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Michael Billington on the collision of fact and fantasy in Shaffer's latest at the Globe

Lord, Peter's whimsy

I CAN'T complain. Two years ago, after *Yonah*, I predict that Peter Shaffer would temporarily banish God from his theatrical vocabulary. He has certainly done that in *Lettice and Lovage*: a whimsically enjoyable, if slightly overweight, conservative comedy that, given fine performances from Mesdames Smith and Tyzack, might almost be dubbed *The Two Moggies*.

Actually it is not a new departure: more a union of the old Shaffer and the new. Twenty-five years ago at this address, the Globe, Shaffer's *The Public Eye* presented us with a liberatingly eccentric private detective. Since then he has written a series of plays — *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*, *Eyans*, *Amadeus* — about the conflict between calculating reason and Dionysian ecstasy.

What he has done in this new play is to unite his obsessive theme with a full-length portrait of a dotty heroine who might, with acknowledgments to Giraudoux, be called *The Madwoman of Paris Court*.

Maggie Smith plays Lettice Douffet: a virtually unemployable tour-guide who cultivates dull history with her own spiralling fantasies. We see her in action, in the very funny first scene, taking parties round a boring Tudor house and wearing ever-more elaborate stories about its original owner's Superman leap up flights of stairs to prevent the Virgin Queen from falling.

Reality enters in the shape of a purse-lipped personal officer from the Preservation Trust who believes in the supremacy of fact and who proceeds to sack her deviationist guide.

What follows is a head-on collision between fact and fantasy which turns into a growing collusion between the two women when they discover a shared detestation of modern architecture.

Mr Shaffer never quite solves a basic structural problem. On the one hand, he is writing a fit part for Maggie Smith: on the other he is creating a comedy about conflicting values. For my money the play is at its best in the superb first act when the two women are locked in glowering combat; and I kept wishing Mr Shaffer had built up the secondary character and dug deeper into

the great dramatic theme of truth versus lies.

When he turns to what the women agree on, he becomes rather soft-focused. I kept wondering what Lettice does about sex and money (does she have any of either?); and the two women's condemnation of modern buildings is so blanket, I fill like opening up a campaign fund for the defence of Richard Rogers and James Stirling. Of course, Mr Shaffer has a point; but it would be more theatrically stimulating if someone opposed it.


Mr Shaffer has, however, written a sumptuous role for Maggie Smith which she seizes, quite literally, with both hands. She has a habit of extending her palms at an angle of 70 degrees to her wrists which gives the whole area from her fingertips to her elbow an astonishing life of its own: it is like watching two demented birds beating their wings against an imprisoning cage.

But Ms Smith also paints a mesmerising portrait of a woman wreathed in inherited eccentricity: almost the funniest character is the unseen one of her mother who led an all-female Shakespeare troupe round the French provinces and who was famous for her Richard III. Where Ms Smith scores is that she plays the character from her own point of view as someone who is mad to others but ineradicably sane to herself. But what I shall not forget is the sight of those fantasising wrists which make Bernstein conducting Mahler look like a model of restraint.

Margaret Tyzack partners her admirably as an art-publisher's daughter encased in tweedy-rectitude and self-sufficient loneliness: her look of numb horror in the final act at the news that her involvement in Lettice's historical chit-chat will be publicly revealed is so profound as to shatter Mr Shaffer's patched-up conclusion. And just when the play looks like running out of steam, Richard Pearson comes on to give it new life as a dry solicitor hypnotised by Lettice's attempt to stage great death scenes from history in her basement: a lovely performance suggesting a galvanised owl.

Michael Baksmore directs efficiently a play in which the two halves of Peter Shaffer — the boulevard entertainer and the obsessive artist — conjoin. In the current West End desert, it provides an oasis of literacy.

But it leaves me with one nagging question, to be answered in the fullness of time: what would it be like without Maggie Smith?



Light fantastic: Maggie Smith as Lettice. Picture: Douglas Jeffrey

THE ROYAL OPERA
MOZART
Die Entführung aus dem Serail

Billington On Lettice

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ianharris

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