, wide-necked shirt and bell-bottom jeans, celebrating a new job, but much of the play takes place across the preceding three years, starting with him as a slightly naive, slightly awkward but optimistic and playful 17 year old. Karim is young, tall and slim, with black hair in a shag-style semi-long cut that curls slightly at the bottom. He is a go-with-the-flow kind of young man, his movement fluid and at times uncertain, particularly compared with some of the other characters.

Karim's wardrobe evolves with his sense of self throughout the play, beginning with a white vest and yellow, argyle patterned socks under bell-bottom jeans with a deep brown, wide-buckle belt. When he leaves to go to a party at Eva's house, he dresses up in bright turquoise flared cords and an eccentric floral shirt with a black and gold embroidered waistcoat over the top, along with a tie tied as a bandana around his forehead. He remains in this costume, sometimes without the tie, for much of the first half of the play, except for a scene where he strips down to a white vest and a pair of red y-fronts.

In the second act, now Karim is a little more grown up, he begins to wear clothing more befitting a young professional actor. His bell-bottoms are dark blue denim, his shirt dark but still with a vibrant, damask pattern. He carries a leather satchel with him as he travels and works.

Finally, when he is celebrating his new job, he wears the same outfit as when we first meet him: a pink, wide-necked shirt with wide lapels, mid-blue bell bottom jeans and heeled leather boots. This outfit is near identical to what Charlie, a young man he has a tumultuous relationship with, describes as an outfit he would look good in when he first meets him.

Haroon, played by Ankur Bahl

Haroon is Karim's father, a man in his late 30s whose pride over his appearance, and particularly his impressive chest, means that he is usually stylishly dressed, but he takes a more casual approach when he is at home. He is a small man with mid-length black hair and a glorious, thick Burt Reynolds-style moustache. We first meet Haroon in the same outfit he will finish the play in - a brown, pin-striped shirt with a wide neck, deep burgundy flared cords, heeled boots and a red silk scarf held together with a gold scarf ring.

When at home and practising his yoga, Haroon wears nothing but a pair of bright blue briefs with a white y-front, showing off his healthy crop of dark chest hair. While still in his y-fronts, he pulls on a pair of green and white calf length stripy socks. Sometimes, while at home, he also sports a string vest. We later see him in a luxuriant silk kimono with a dark brown, damask pattern and red silk edging.

Haroon often wears a small golden medallion around his neck. When dressing up, he wears a flashy, grey three piece suit with wide lapels and a pair of large sunglasses. He also favours roll-neck jumpers, appearing later in a brown leather jacket over the top of a brown rollneck, with dark jeans on below.

Occasionally we get a glimpse into Haroon's past, where he wears a long cream shalwar kameez with gold embroidery down the centre, and a deep burgundy topi prayer cap.

Charlie, played by Tommy Belshaw

Charlie is a young man a year ahead of Karim, who Karim develops an infatuation for. He is confident, playful and a little cruel, playing on Karim's feelings for him and seemingly disaffected by the world around him. He has dirty blonde hair, longer on top, which is often pushed to one side, and a

single pierced ear. When we first meet him, he is determined to be something more than his middle-class background; as the play advances and he achieves his goals, he goes from being stylish and playful to dishevelled and tempestuous.

Appearing at Karim's party at the beginning of the play, Charlie is dressed in the same clothes he will appear in during the second half. He wears a burgundy leather jacket over a burnt orange, damask printed polyester shirt open to show his chest, with black jeans, leather heeled boots and a brown tie loose over his chest.

When we meet him as a young man, Charlie is dressed in a school uniform with a white button-up shirt, grey trousers, and a green and yellow tie. He wears blue underwear.

After a visit to a punk concert with Karim, Charlie changes style completely, dressing much more punk, with black stovepipe jeans ripped at the knees and a black leather jacket with silver spikes and graffitied anarchy symbols over a baggy black fishnet shirt.

Jamila, played by Natasha Jayetileke

Jamila is Karim's best friend and occasional lover. She is a studious, forthright young woman with a rebellious streak and a strong sense of both justice and self. Her sense of fashion reflects her principles: she is often seen wearing pin badges for causes she supports, or dressed with modern slogan t-shirts.

When we first meet her at Karim's party at the start of the play, she has her long, dark hair pinned back in two tight French braids down the side of her head, large rectangular eyeglasses, and a form-fitting long-sleeved shirt patterned with orange and blue squares tucked into high-waisted beige cord flares.

When we see her as a young woman, she is dressed in a school uniform, with a white shirt under a grey woollen vest with three pin badges on it, along with knee-length grey socks, a grey pleated skirt, and a grey headband in her long dark hair. She carries a leather satchel full of books, both for school and personal reading.

Later, as she begins to grow up and get past her school years, she starts to French braid her hair and develop her sense of style. We see her in high-waisted denim flares, with a green colour-blocked knitted cardigan over the top, and then in a pink t-shirt that reads 'The Future is Female'.

Margaret, played by Bettrys Jones

Margaret is Karim's mum. A harried woman in her thirties when we first meet her, Margaret tends to dress more conservatively than the rest of her family, with muted colours and baggy shapes. Her husband's helplessness in the home has left her having to do everything for him, and it shows in the way she talks and moves, weariness sometimes turning into frustration. She has mousy brown hair with a fringe that often seems messy or uncombed when we first meet her.

In Karim's party at the beginning of the play, and when we meet her at the end of it, Margaret seems happier, and her wardrobe reflects this with an emerald green cardigan over a white, floral patterned blouse and a pleated, patterned navy skirt.

When we meet her in Karim's family home, she is dressed in a beige jumper with a beige floral apron over a grey, knee-length skirt, light blue stockings and brown ballet pumps. She has a pink towelling dressing gown she wears occasionally.

Eva, played by Lucy Thackeray

Eva is Charlie's mum, a white woman in her 30s who has an exciting, fusion style full of bright colours, patterns and fabrics. She is confident, stylish and outgoing, with perfectly coiffed blonde hair in a bouffant style that often has a bright, coloured headband, and is usually smoking. She seems to favour exotic styles, often a fusion of other cultures.

When she first appears, she is in a bright pink, kimono-style dress, made up of swathes of floaty pink and peach fabrics draped over her body. She is also seen in a silk dressing gown made up of deep emerald damask, with edges of a lighter green silk and a tie made of the same. Later, she adopts a bright, satin shalwar kameez with a light blue tunic over beautiful, loose trousers with a pink and blue damask pattern.

Anwar, played by Simon Rivers

Anwar is Karim's uncle - though not blood - and Jamila's father. We first meet him as a man in his late thirties or early forties, as the owner of a shop in town. A cantankerous and difficult man who has recently endured a racist attack, he walks with a stick and often appears paranoid or angry, though he has a softer side. He favours clothing that is closer to that of the country he was born in, usually sporting a salwar kameez in cream and beige. Like Haroon, he has a thick moustache. Anwar sometimes wears a thick brown knitted vest cardigan over his clothes.

Jeeta, played by Rina Fatania

Jeeta is a woman in her thirties or forties who is married to Anwar and the mother of Jamila. Diminutive in size but forthright and strong, Jeeta speaks with a strong accent and dresses primarily in traditional clothing, usually found in a sari and long scarf. Her long dark hair is braided down her back. The first sari she wears is light turquoise, long and flowing but plain. The second is light brown and cream, covered in light floral and damask patternwork.

Changez, played by Raj Bajaj

A sweet and silly man, Changez is thirty when we first meet him, an arranged marriage for then-17 Jamila. He is very new to Britain, but seems at first enthusiastic about his move, with a love of Arthur Conan Doyle and Sherlock Holmes. He wears slightly mismatched and incongruous fashion, often sporting a deerstalker hat with the flaps tied under his chin. He wears loud, snakeprint patterned brown trousers and a square print shirt in tan and blue. He often carries binoculars, and is sometimes seen in a bright scarlet knitted waistcoat over his shirt.

Matthew Pyke, played by Ewan Wardrop

Matthew is a director Karim meets after the premiere of his first play. An indie darling in his 40s, Matthew Pyke is dressed as an auteur, with a navy suit jacket over a black rollneck jumper and navy suit trousers. His hair is close-cropped blonde curls, and he usually wears rectangular glasses.

Eleanor, played by Bettrys Jones

Eleanor is an unfathomably posh young woman in her 20s, and a paramour of Karim's when he is embarking on his career as an actor. She has long, slightly wavy blonde hair with a blunt-cut fringe, and is particularly emotional, often seeming to need extra reassurance or space from those around her. She is sweet-natured but runs hot and cold, and is occasionally cruel to those around her.

She dresses in a long, floaty pink dress with delicate floral patterning, and wears brown leather sandals.

Marlene, played by Rina Fatania

Marlene is Matthew's wife, a confident and voracious woman in her 40s. We meet her at a party at Matthew's house, where she wears a zebra striped pantsuit with long, trailing sleeves.

Shadwell, played by Tommy Belshaw

The first director Karim works under, Shadwell is a tall man in his thirties or forties who is snappish and forthright, cutting across Karim's objections. He wears a white shirt under a pair of dark braces that connect to dark trousers turned up at the cuff, and dark leather shoes. His hair is long, dark red and wild, pouring from a centre parting to his shoulders.

Chorus

When not on stage, many of the characters return as chorus, helping to underline key events on stage by letting off party poppers or handing the characters props. When in this role, they wear dark blue dungarees and small pieces relating to whatever guise they are appearing in at the time. When they are helping in a sex scene, they often wear hats made of fruit, while other times when appearing as British thugs they adopt flat caps or woolen hats; and leather jackets and studs when they are playing a punk band.

Cast and Creatives

Writer/Co-Adaptor - Hanif Kureishi
Director/Co-Adaptor - Emma Rice
Set Designer - Rachana Jadhav
Costume Designer - Vicki Mortimer
Sound and Video Designer - Simon Baker
Lighting Designer - Jai Morjaria
Composer - Niraj Chag
Choreographer and Intimacy Coordinator - Etta Murfitt
Fight Director - Kev McCurdy
Casting Director - Matthew Dewsbury CDG
Company Voice Work - Jeannette Nelson
Dialect Coach - Gurkiran Kaur
Associate Director - Laura Keefe
Associate Costume Designer - Helen Johnson
Associate Choreographer - Ankur Bahl

Content Advisories and Synopsis of the Play

The age guidance for this production is 13+; it features:

- Some scenes of an adult nature (including depictions of nudity and sexual acts)
- Swearing
- Representations of physical violence
- Themes of racial, gender and sexual discrimination (including portrayals of manipulative, forceful and domineering behaviour, as well as grooming)
- Depictions of alcohol and drug misuse
- Loud noises (including music and voices)
- Flashing lights
- Strobe effects
- Smoke and haze
- E-cigarettes
- Incense
- Party Poppers and confetti cannons
- Latex Balloons

The Buddha of Suburbia opens with a 20 year-old Karim Amir welcoming us to a party to celebrate his new job in 1979. Soon we shift 3 years back in time and begin to follow Karim's journey from suburbia to the London stage and beyond.

We meet his parents with their unhappy marriage heading for crisis; Karim's first crush, Charlie; his defiant best friend Jamila - and Changez, the Indian husband her father's chosen for her. We go with Karim as he navigates his parents' separation, gets his first break in theatre, and experiences his first doomed love affair; all as his friendships are tested and his career develops - taking in disco, communes, swinging sex, drugs, punk rock, London, New York, racist violence and all the mess, joy, sadness and change Karim encounters on the winding road back to 1979.