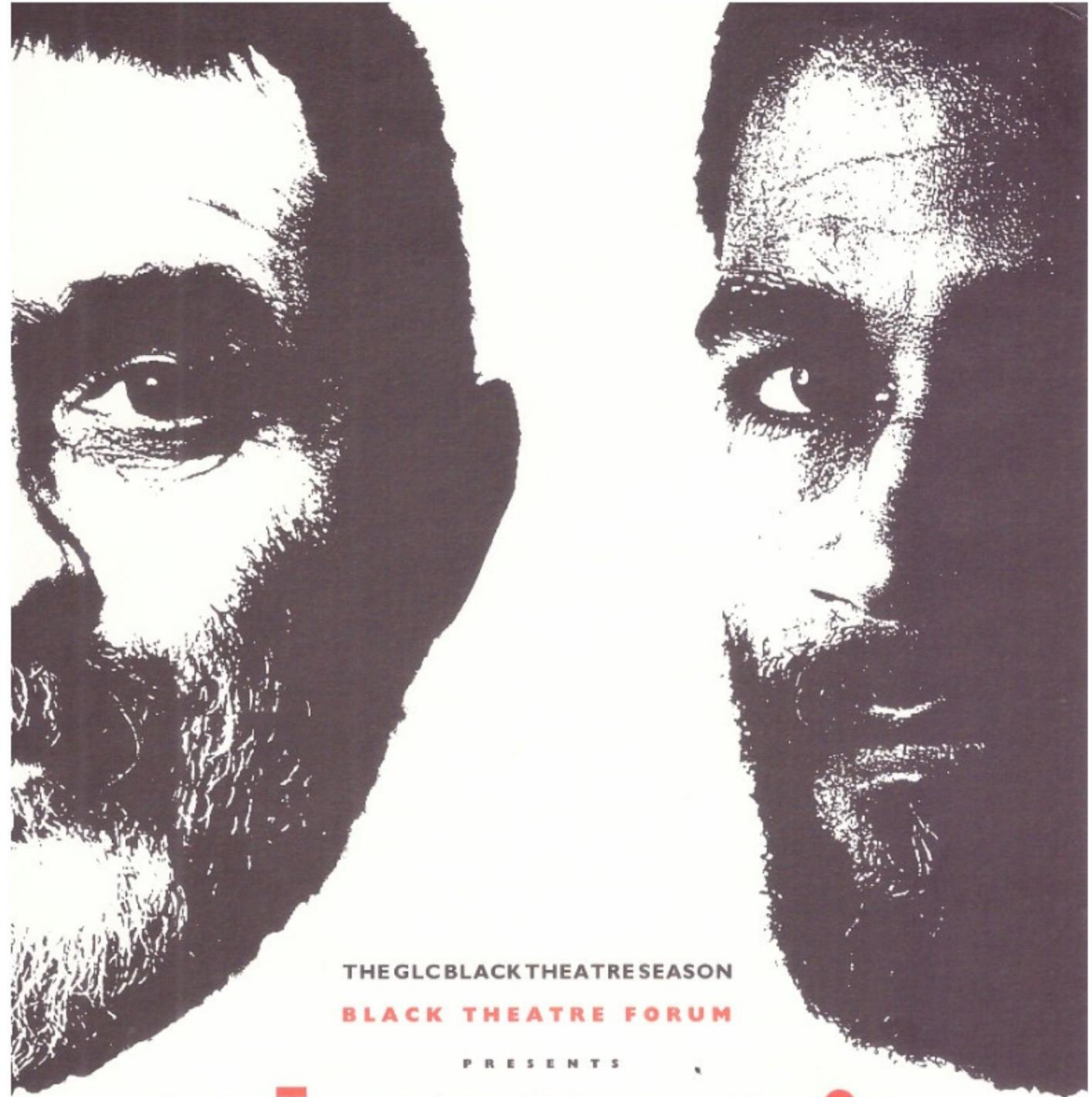




THE GLC BLACK THEATRE SEASON

BLACK THEATRE FORUM

P R E S E N T S

RĀKSHASA'S RING

B Y V I S A K H A D A T T A

THE ARTS THEATRE

GREAT NEWPORT STREET W1

LEICESTER SQUARE TUBE

6th FEB - 1st MAR 1986 BOX OFFICE 896-2132

DIRECTED BY ANTON PHILLIPS • DESIGNED BY MARSHA RODDY • LIGHTING BY PAUL ARMSTRONG

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Renu Setna in Rakshasa's Ring

Michael Billington at the Arts Theatre

Ring of discord

I AM all for the Black Theatre Season at the Arts if it means giving good work a central London airing. But Black Theatre Forum's production of Rakshasa's Ring (a Sanskrit play by Visakhadatta dating from around 875 and here given in an unacknowledged English translation) is so limply under-directed that it is likely to leave the average European spectator somewhat baffled: a pity since there are signs the play itself is a wonderfully intricate study of realpolitik.

It is, in fact, based on a classic Indian treatise on statecraft; the Artha-Shastra, which clearly pre-dates Machiavelli's *The Prince* by several centuries. The play focuses on a classic conflict between two men: the wily fox, Kautilya, and the noble lion, Rakshasa. The former is chief minister to the young emperor, Chandragupta (credited with fostering the idea of an Indian nation-state): the latter is a renegade minister still loyal to the defeated Nanda dynasty.

Through a series of devious stratagems — including the use of spies and the threat to execute a jeweller who is Rakshasa's friend — Kautilya gradually winds in his opponent and brings him to the court. But his masterstroke is not to punish him but hand power over to him this guaranteeing his obedience to the new regime.

Kautilya's tricks would put any MI6 agent to shame: counter-intelligence, the discrediting of his opponent's followers, the spreading of sham-information about a rift between himself and the Emperor. Even the relationship between Kautilya and the young puppet-Emperor is one that many a modern PM would envy.

What is puzzling to a Western spectator (and this is true, to some extent, even of the great Brook Mahabharata) is the conflict between human action and destiny. As far as I can see, everything in the play happens because of Kautilya's chess-master intellect: at the same time, the play clearly endorses Rakshasa's point that "the things that happen make us all fate's servants in the end." That seems to undercut the play's tribute to guileful statecraft.

Anton Phillips's production does little to clarify this or anything else. Renu Setna, grey-bearded and implacable, gives us all of Kautilya's steeliness and Wyllie Longmore is suitably heroic as his opponent. But some of the supporting performances are wispily inadequate; and the production becomes unintentionally comic when a captive spy is taken out to be beaten (he returns, of course unmarked) by a glamorous female servant. As someone muttered behind me, "Poor boy."

G 8/2/86

Chandra Gupta but over the Emperor himself. Kautilya is here played by a Pakistani, Renu Setna, who, despite the smallness of his stature, projects a quietly invincible authority whenever he is on the stage.

The Rākshasa of the title, previously chief minister of the dynasty deposed by Kautilya to make way for Chandra Gupta and therefore an enemy of the Emperor until Kautilya's wiles win him over, is invested with impressive stillness and dignity by a gauntly imposing Jamaican actor, Wyllie Longmore.

THE PRODUCTION of a Sanskrit play, predating Shakespeare by more than 1,000 years, is so rare an occurrence that it is surprising that *Rākshasa's Ring*, second event in the sparsely attended GLC Black Theatre Season at the Arts Theatre, has not aroused more interest.

In part, at least, the publicity, referring merely to "a classical Indian drama" and omitting, as does the programme, any acknowledgment of the translator, Michael Coulson, must be to blame. Had Mr Coulson been invited to write a programme note, based on his Penguin introduction, about both the author Visākhadatta—who, it seems probable, came to writing from the world of affairs—and the dramatic conventions within which he worked, bewilderment might more speedily have given way to admiration for a remarkable piece of theatre.

What makes it so remarkable is the political sophistication with which Visākhadatta shows how the statesman Kautilya, almost divine in his omniscience, exercises power not merely over the subjects of the Emperor

Anton Phillip's production at first struck me as too closely resembling that of a school play with the players constantly facing out to the audience as they elaborate their devious plans. But a re-reading of Michael Coulson's preface reminded me that, however half heartedly, Mr Phillips was attempting to follow the manner of production of Visākhadatta's own remote time.



Morris Newcombe

Naim Khan and Wyllie Longmore in "*Rākshasa's Ring*" at the Arts.



Renu Setna in Rakshasa's Ring

Michael Billington at the Arts Theatre Ring of discord

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FEB 14-20 228 60p

CITY LIMITS MAGAZINE

STILL ONLY

■ 'Rakshasha's Ring' by Visikhadatta, presented by the Black Theatre Forum (Arts Theatre).

Had Leon Brittan read the text of Visikhadatta's fascinating play about political skulduggery, perhaps...

Based on the 'Arthra-shastra'—an Indian treatise on statecraft with its open advocacy of ruthless methods for the maintenance of power—the play has a chilling relevance, considering it predates Machiavelli's 'The Prince' by many centuries.

Unfortunately this production by the Black Theatre Forum, directed by Anton Phillips, is hampered by a rather literal and unimaginative interpretation. Much of the theatricality of Indian politics, its ritual dance remains unexplored and one wonders wistfully what its original director, Rufus Collins (who spent two years in India studying Kathakali dance and Hindu philosophy) would have made of Marsha Roddy's potentially versatile set.

The BTF had hoped that the involvement for the first time ever in Britain of an integrated cast of Blacks and Asians would 'bring together two contrasting traditions of statecraft' but in the end the production did not do justice to either tradition. However an excellent performance by Renu Setna as Kautilya and fine support from Wyllie Longmore as Rakshasha, his main adversary, redeemed a disappointing evening.

(Jan McKenley)

February 13-19 1986
No. 808 75p

Time Out



NEW REVIEWS

FRINGE

'Rakshasa's Ring' (Arts)

You could argue that this second production in the GLC's Black Theatre Season does at least possess a certain curiosity value, since it's not every day that you get the chance to sample the distinct style and stagecraft of eighth century Sanskrit drama. The pity of it is that this particular version, presented by the Black Theatre Forum and directed by Anton Phillips, manages to convert Visakhadatta's chronicle of political infighting and power struggles into an all too familiar piece of amateurish English costume drama. Renu Setna is effective as the Machiavellian minister whose shrewd scheming and manoeuvring in defence of his young emperor sets the whole labyrinthine plot in motion, and Wyllie Longmore provides a convincing psychological portrait of his baffled opponent. Best to draw a discreet veil over the rest of the production, however, including the plodding delivery of endless philosophising about kingship, government and fate which, like so many of the lines, suggests a lot may have been lost in the translation. (Malcolm Hay)



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PRESENTS

RĀKSHASA'S RING

BY VISAKHADATTA

THE ARTS THEATRE

GREAT NEWPORT STREET WC2
LEICESTER SQUARE TUBE

UNTIL 1st MAR
Eves 8pm
BOX OFFICE 836 2132

DIRECTED BY ANTON PHILLIPS

DESIGNED BY MARSHA RODDY

LIGHTING BY PAUL ARMSTRONG

LONDON



**The Magazine for
Anytime!**

AN EQUAL OPPORTUNITY MAGAZINE

**ISSUE 203
FEBRUARY 10 1986**

Machiavelli a thousand years before

The Black Theatre Forum was set up in 1985, with funding from the GLC. As well as identifying with and fighting for a better deal for Black Theatre, it aims to achieve greater equality of opportunity for Black artists, giving advice, support and information on new initiatives and training programmes.

They are currently presenting Rakshasa's Ring at The Arts Centre, Leicester Square. It is the epic story of the struggle for political power between two warring factions. This classical Indian drama anticipates the political philosophy of Machiavelli by almost a thousand years.

Assassination, betrayal, and corruption to achieve and maintain power are at the core of the play.

Rakshasa's Ring is showing at The Arts Theatre, Great Newport St, London W.1. Box Office 836-2132 G.B.

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BY VIJAYAKHADATTA
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OPENS
NEXT WEEK

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