

TELEVISION

Critical Eye, Hanging In The Balance, This Week
Hugh Hebert

WHATSOEVER they do to the heads beneath them, light blue helmets make good targets. Look around any place where the heavy push of politics has come to the shores of a bloody shooting match, and someone is calling for the UN to send in its chariot — and the Security Council opens resolutions like a punctured drum.

If a dozen aid agencies warn that famine and civil war are about to wipe out a million people you can hear the collective snores round the globe. Faith in that tower of Babel in New York is not touching. It's the triumph of liberal delusion over bitter fact. Critical Eye (54) on Somalia was just the latest evidence.

In an earlier but crucial stage of the development of the famine, you watch a UNICEF official in New York telling of his anger that they had asked member countries for \$2 million and that so far they had coughed up less than \$1 million. "The governments that for years crused Barre (the former Somali ruler) with all the tanks and weapons are not providing food for the people."

It took a Somali woman to see that the grain was no use if the people could not cook it. She started a feeding centre and the International Red Cross caught on and opened another 600 across the country.

Hanging In The Balance (Black Box, C4) had another UN arm swiping at the air. It was about Eritrean and Fran Morgan, two Jamaicans found guilty of murder in 1978 and given their country's mandatory death sentence. They have always protested their innocence. In the middle of next month they will begin their 14th year on Jamaica's death row. The former Governor General, Sir Phillip Sago, signed their death warrants twice, and twice Phillip Sagoford won stays of execution. He took the case to the United Nations committee on human rights, who agreed the death sentence should be commuted. The mighty UN had spoken. Sir Florian promptly issued a third death warrant, and in this programme Sagoford is seen preparing to lodge the final appeal on the grounds that his decision was unconstitutional.

You, like me, may well have thought that Jamaica was a free and equal state, but the final say in constitutional matters lies with the Queen and the judicial committee of her Privy Council. There are 270 men on Jamaica's death row, so Her Majesty's Councillors could have a very busy year.

This Week (Thames) took its final curtain call. Its honour roll of reporters bears some names that now have different associations: like Jeremy Thorpe (1956-88); Bryan Gould (1979-83), its most controversial programme was Death On The Rock in 1986, about the shooting of three IRA members in Gibraltar. Neil Kinnock reckoned that the fury this report induced in Margaret Thatcher led to the Broadcasting Act, the franchise auction, and the death of Thames Television and This Week. We'll miss it, perhaps more than we yet know.

THEATRE

The Gift Of The Gorgon

The Pit

Michael Billington

PETER SHAFER's plays are all variations on a single, obsessive theme: the conflict between reason and ecstasy. But his powerful new work, *The Gift Of The*

Gorgon, thickens the brew with meditations on creativity, justice, terrorism and classical myth. Whatever its excesses, it is bracingly theatrical, endlessly alive and fiercely ambitious.

Shaffer's structure itself is complex. Philip Danson, a 28-year-old academic, arrives on a Greek island to help his stepmother Helen to let him write the biography of his late playwright father, Edward, whom he never met. Over a two-day period Helen recapitulates the strange story of her 19-year-life with Edward.

He, it transpires, was a wild, Basque-Welsh writer preoccupied with the Dionysian power of theatre, the need to depict violence, the legitimacy of revenge, meanwhile Helen, daughter of a Cambridge pacifist classicist, was both his creative muse and a restraining influence who finally lost her power. In a direct invocation of Greek myth, she is compared to Athena who first allowed Perseus to slay the snake-haired Gorgon and then saw him become what he had conquered.

As in *Equus* and *Amadeus*, Shaffer broves the structure of a subduer: we keep watching to find out why Edward refused to acknowledge his son, what happened to his career, how he mysteriously died. But Shaffer's prime interest lies in exploring the dialectic between reason and verbiage. What gives it a new charge is that he has shifted his ground. Edward, who argues that "the theatre is the only religion that can never die", obviously has a fierce creative passion.

Dramatically, there are obvious problems. In an age when Greek myth is not exactly current, Shaffer has to illustrate the Perseus legend to show its applicability. The climax also succumbs to rhetoric as if Shaffer cannot decide whether vengeance or charity should have the last word. But what I admire about Shaffer is his sheer recklessness: his willingness to go for the big issues and to dramatise his own divisions.

Peter Hall's production, bearing against the confines of the Pit, itself keeps a fine balance between Shaffer's pictorial romanticism and dialectic classicism. And Derek as Helen also reminds us why she is one of our greatest actresses. Michael Pennington as Edward shrewdly suggests the vanity and cruelty lurking inside the academic dramatist, and Jeremy Northam brings to the academic son a nice touch of Bialystokian puzzlement.

For me, it is easily the best thing Shaffer has done since *Amadeus* simply because, while acknowledging the force of the irrational, it makes an even more eloquent case for fairness, reason and justice.

OPERA

The Adventures Of Mr Broucek

Coliseum

Edward Greenfield

EVEN by the standards of London, *The Adventures Of Mr Broucek* is an odd opera.

How bizarre for the journeyings of the drunken little property-owner from Prague to involve a flight to the moon in Act 1 and equivalent time-travel to 400 in Act 2. English National Opera, back in 1978, presented the first British staging, but now, thanks to sponsorship from 1,600 supporters of ENO, comes a completely new production.

For his penultimate offering as the company's director of operations, David Pountney goes over the top in a dazzling display of stage virtuosity, masterfully backed up by the conducting of Sir Charles Mackerras and the singing and acting of tenor Graham Clark in the title role. Stage productions that go over the

Gift Of teh Gorgon Billington

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