

Edinburgh International Festival Review: One Thousand and One Nights (*****)

✘ British director Tim Supple's extraordinary stage adaptation of the classic Arabic masterpiece makes evident demands on its audience. It's more than six hours long, and has to be viewed in two sittings. It's performed in Arabic, French and English, with actors switching between the three languages and English subtitles throughout. Its content is sometimes shocking, sometimes bawdy, and always poses the challenge of what a 15th-century collection of stories can say to a modern audience.

Admittedly, it takes time to adapt to. At first, the languages seem bewildering, and the sheer speed and complexity of the narrative, distilled from the original by Lebanese novelist Hanan al-Shaykh, are hard to keep up with. But by the first night's interval, I was hooked.

Supple has gathered actors, musicians and designers from all over the Middle East for his production, which he has been working on since 2006. Oum Keltoum Belkassi's set is at once simple and sumptuous, framing the stage with an intricately carved wooden screen that serves as a backdrop for the stories. Hanan al-Shaykh's text covers 16 of the work's tales, ranging from the tragic to the farcical, and often embeds stories within stories in a disconcerting yet fascinating structure.

Supple's troupe of 19 actors give commanding performances, assuming different roles in different tales and, despite the mixture of languages, managing to communicate the stories in a strong, resonant, relevant way. Assaad Bouab is a potent king, who moves from initial aggression and violence to fascination

and love for the storyteller Shahrazad – tenderly portrayed by Houda Echouafni – in the final scenes.

The overarching theme of relationships between men and women slowly emerges. It's easy at first to condemn the male characters' often brutal interactions with their female counterparts, but as the evenings progress, a more complex, balanced picture starts to form that examines power play between the sexes from every angle. Supple's production manages to ask some profound questions but does so with an astonishingly light touch.