

ired thespian wins in

a strange amoebic blue sky encircling a suspended globe that would look familiar only to devotees of BBC TV's *The Late Show*. Designer Anthony Ward flies in one large side of a picture frame. The globe cracks when Gloucester's eyes are put out, and the sands of time trickle down, accumulating on the Dover coast during the interval. By which time, Stephens engages tellingly with the particular; the mouse and the toasted cheese, and the flying bird ('Wheeeee' sings the king), pathetically engage his attention as the world slips from its axis. John Wood, more manic and eccentric, made these scenes funny, too. Stephens conveys,



Wonderful: Alan Bates.

more movingly, complete disembodiment. He is bound upon a wheel of fire, but knows not where he lodged last night. He carries on Cordelia (Abigail McKern), but only with the help of three shuffling courtiers, and switches from her dying breath to a sudden vision beyond ('Look, there . . .').

By this time the audience was audibly scrabbling for its Kleenex. The whole cast is very strong. Simon Russell Beale is a book-laden Edgar, studying Bedlam to go mad; Owen Teale a bravura, smiling Edmund; David Bradley a deeply affecting echo chamber of Lear's own tragedy as Gloucester; David Calder a rock solid, but never boring (some achievement) Kent. Janet Dale and Jenny Quayle are crackling with sexual voracity and viciousness as Goneril and Regan. One just hopes that, over the season, a fully recovered Stephens finds the lungs and energy for the first half; when he does, this will be a great performance. It is already a deeply heroic one.

More Lear-like monomania, and thunderstorms, with Alan Bates in *The Showman* by the Austrian playwright Thomas Bernhard (1931-1989) at the Almeida, in which the ridiculous actor Bruscon fetches up on tour in a squalid hostelry fitted out with antlers and a residual spirit of Hitler. There are grunting pigs in the yard, and an unseen audience of fat

midgets who are finally deprived of the evening's entertainment by a fire in the parsonage.

Bernhard's rabid hatred of his native country, its inhabitants and its actors makes for compelling, vicarious theatre pleasure, and Bates is on wonderful, flickering form, dispensing acid drops while half-listening to his own voice for the acoustic echo. Bruscon's rant is part of the warm-up for his own play, 'The Wheel of Fire', a palpably atrocious historical stew featuring Stalin, Napoleon, Metternich, Lady Churchill and Marie Curie. But it is also a means of defying the abyss and claiming a spurious vitality, as did the ageing Jimmy Porter in *Déjàvu*.

Jonathan Kent's production combines parochial seediness with comic splendour on the grand scale. The sound and lighting by John A. Leonard and Mark Henderson are brilliantly eloquent. And Paul Brown's arena of grey receding perspectives conveys a world of provincial grunge — if it's Tuesday, it must be blood sausage day! — before placing us behind the red curtain to witness the final panic as Bates dons Napoleonic gear, spies on his inadequate audience and smears his lobotomised, consumptive wife (Mary Rutherford) with black sticks of make-up in her unlooked-for role as the Polish mother of fat magnetism and radioactivity.

Michael Coveney On The Showman

Clipped By:



ianharris

Sun, Dec 29, 2019