



Henry Goodman as Freud in *Hysteria* PHOTOGRAPH: HENRIETTA BUTLER

*A farce about Freud? Terry Johnson's **Hysteria** marries theatrical audacity to real insight— 'a great achievement'*

Farce proves the surreal thing

Michael Billington

TERRY JOHNSON is nothing if not daring. In instigating he brought together Einstein, Monroe and relativity. Now in *Hysteria* at the Royal Court he combines Freud, Dali and infantile seduction theories. The result is a flamboyantly, if erratically, brilliant play that matches Stoppard in its use of farce as a vehicle for serious ideas.

We are in Freud's Hampstead study in 1938. The old man has just been to see Rookery Nook. Suddenly his life turns into a surreal, fantastic version of the Ben Travers prototype. A young girl beats on the French windows demanding admittance. To gain Freud's attention she sheds all her clothes and has to be popped in the closet out of sight of Freud's inquisitive visitors: Abraham Yahuda, the biblical scholar who wants to stop Freud publishing Moses and Monotheism, and Salvador Dali who seems like the myth of Narcissus made manifest.

But why a farce about the great

Sigmund? On one level, I suspect, because Johnson has seen the real hilarity in the unlikely confrontation of Dali and Freud. He builds superbly on a true incident in which the bewildered surrealist found a bike with a hot-water bottle attached to the saddle in Freud's backyard. Johnson even manages to incorporate the analyst's awestruck reaction to the moustachioed painter: "I've never seen a more complete example of a Spaniard."

But like Eric Bentley, Johnson also sees that farce, with its obsessional neurosis, its enactment of subconscious fears, and its destruction of the household gods, is an essentially Freudian entertainment.

So far, so dazzling. But Johnson also has a serious purpose and slyly hints that we are watching the death-fixated Freud's guilt-ridden dream. Jessica, the nocturnal visitor, turns out to be the daughter of one of Freud's 1,297 female patients. Her charge is twofold: that Freud turned a suicidal hysteric into a successful case history, and that he was guilty of careerist opportunism in abandoning his theories about

child abuse in favour of the universality of fantasy.

The latter attack is clearly based on Jeffrey Mousaleff Masson's *The Assault on Truth*. But it is only fair to say that Masson's charges have been rebutted by Richard Wollheim and others, and that, in purely dramatic terms, the accusation that Freud backtracked out of fear of the Viennese bourgeoisie and the skeletons lurking in his own parental closet is not made to stick.

But this in no way invalidates the sheer theatrical audacity of a play that incorporates authentic pain into a farcical framework, or that finally renders Freud's fears in Dallesque terms—clocks melt, doors turn to rubber, a swan descends from the ceiling, and a faceless patriarch towers over the covering analyst.

Phyllida Lloyd's production and Mark Thompson's design rise superbly to Johnson's extravagant demands. And there are remarkable performances from Henry Goodman as a harassed, death-haunted Freud, Phoebe Nicholls as an anguished Jessica reliving her mother's nightmare, David de Keyser as the mosaicically-protective Yahuda and Tim Potter as a fanatically self-admiring Dali.

But Johnson's great achievement is that he has not only opened up the whole debate about Freud's theories on infantile seduction but has also managed to combine dramatic and traumatic values.

At the Royal Court, London SW1, (071-730 1745)

Billington on Hysteria

Clipped By:



ianharris
Thu, Jan 2, 2020