

Epic proportions

Noises Off

Michael Billington

WHY EPICS? Why this modern fascination with turning the world's greatest poems into theatre? One of the key works of the seventies was Ronconi's *Orlando Furioso*, full of winged dragons and caparisoned palfreys. Brook's *Mahabharata* was, internationally, the dominant event of the eighties. And now while the RSC stages *The Odyssey* — due at the Barbican in June — the RNT offers *He Who Saw Everything*, based on the epic of Gilgamesh, as part of the Cottesloe Springboards season. Everyone's thinking big. Let me say at once that the Cottesloe show is hugely impressive. The original poem, dating from around 3000 BC, is said to be the world's oldest sustained work of literature. It consists of oral legends apparently put together by an unknown Babylonian poet. It deals with the adventures of Gilgamesh, two-thirds god, one

third man, who slays lions, bulls, forest-guardians and finally confronts mortality. And it obviously anticipates the labours of Hercules, Homer's *Odyssey*, Noah's Flood. As Rilke said: "Gilgamesh is an immensity".

But is the staging of it just an antiquarian curiosity? Or does it have some meaning for us today? Tim Supple's exultating Cottesloe realisation of Robert Temple's verse translation does everything possible to bring the work alive. The 14 versatile performers alternate between playing an array of bells, gongs, drums, stringed instruments (music by Adrian Lee) and acting out the story. Brookish symbolism is freely used so that the capture of the shape-shifting forest-guardian (Miranda Foster in a figure-hugging black leotard) is suggested through entwined silk streamers. And the work becomes more than a superman-saga when Gilgamesh, seeking eternal life, is told by the flood-surviving Ziusudra "Mankind, like a reed, stands fragile".

The audience sat rapt for over two hours. And although I periodically pondered the

story's political implications — might not all that conquering-hero stuff go down quite well with that modern Mesopotamian, Saddam Hussein? — I too found myself moved, especially by the hero's grief over the death of his companion, Enkidu.

But behind all this lurks a larger question: why the current fascination with epics? In part, it suggests an unsatisfied hunger for narrative. We are constantly told that modern life is fragmented, discontinuous, even meaningless; and much drama and fiction dutifully reflects that fact. Even in the best of modern plays, sustained narrative is often supplanted by verbal echoes, internal rhymes, looped phrases that provide a hidden structure.

But there is strong evidence, on all levels, of a need for stories. I guess it's why people buy shiny airport fiction by Jeffrey Archer, Wilbur Smith or Judith Krantz. It also explains, in part, why Vikram Seth's acclaimed multi-layered saga, *A Suitable Boy*, is number two in the best-seller lists. And, in the theatre, it is evident from the popularity of poetic epics or ad-

aptations of 19th-century novels (from *The Mahabharata* to Nicholas Nickleby) that audiences crave narrative.

But I suspect audiences also find some moral sustenance in the literary epics of the past that they miss in modern drama. The Brook-Carriere version of *The Mahabharata* was moving precisely because it suggested that human beings must find order within themselves to create an ordered universe. And *He Who Saw Everything* is transformed from a Herculean omnipotence-fantasy into something richer when Gilgamesh is confronted by earthly transience: "The dragon-fly," he is told, emerges and flies, but its face is in "the sun for but a day. Is this for ever?" In short, epics go beyond entertainment to offer us eternal truths.

But the current fascination with epics is also part of a yearning for some extra-theatrical experience. Plays, thank God, still have their appeal but even they have increasingly to be part of an "event-culture". What I sense, however, is that, as we seem to lose faith in the rituals of organised religion, we look to the theatre to supply the missing numinous dimension in our lives.

Different people find this in different ways. Some go to the musicals of Andrew Lloyd-Web-

ber which not infrequently (*Cats*, *Starlight Express*) end on a note of spiritual transcendence. Others, who can afford it, go to opera in search of some glimpse of divinity. I suppose I'm one of them: I didn't go to church at Easter. I went to Parsifal. And I am convinced that the modern vogue for staged epics — which invariably combine drama, music and dance — is part of a comparable quest for the ecstatic.

What intrigues me, having attended all five shows in the Cottesloe's admirable Springboards season, is that the atmosphere at *He Who Saw Everything* was clearly something apart. We seemed to be attending a ritual: an attempt to lure the sleeping dragon of an unknown classic from its lair. But, while I find this attempt to harpoon the great epics in many ways laudable and educative (what did I know of Gilgamesh until last Thursday?), I also sniff a disturbing trend: that we downgrade drama in our search for the ultimate *Gesamtkunstwerk* and that we constantly look to art for the answer to our modern spiritual vacuum. Theatre obviously had its origins in religion and ritual. But are we now, in an agnostic age, beginning to turn it into a substitute for worship and asking from it more than it can possibly supply?

Michael Billington He Who Saw Everything May 1993

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