

# Monsoon Wedding

**Vishal Bhardwaj** music **Masi Asare, Susan Birkenhead** lyrics  
**Arpita Mukherjee, Sabrina Dhawan** book **Mira Nair** concept  
**St Ann's Warehouse, New York** 6 May – 24 June 2023  
 REVIEWED ON 19 MAY 2023



Namit Das (centre) as the ambitious wedding planner; Deven Kolluri and Salena Qureshi portraying the central couple; Monsoon Wedding's passionate ensemble

Mira Nair's 2001 film *Monsoon Wedding* does not immediately suggest itself as a candidate for a stage musical adaptation. Nair, who got her start as a documentary filmmaker in the 1970s, brought a *vérité* approach to the sprawling story of far-flung relatives descending on a Delhi home for the traditional arranged marriage of a well-bred Hindu girl (played in this musical adaptation by Salena Qureshi) and a Princeton-educated Indian-American boy (Deven Kolluri).

In reconceiving her own movie for the stage, Nair provides some narrative structure to the material – even elevating a minor subplot about the ambitious lower-class wedding planner (Namit Das) and his pursuit of the family's maid (Anisha Nagarajan) into a more fleshed-out parallel love story that can justify a double wedding by the final curtain.

Arpita Mukherjee and Sabrina Dhawan's book packs in a lot of story. In addition to the two couples, we meet the bride's parents (Gagan Dev Riar and Palomi Ghosh), struggling under the financial burdens of the wedding festivities; the wealthy family elder (Alok Tewari), a California moneybags who takes an unhealthy interest in a much-younger cousin (Rhea Yadav); and an orphaned cousin, Ria (Sharvari Deshpande), raised as a kind of older sister to the bride. And that's not to mention the bride's married lover (Manik Singh Anand), the impatient mother of the wedding planner (Sargam Ipshita Bali) – as well as the parents, spouses and children of many of these characters, all of them given speaking roles. (The cast numbers 26 in all.)

*Monsoon Wedding*, which opened at Off-Broadway's St Ann's Warehouse after nearly a decade of development, is like a colourful but overstuffed samosa that pays tribute to the music and culture of India

without fully bringing them to life in a coherent and memorable story. Vishal Bhardwaj's ballad-heavy score is a blend of Eastern and Western influences, backed by an eight-piece band that includes a sitar, sousaphone and Indian percussion. But the 22 tunes, which often end abruptly, do little to flesh out either the plot or the characters. (There's only one solo number –

“The score is a blend of East and West – the band includes a sitar and a sousaphone”

prettily sung by Deshpande as the NYU-bound cousin Ria who yearns for independence from the toxic masculinity of older Indian society.) The rote lyrics, by Masi Asare and Susan Birkenhead, are frequently forgettable variations on the obvious: ‘Winds they are blowing / soon rain will be flowing.’

The evening perks up when Bhardwaj goes full Bollywood in a handful of bouncy

ensemble numbers like ‘Aunties Are Coming’ and especially the second-act showstopper ‘Chuk Chuk’, an over-the-top chase to the train station that makes the most of David Bengali's cinematic projections, Arjun Bhasin's costumes and Shampa Gopikrishna's far-too-infrequent choreography. There is a kind of energy and passion on the stage that makes us forget how

expendable this song is to the mechanics of the story. And it offers a hint of what Nair might have achieved if she had more willingly abandoned the hyper-realism of her movie for a more

stylised adaptation willing to loosen its sari a bit.

Despite theatrical flourishes like an onstage rainstorm, Nair's approach as director remains stubbornly cinematic. With so many characters and subplots to follow, it's hard to tell where we should focus from scene to scene. Worse, the plot challenges that pop up (such as the Hindu wedding planner's reluctance to marry a Christian girl) are resolved in a way that feels both rushed and pat. (Yes, his mum actually advises him in song: ‘The heart knows what it knows.’) By giving so much weight to such a large cast, you begin to ponder alternative narratives: the NYU-bound Ria, for instance, seems like a better match for the Ivy-educated banker than her pampered ‘South Delhi Girl’ cousin – even if Ria is unlikely to agree to an arranged marriage.

But imagining what might have been is not how classic Broadway musicals – or Bollywood romances – are supposed to work. The inevitable happy ending should feel like the only possible conclusion. Still, *Monsoon Wedding* has many virtues, including an Indian-accented look and sound that have seldom found a home on New York stages.

Thom Geier

## Production credits

**Cast** Salena Qureshi, Sharvari Deshpande, Gagan Dev Riar, Palomi Ghosh, Deven Kolluri, Namit Das, Anisha Nagarajan, Sargam Ipshita Bali *et al*

**Direction** Mira Nair

**Musical supervision, direction** Emily Whitaker

**Orchestrations** Jamshied Sharifi, Rona Siddiqui

**Choreography** Shampa Gopikrishna

**Movement direction** Carrie-Anne Ingrouille

**Set** Jason Ardzizzone-West

**Lighting** Bradley King

**Sound** David Schnirman

**Costumes** Arjun Bhasin

**Projections** David Bengali