

## ARTS

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In 'Brick Lane' Nazneen (Tannishtha Chatterjee) is sent away from Bangladesh aged 17 as an arranged bride for an older man living in East London

## Finding lyricism in East London



**Brick Lane**

15 CERT, 102 MINS

**FILM REVIEW**  
**Freddie Sayers**

**Brick Lane**, the film of the bestselling book by Monica Ali, actually succeeded in surprising me. It is the story of a young Bangladeshi woman who, after the untimely death of her mother, is sent away aged 17 as an arranged bride of an older man living in London's Brick Lane. I thought it would be gritty; in fact it is lyrical, almost childish. I thought it would be sad; in fact, it is heart-warming and hopeful. Director Sarah Gavron has managed to turn a tricky immigrant story into broadly appealing, Sunday evening fare.

It doesn't start out this way. Nazneen (Tannishtha Chatterjee) is a beautiful young girl whose life in Bangladesh is presented as preposterously joyful, playing with her younger sister, running through green paddy fields and laughing almost incessantly. We then cut 17 years to 2001, and the contrast could not be more

depressing. Laden with plastic bags, the now mother-of-two walks silently along the dirty grey streets and back home to her colourless council flat in a grim east London estate, to look after her overweight, much older husband and two noisy British-Asian daughters.

The arc of this film, having opened with such a caricatured depressing misc-en-scène, is bit by bit to restore hope and life to the story. Nazneen at first seems totally defeated – still beautiful but taciturn and with a sad, distant look. She lost her first son ("the devil always takes the most beautiful babies") and pines for her youth and homeland. Her husband has promised that they will return but it has never happened. Her only source of life is the regular letter she receives from her sister, detailing the love affairs and excitements back home.

But Nazneen then begins a process of self-empowerment. When her husband resigns and watches television instead of finding new work, she secretly joins a home sewing ring, for which she is paid £1 per garment. Karim, the pretty, British-Asian boy who administers the company and who drops off and picks up her clothes, is an Anglicised, bopping cheeky chappie, and he takes a fancy to her. Gradually they begin an illicit affair and for the first time since she came to England she begins to feel alive.

What I like about this story, though, is that it doesn't stop there. This

shameful awakening is shown, in time, to be a necessary but transient fancy. On September 11, 2001, the local Asian community changes overnight: there are riots and backlashes on British Asians. They feel under threat, and hunker down. Karim begins to radicalise, growing a beard and leading protest groups. Suddenly Nazneen's husband decides to return the family to Bangladesh, and Nazneen is forced to decide who she really is.

*The whole thing is like a parable, very naive and sweetly over-simplified*

Chanu, Nazneen's husband, goes through a similar unveiling. He begins as an absurd figure, benign but deluded, a strikingly Dickensian philosopher-cabbie. No matter how bleak the situation, he remains grand and optimistic.

But as the community around him begins to radicalise, his true wisdom comes through. He stands up at a community meeting and makes an impassioned speech about the folly of ghettoising into racial groups, and Nazneen realises that she has learned to love him after all. At the end of this story, which appeared to be so clear at the outset, you are left feeling differ-

ently about everyone in it. The film has recently caused controversy, with the Bangladeshi community worried that it misrepresents them, and it has even been the subject of an editorial in the *Guardian*. It certainly seems ultimately to come down on the side of the West, with women's empowerment at the heart of it. But I felt it was respectful of the Asian traditions also.

Nazneen is a princessy figure in drab London, and her arranged marriage was not so disastrous after all.

The real flaw of this film – and I'm afraid it does have one – is hard to disentangle from its charm. The whole thing is like a parable, sweetly over-simplified and very naive. At times this feels quite poetic and beautiful, with legitimate artistic roots in the Bollywood-style morality flick, and legitimate logical roots in that the lead character is a naive and simple village girl.

But there are times when it feels superficial and melodramatic. Nazneen's husband is just that little bit too Dickensian, her lover that little bit too cute and cheeky, her memory of Bangladesh that little bit too pastoral and slow-mo. The pain of her loss, the urgency of her passion, her love for her children, is sometimes not quite there.

Don't see this one on a Friday night, or make it to a Sunday evening, when you are feeling forgiving and just a little bit sleepy.

## This searing opera will grill your soul



**Il Sant'Alessio**

BARBICAN

**MUSIC REVIEW**  
**Igor Toronyi**

The boy choir was playing up and the conductor William Christie was getting crabby. I was in France, in the small concrete town of Caen, watching the early music specialists Les Arts Florissants rehearse one of the very first operas ever written, *Il Sant'Alessio*, which they were preparing to take to Paris, New York and last month, to the London Barbican.

There was an air of tension in the theatre. Christie was embarking on a precarious enterprise, trying something that had never really been done before. He was going to attempt to recreate the all-male world of the original 1632 premiere.

Not so difficult, you may think. But what do you do with the castrati parts? If you want men to sing in the roles then you have to either doctor the roles or, ahem, the singers.

Or you could replace the nine castrati with nine countertenors; almost unheard of but exactly what Christie decided to do.

There was also to be a boy choir and early Baroque staging and direction. Baroque scenery, costumes and gestures were going to complement the baroque playing and singing, an audaciously comprehensive experiment.

But would it match up to the strange and steamy 1632 first night?

Rome's religious elites crowded into the Palazzo Barberini under the frescoes of Pietro da Cortona – who was that evening's set designer, too – to watch the pretty castrated boys sing Landi's plangent masterpiece. Cardinals threw flowers and showered the castrati with kisses, the performance tumescent with sexual tension.

Remarkable, considering the extent to which the Church was involved in the production: the work represents the historic high-water mark of Catholic-operatic interaction. Its producer was a cardinal; its commissioner, Pope Urban VIII; its librettist, Giulio Rospigliosi, the future Pope Clement IX; its composer, Stefano Landi, a cleric.

Ironically, a more restrained response welcomed the 2007 London performance. No flowers or kisses. Though when 29-year-

old Philippe Jaroussky appeared as St Alessio a few mental knickers flew towards stage.

The boyish French countertenor Jaroussky is one of classical music's hot new things. And here in one of his first major operatic roles in London, he showed us why.

Despite its brevity, the strange role of St Alessio, a character without clear motive or action, is a tough one to get right.

The fourth-century Roman deserts his inheritance, his wife and his family to become a Christian ascetic in Syria. He then comes back to live the rest of his life under the stars of his former home. Here he must keep his vow of poverty and his impoverished disguise against the taunts of the devil and the distressed cries of his broken family.

It seems a particularly harrowing divine plan and for much of the first two acts we don't understand why he's going along with it. Then an angel arrives and, in the sweetest of tones, Jaroussky pours forth one of the most beautiful arias ever written, reconciled to death.

And there's more to Jaroussky than just his milky voice. There's very impressive acting, too; he conveys the strangeness and dreaminess of the role excellently.

With Jaroussky dead after the middle of the second act, you might suppose the third act would disappoint. Quite the opposite, however. The final scenes mark a dramatic culmination.

They begin with the unfeasibly low sounds of the devil, brilliantly sung and acted by Luigi De Donato, who curses his failure to lure Alessio away from his heavenly goal. The music then moves into the plangent sounds of familial grief, which has, at its heart, an extraordinary unadorned trio: the wife (Max Emanuel Cenico), the father (Alain Buet) and the mother (Xavier Sabata), all singing alone.

It is the searing, still core of this work, with unimaginable shifts in tone and intensity, a heavy nucleus of chromatic cries and whimpers. It softens your soul and then grills it.

Much of *Alessio's* dramatic originality and intensity is a testament to the inventiveness of the early Baroque, a spiritually competitive world which endlessly sought new ways of attracting and interacting with its punters.

Variety and subtlety were key. In *Alessio*, we swing from comedy to tragedy, from fantasy to reality, from fierce exhortation to a dreamy *fizz*, seamlessly.

The clerical pioneers of opera, it seems, could do anything. And with the final instrumental dance, an ever-diminishing, ever-circling *ballo delle virtù*, it is true that they "even make grief sweet".

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## Brave comic falls short

**THEATRE REVIEW**  
**A Night in November**

TRAFALGAR STUDIOS

One man shows often get a bad rap. This is probably due to their long association with money-spinning Edinburgh festival productions in which a figure of historical interest – Winston Churchill or Charles Dickens, say – is resurrected for the benefit of the blue-rinse brigade.

Yet, for my money, when a one man show is done properly (an actor telling a story directly to an audience, with a minimal set and taking on a number of different roles) it is the essence of great theatre.

In recent years there have been a number of excellent examples of the genre: *Hurricane* at the Soho Theatre in 2004, about the tempestuous life and times of snooker legend Alex Higgins, was an astounding piece of work, and the Tricycle's 2002 production of *A Night in November*, by Marie Jones of *Stones in his Pockets* fame, was equally affecting.

I was therefore relishing the prospect of seeing a new production of the play at Trafalgar Studios in central London.

*Night* is the story of Kenneth McCallister, a working-class Protestant man living in Belfast in the early 1990s. After being confronted by terrible bigotry on the terraces of

Windsor Park at a Northern Ireland versus Republic of Ireland football match, he is forced to reassess his whole life, a process that eventually culminates in a trip to America to support the Republic in the World Cup.

One man shows offer a huge challenge to any actor, let alone a first timer such as Patrick Kiely, a Northern Irish comedian and television presenter. A production of this kind lives and dies on the strength of its performer, and unfortunately this *Night* ends in disappointment.

Kiely takes up the challenge of bringing Kenneth and the characters that surround him to life with energy and enthusiasm. But this does not prove to be enough. He lacks the skills and experience in physical theatre to pull off the character shifts and his vocals are also weak.

He is not helped by the fussy direction of Ian McElhinney, who forces Kiely to constantly move around as if he is trying to cover every inch of the stage. The scene-setting projections, too, are patronising in the extreme.

The director appears to have a (well-founded) lack of trust in Kiely's ability to bring the story to life without assistance. But his attempts to help only serve to highlight how far the comic is out of his depth. These problems are seen most clearly in the Windsor Park scene where Kenneth has his world turned upside down. This is the most vital

scene in the play but the production souches it. The constant switching on and off of crowd noises distracts rather adds to the atmosphere, and Kiely hurries through the scene, failing to invest it with any dramatic tension.

The play itself is not without a number of serious flaws which are exposed by this weak production. The most problematic of these is Jones's simplistic presentation of Northern Ireland's sectarian divide. It is one-sided to say the least. The Protestant characters, in the shape of Kenneth's poisonous father-in-law Ernie and his wife and friends, are presented as uptight, bigoted and vain. Kenneth's Catholic boss, on the other hand, is a genial free spirit, as are the throng of Republican supporters who welcome Kenneth and other Protestants into their gang with open arms. Loyalist shootings also cast a heavy shadow over the play, while the IRA is never mentioned.

A decent production, like the Tricycle's, can overcome this lack of balance. In that interpretation, Marty Maguire's exemplary acting created a thrilling night of theatre in which Kenneth's viewpoint seemed somehow appropriate and believable. Kiely fails to meet these standards. He took a brave decision in making his acting debut in this tough one man assignment, but unfortunately he falls well short.

**Will Gore**

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