



Spinning a strange fable . . . Kathryn Hunter as the Skriker

PHOTOGRAPH HENRIETTA BUTLER

The Skriker may look arresting, but what does it mean, asks MICHAEL BILLINGTON

Lost on a magic roundabout

NO, IT'S not — as newspapers have been suggesting all week — The Skriker, which might be a play about Gary Linder or the trade unions. Caryl Churchill's new work at the Cottesloe is The Skriker: an ancient word for "a shapeshifter and death portent". Like Shakespeare, the Brothers Grimm and J.M. Barrie before her, Churchill poses a world in which fairies and mortals coningle but, while it makes for eye-arresting theatre, I still found the play strangely opaque.

We first see the Skriker — the protean Kathryn Hunter — looking like some squat, hairy

insect and plotting revenge for ancient wrongs in a dense, pun-packed Joycean prose. Cut to a mental hospital where inmate Josie, who seems to have killed her own child, is being visited by the pregnant Lily. And when the two young women flee to London they are ardently pursued by the shape-shifting fairy who turns up in various guises as American tourist, derelict, haggard street urchin, ball-gowned queen and trousered male wooer. Whisking Josie to the underworld and claiming the maternal Lily's love, she oscillates between evil spirit and fairy godmother, but inescapably she remains a potent symbol of death.

My puzzlement stems from not knowing quite what the story signifies. Is Churchill spinning a fable about the strange otherness of the world around us, warning us about the danger of fulfilled dreams and desires, or reminding us that we are all born astride a grave? In the most potent speech in the play — because it touches on a common human fear — the Skriker even becomes an eco-prophet of doom forecasting the death of the planet. As she says, "It was always possible to think that whatever your personal problem, there's always nature." Not, however, in a world of seasonal disturbance and apocalyp-

tic meteorological phenomena. But in a classic fairy tale a simple story naturally gives rise to multiple meanings, here you have to impose the meanings on the story just to make sense of it.

What you do get, however, is a piece of skilful theatrical magic. Les Waters's production, Ian Spink's movement, Annie Smart's design and Judith Weir's music all create a world in which the co-existence of mortal and immortal seems perfectly natural. Toads, at one point, tumble out of Josie's mouth. A fairy hangs from the ceiling and the Skriker pops up through the sofa as the two women talk. And, as Lily casu-

ally kicks off her shoe, it is suddenly replicated downstage by a giant-size specimen in which sprites and goblins cluster.

Playing Lepage-like tricks with scale, the production has a free-floating immaturity. And, at the centre of it, there is Hunter's prodigious chameleon skill, Sandy McEade's spiky intensity as Josie, and Jacqueline Defferary's maternal protectiveness as Lily. As a theatrical experience, it is full of kaleidoscopic magic, but what I miss in the writing is that element of naivety that is common to all great folk-tales.

In rep at the Cottesloe. Box-office 071-928 2252

Billington On The Skriker

Clipped By:



ianharris

Sun, Jan 5, 2020