



Alex Jennings turns in a memorable performance in John Barton's thrilling production of Peer Gynt in Stratford-upon-Avon

## A peerless Ibsen

Michael Billington

**A**FTER the hi-tech debacle of Ninagawa's recent Peer Gynt, we now have a mesmerising production by John Barton at The Swan in Stratford-upon-Avon. Barton, who directed this vast epic poem in Oslo four years ago, not only explores the great Ibsen theme of the barrenness of individualism but also makes the work a neo-Shakespearean meditation on time and mortality.

Unlike Ninagawa, Barton does this without denying the work's cultural roots. Indeed the first half is like a peasant Singspiel with Per Christian Revholt's brilliant arrangement of Norwegian children's and popular songs threading its way through the action. And, adopting a light Irish accent, Alex Jennings's Peer is the kind of aspiring, tale-spinning fantasist you find in rural communities down the ages: he is a corduroyed dreamer who identifies with the sky's soaring eagles and who cries "If I want to, I can do anything."

What is astonishing, however, is the staging's mixture of virtuosity and humanity. The five-strong female chorus make light-

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ning switches from smoked wedding guests to mountain trolls in Wagnerian helmets (we even get a touch of the Ride Of The Valkyrie). A cascade of feathers evokes Solveig's domestic devotion in the forest hut. And with Raydn Gwynne Freudtun doubling as both Peer's lover and mother, the death of Anse becomes a heartstopping scene in which Peer uses

In fact, Barton captures better than any director since Michael Elliott Ibsen's mixture of playful exuberance and moral seriousness. And in the second act Jennings, through his quicksilver transformations, perfectly embodies Ibsen's point about the dangerous tyranny of self. One minute Jennings is a sleek-haired, dark-glassed tycoon, the next a self-styled Oriental prophet and a second later a map-laden European traveller unwittingly trapped in a Cairo madhouse. He is also superb in the final section of the play: totally bemused by the Button Moulder's injunction "To be yourself is to kill yourself" and retreating into what I take to be a final wish-fulfilling fantasy as he nestles in the lap of his waiting lover. It's a performance that — in its suggestion that Peer, while adopting various adult personae, goes through his life

as boy eternal — lifts Jennings onto a new plateau as an actor. When, I kept wondering, shall we see his Hamlet?

But the joy of the production is that it treats the play not just as a star vehicle but as a company show. Gwynne's unforgettable doubling of Anse and Solveig — the first time it's been tried in Britain — underscores the point that Peer is perpetually searching for his lost mother. And David Killick as a paper-crowned Troll King, Alfred Burke as a dryly inquisitorial Button-Moulder and every single one of the chameleon female chorus add to the show's ensemble weight.

What Barton also catches is the story's Shakespearean dimension. It is partly because, in Louise Belson's design, he uses his familiar device of falling leaves and snowflakes. It is partly because his version, based on Christopher Fry's text, highlights the race of devouring time. But it is also to do with the spirit of generous, all-embracing humanity that pervades every second of this great production.

In rep at The Swan (0799-295623).



## Billington On Peer Gynt

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Mon, Jan 6, 2020