

A Visit to Guards at the Taj

SPACE

Space here in the Mughal Empire is like a snowglobe in a forest - an entire world trapped within the confines of the sky, an outside world trapped within the inside, a world inside a world. The world is constructed but its surroundings natural, the people inside aware of their viewership but powerless to reach beyond. A world where the beauty that lies in the construction is inherent but hope of breaking beyond the barriers of the sky is the ultimate goal. The land within the snowglobe is carved - leaving only structures to define the skyline, but outside the city of the snowglobes lies a jungle wilderness - a place of potential freedoms and potential dangers. But the city's grasp on its residents is strong. The water is suffocating and within the structures of the city of the snowglobe, there lies deeper chambers of desire, corruption, truth, power, pain, horror, and betrayal.

TIME

Time here is water on the cusp of freezing. The world is submerged and movement within it is slow and suffocating. The passage of time here is the name of the game - survive the passage of time and you shall be rewarded. Time here is an endurance test. It is swimming below frozen ice, searching for the exit but the cold is disorienting and once you break through, you cannot find your way back to where you started. Time here is marked by the sun but exists in the extreme axes of the globe, like the Alaskan sun it is fickle and unreliable and yet it is the only

thing to mark the passing of the days. Time here is the space between amputation and cauterization.

CLIMATE

The climate here is the eye of the storm during monsoon season. It is the place of calm while horror rages around. It is the place of witnessing devastation with little power to curtail it. Those who reach beyond its confines are eviscerated. The storm is hot and humid like a hot rock sauna. The heat sticks but the wind blows the sweat away. It is windy and abrasive but the eye of the storm remains steady in the face of it all. The world outside is lush and sturdy - trees deeply rooted within the earth making a vast dynastic jungle, able to withstand the storm, while the animal inhabitants are thrashed about. The jungle is the confines that break the backs of those cast about during the storm when they venture outside the eye.

MOOD

The mood here is crossing the demilitarized zone. It is delicate in a world of blunt instruments. It is the head governing limbs chock full of their most innate desires. It is eerie, like the feeling of always being watched with severe punishments lying ahead for those who break the rules. A paranoia that gnaws like an itch that cannot be scratched. A lice ridden apartment building under a beautiful night sky. It is a dog tag blasted into the skin of your best friend, with only your nails to scratch it out for recovery.

MUSIC

It is the chirping of crickets against the searing of flesh in a ripping hot cast iron pan. The wind rattling trees with screams of agony dancing around it. It is a deadly silence. It is the dripping of blood from a butchered and hanged carcass, hauntingly enticing like a metronome with the dragging chains on the body swaying in the wind. It is the dull thud of a chopping block breaking through bones. It is the sound of taut leather restraints being pulled with all your might. It is your best friend saying it will all be okay when you both know it won't be. It is a whistling in the dark to pass the time and fill the silence. It is Nero's fiddle.

SOCIETY

It is as public the CIA looking for an informant within its ranks. It is a conspiracy led by a dictator. It is a dog fight with the venue operator watching from across the world. It is a coup led by a lone wolf. It is a ninja moving against a shogun. It is a pyramid built atop a nation's back. It is a murder of crows with an albino at the back. It is a throne atop a slave auction block. It is a house of cards with the topmost point suspended by cables.

Babur and Humayun are three dimensional figures. The rest are limbs and shadows. The rest are suspended tarps but when you pull upon them, the cloth falls as though nothing holds it up. The rest are the pupils seeing through a peephole. The Emperor is a behemoth forged from the eyes, ears, and limbs of 20,000 men.

Babur and Humayun are wearing imperial clothing but have the appearance of the working class. The regality is cut by its own false facade, like a brick wall made out of styrofoam.

The figures interact through discourse, although the Emperor's word reigns over all. The Emperor's power comes from divine right, and is executed through extreme militaristic force. It will manifest in the most grotesque types of capital punishment. Language of feeling has no place here, although it leaks into the mind like a poisonous hope. Language of thought is policed here, thoughts against the Emperor are treason. Despite all this, language is floral and dances like two children playing cops and robbers. It flows against the structures in place, spilling over and leading to the dam breaking.

CHANGE

The Images:

1. The two men guarding that which they dare not look at.
2. Two best friends lounging in a treehouse.
3. Two best friends drenched in the blood of their community, blinded by the smoke of the burning flesh.

It is essential to pass through image 1 to establish the rigidity of their social structure and the danger that surrounds them, in addition to the awe, beauty, and power that watches over them.

It is essential to pass through image 2 to establish life outside the structure of the society, what freedom and hope aspires to be for these two men.

It is essential to pass through image 3 to establish the true nature of the consequences that these men must suffer for existing within the hierarchical structures of this world.

The world moves from outside to inside to outside, going from the perceived freedom of being outside the walls of the Taj Mahal while standing guard and doing their duties, to the inside room of the underbelly of what such beautiful structures hide behind, to the true freedom of being outside the city's jurisdiction.

While the temporal timeline of the play moves from day to night to day, there is a feeling established throughout the play of going through the darkest night with the cresting of a new sun by the end of the play, although that sun is tainted with the events previously seen.

The linguistic tone of the play shifts from a careful hope, to utter despair, to ecstatic peaceful beauty.

The action of the play moves from a dangerous threat, to horrific pain, to earth shattering betrayal, to nostalgic hope. Despite this, the one constant is the power of Shah Jahan, the emperor. In this, the world remains unscathed while Babur and Humayun's lives have been irrevocably changed. The machinal power of the Empire's hierarchy rages on. The progression of these places, images, and action lead to a story of two best friends who see their darkest days, only to cling onto their former lives as nostalgic hope prevails, despite the horror they've both seen.

YOURSELF

The play ultimately asks for pity. Pity that manifests itself into self-doubt in how far you would be willing to compromise your principles to protect the people you love. How would you choose one love over another? Family by blood or family by choice? The play asks one to consider their allegiances and their relationships - is there a difference? How far will you go to obey something you know is wrong? The play makes this intention known through its use of a two-handed play - the emphasis is on a relationship under the pressured circumstances of an oppressive hierarchy, rather than seeing a whole community struggling with the hierarchy.

THEATRICAL MIRRORS

The play mirrors most closely to me: Harold Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter*. It also echoes *No Exit* by Jean Paul-Sartre and *Middletown* by Will Eno. While there is no discernable reference to these theatrical works within the text, the mood spans all three of these plays in its scope. In some parts a trudging towards a surprise betrayal, in some parts a musing on the destiny of humanity, and in some, hell being other people, this play balances these theatrical mirrors in a new way, especially considering the context of having two South Asian men taking center stage with this piece.

CHARACTER

BABUR: Eclectic. A day dreamer who cannot help but babble on about his fantasies. Does not have high regard for authority or his line of work, rather, he enjoys the privileges that his position grants him. He is crass and inventive, often thinking about anything other than what

he is supposed to be thinking about. He does not punish himself for this, rather, he thinks it a trait that makes him unique. Time is a slog for Babur, something that just needs to be passed for the sake of passing it, and he carries a light within him that shines through until he is faced with betrayal. Visually, Babur is goofy and loose, a clown of sorts. He represents the inner desire that would betray hierarchy. Unable to contain his feelings, he works to be optimistic but always gives in to his inner desires. His inability to contain himself is his ultimate downfall.

HUMAYUN: Diligent. A rule-follower born into a life lineage of servants. He honors and reveres his position as if it were holy, but can find himself carried away by his friendship with Babur. He has a whole inner life that he works to deny himself, and is successful almost all the time, save for when Babur sways him. Time is an investment for Humayun, as he believes he is putting in the work to better his station and bring pride to his family. Humayun is a kind of army brat crossed with a pastor's kid. He looks like he has a stick up his ass but can occasionally take the stick out and play with it, making dick jokes. He is intelligent and observant, but denies himself these traits in favor of humility and allegiance. He represents the compromised character, asked to contradict his only allegiance for the sake of the love of his friend. Ultimately, he is asked to choose between his allegiance to his position and his inner feelings, and he chooses his position. This is the ultimate sacrifice in him, as it kills the part of him that has always been suppressed, leaving only memories to relive those inner passions with little hope for redemption.