

CHISWICK HOUSE GARDEN
Cymbeline

THE GODS smiled upon Houslow Leisure Service's presentation of Theatre Set-Up's Cymbeline, described "as a comedy in the magical Celtic tradition". An accurate description having paid regard to the ambitious and exhaustively researched programme notes which analyse the meanings of the story. In fact, not forgetting the planetary correspondence of the characters, not so much a programme more a way of life, to be studied, time permitting, in the idyllic surroundings of the open-air Temple Amphitheatre in Chiswick

House Grounds.

I suspect we had the advantage of the National Theatre production, which was touched with sadness by the death of Lord Olivier on the same night. However, it was also one of the loveliest nights of the year, marred only by the roar of the occasional planes overhead, although even they acquired a magic of their own once reflected in the pool by the amphitheatre. Apart from that the acoustics were admirable.

The explanation of what lies behind every nuance and permutation of the plot are fascinating, though I suspect some of them might have surprised even the Bard himself. However I am content

to coast along with this intriguing and unlikely confection of gobbledygook, with its echoes of Snow White, complete with Wicked Queen, the faithful servant who can't bring himself to cut out the heroine's head and her reunion with Prince Perhaps-Not-Quite-So-Charming, as he's the one who wants her done away with.

There are those tried and trusty Shakespearean stand-bys: the girl, in this case Imogen, disguised as a boy, the long-lost brothers for a happy get-together finale, unassailable purity made suspect by foul subterfuge. All acted to the hilt and was entirely enjoyable, although, at three hours, a

touch too protracted (though apparently an hour shorter than the National). Artistic direction by Wendy McPhee and co-director Don Casfield — a sturdy Belarius et al — impeccable incisive characterisations, audible even across a crowded lake, by Stephi Hemelryk (Imogen), Christopher Robbie (Cymbeline and others), subtle doublings by Tony Portacio (Leonatus Posthumus and Gloten) Chris Jordan (Pisano and Arviragus) and Ben Foster (Iachimo and Guiderius). As the Queen, Teresa Forsythe reminds us what a great stage comeback could be in store for Joan Collins.

Eric Braun

MAUREEN PATON gets hot under the collar

Hell on earth

LYRIC, HAMMERSMITH
Huis Clos

SARTRE borrowed his idea of Hell from the ancient Greeks whose attitude to the afterlife was altogether more urbane than the medieval Christian fear of eternal physical torture.

It was the mental anguish that mattered more to Greek souls in torment. In Homer's Odyssey, the denizens of the underworld complained of its everlasting tedium as if Hades were some ghastly hospital waiting-room guarded by a harpy behind the reception desk.

Paul Farnsworth's appropriately sterile design for this Cotswold Theatre Group production presents us with an ornate antechamber in Second Empire style that looks like the setting for a stifling Civil Service cocktail party. The oven-temperature heat in the Studio does the rest. Hell is too many other people in the audience on a hot night.

Director Alison Sutcliffe gives us

recognisable human beings in this doomed ménage à trois. Susan Dury, as the embittered lesbian postal clerk Ines, looks like an escaped wardress from Prisoner Cell Block H, full of blue-collar resentment towards Kate Nicholls' heartless socialite Estelle. Bearded, burly Bruce Purchase has a gruff male chauvinism as the surly Garcin, who prefers the company of men in his newspaper office.

It is less easy to believe in them as spectres, but that is a problem inherent in the play itself. Reuben Purchase completes the cast as a smug little flunkey, the porter at the gates of hell.

Frank Hauser's crisp translation serves Sartre's economical style well and supplies an ironic modern perspective with Ines' sour joke about the absence of a traditional torturer in hell. "They cut down on the staff — customers will serve themselves," she says, preparing to whip up hatred and despair as the self-appointed dominatrix in this vicious circle.



The heat is on — BRUCE PURCHASE and KATE NICHOLLS in Huis Clos at the Lyric, Hammersmith. Picture: Tristram Kenton

SYDNEY
The Recruiting Officer

THE ROYAL Court has done Australian theatre a service if its directors have noted how little embellishment is strictly necessary in the presentation of a good old play.

Not that Max Stafford-Clark managed to get it all right. The balance between the two affairs in The Recruiting Officer is tilted heavily towards the Plume and Silvia liaison, mainly thanks to Amanda Redman and Peter Wadham. Redman, in particular, carries her unexplained transformation into the Wilful male with a delightful ambiguity that never confuses the audience, though it is enough to fool her fellows in stage.

Nigel Cooke's Worthy, on the other hand, takes his name too literally, and Kathryn Hunter, who had been so moving in Our Country's Good, translates Melinda's uncertainty of mind into movement without encouraging us to care for her eventual decision.

The company's strength in the off-centre characterisations is also a major contributor to the overall picture — adding touches of Restoration to a play

more concerned with the real politics of marriage than its predecessors. We actually care about silly Lucy's attempts to wed the only semi-outrageous Brazen, about country Rose's complaints of loss of reputation without compensatory pleasure; and even about worldly-wise Saint Kite's military recruiting as his Captain deserts to raise recruits in a matrimonial way.

Stafford-Clark and designer Peter Hartwell have so well established the social intimacy of 18th century Shrewsbury that there is a reasonable fear that French dragoons would do far worse than these conniving grenadiers.

And also the economics which have brought Kite into the army and taken Plume out of it to pay taxes on his wife's bountiful income can also be assumed.

The only historical aspect which Australian audiences may miss is any sense of its premiere production on our soil 200 years ago, which we've been encouraged to optimistically expect by the prior production of Our Country's Good. London, Blackpool and Toronto (to which the double bill now tours) may have lesser expectations.

Jeremy Eccles

WIMBLEDON
Sammy's Magic Garden

THE ENCHANTING Polka Children's Theatre has everything to delight younger patrons such as teamoons in magic train carriages and the most beautiful marbles you could hope to buy but still lacks effective air conditioning.

Once predominantly the home of puppet shows, the Polka has latterly been diversifying with less esoteric plays for children, such as this summery show by Kirsten Poskitt, which arrived laden with accolades from previous airings in Edinburgh and London.

This is Gothic horror for kiddies — "horror" being perhaps too strong a word for the scary things that are experienced by a little girl called Sammy. Her dad and mum, played with delightful eccentricity by Joe Cusley and Erika Poole, are far too vague and immersed in their own concerns to notice anything untoward. Sammy, however — a real star performer by the vivacious Josephine Melville, who in her young life has been around for as far back as EastEnders and the Unicorn — is

as bright as a button and immediately at loggerheads with the horrid Miss Nettle, who loathes youngsters and is doing sinister things with poisoned cakes to turn them into flowers imprisoned in thraldom to her in the magic garden. Makeup and costumes by Paula Adrainowski and Leni Hill are brilliantly macabre in their effect. Lizzie Queen's Miss Nettle has much of the fearsome impact of Margaret Hamilton's Wicked Witch of the West in The Wizard of Oz, and, for that matter, Josephine Melville has something of the sparkle of a dusky young Judy Garland. As her friend Eddie, who supports and accompanies her on all her adventures, Ian Doody is engagingly nimble and bright — son of Jean Chellis, he was the Christmas Hansel at the Latchmere and looks to be at the start of a promising career. Tony Pritchard makes Compost the Gardener another entertaining character. He, like the rest of the cast, gives full value to the author's effective music and lyrics, for which credit is also due to MD Nick Skilbeck. Full marks, too, to Alex Bunn's imaginative set designs and director Chris Fisher for keeping the show going at such a cracking pace.

Eric Braun

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