

THEATRE Easter eccentricities



Kate Kellaway senses the **MADNESS** **BENEATH THE SURFACE** in 'Easter' and sees two Shakespeare shows with gender on the agenda

Strindberg wrote *Easter* in 1900, only a year before *The Dance of Death*. The play is eccentric, heavily symbolic and more rugged in some of its details than its successor. But its shape is beautiful. Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Saturday – it takes only three days for willed suffering to turn to unexpected grace and for a domestic drama to turn into a passionate Easter parable.

Kate Mitchell's production at the RSC is outstanding: it has a manic-depressive intensity, a madness just beneath the skin of sense that is essential to Strindberg and missing in the Almeida's current production of *The Dance of Death*. But *Easter* has an advantage over *Dance of Death*: a miraculous ending. I felt stirred by it long after I'd left the theatre.

Elias Heyst, remarkably played by Adrian Rawlins, is in the grip of spring fever. He's pale, manic, feverish, greeting the sun as if it were his personal victory that it shines. He wishes his face in a shaft of light, as if it might bless him. He is looking for omens in an ecstatic manner that is close to despair, greeting claffaches with joy, whipping dustsheet off a piano

and making music that sounds like a dawn chorus.

But it takes little to scissor into Elias's bliss: he has only to contemplate his sister Eleanora, locked up in an asylum, or Lindlovist, to whom the family is in debt. Elias's fiancée Kristina (Heather Ackeroyd) is steadier than he – a student in hope. She looks like Charlotte Brontë: neat, intelligent, quietly powerful.

For much of the play emotion is derived from almost trivial things: an Easter lily taken from a florist by Eleanora, a Latin exam failed by the lodger, Benjamin (an engaging Daniel Betts). But in Strindberg's plays, people say what they feel about everything. It's a form of madness.

Eleanora arrives home from the sanatorium carrying a lily in a pot. She's a nicely-spoken plegian with muddy feet and a pretty face. She offers Benjamin desiccated sayings while watching her lily – her words somewhere between wisdom and flaky inanity. She is infused by religion; when she says 'today the cross, tomorrow resurrection', she gently turns her arms into a crucifix, and slightly leans her head on one side. Lucy Whybrow is

excellently unnerving in the part. Mrs Heyst, the mother (Susan Brown), is said to be mad but seems passionately sensible though inaccurate. Especially enjoyable is the moment when she tells her family about the theft from the florist, while behind her back the tell-tale lily looks about to speak.

Rosa Maggiori's set, inspired by Strindberg's own photographs, is spacious and realful with grey wooden boards and pendant lamps like bell flowers. Each act is framed (the show runs without an interval) with a slide projected on the wall of paintings of the Last Supper and the Crucifixion, accompanied by Iach's *St Matthew Passion*. It's a marvelously theatrical distillation of *Easter*.

At the end, Philip Locke's tremendous Lindlovist returns from the past imposing, rubicund, snow-bearded, wearing a handsome black coat with an astrakhan collar. He seems dangerous and benign. What will his visit bring? He has cast himself as a wolf and as a giant, but he will oversee an ending too real, too testing, to pass as fairytale.

Terry Isaacs's trusy production of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* seems a laminar steel cut of the RSC stable – though in fact the show is at the National Theatre. It's fastidiously crafted, with fine ensemble playing and staunch comic performances.

Denis Quilley plays Falstaff to the manner born: you would recognise him anywhere, even at the bottom

Falstaff's followers in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Photograph: Neil Libbert

of a laundry basket. And everyone knows someone like Brenda Bruce's lively, lightly unreciprocated Mistress Quickly. As for Mistress Ford, Geraldine Fitzgerald is priceless. When she receives Falstaff, she goes through the most amazing motions without words but with the use of her jaws (like a giggly goldfish) to indicate alarm, glee, relish and pretended lust.

Meanwhile, Master Ford (Richard McCabe) entertainingly shows us that jealousy is not a green-eyed monster, more a black beetle with a mission and a smart, black satchel.

The crazy finale in the gloaming with a mighty oak tree and fantastical animal masks makes up for the rest of Timothy O'Brien's also-son design.

The Merry Wives of Windsor is often maligned (and with some cause), but there are some glorious lines, such as 'creesfallen as a dried pear' and 'wainish like hailstones'. This production gave no reason to feel like a dried pear or follow the hailstones' example.

I felt much more like a hailstone about Cheek by Jowl's greatly praised *As You Like It*, (returning to the Abbey Theatre for a limited run). I love Cheek by Jowl's work and an all for taking risks with Shakespeare, but this all-male production does not come off. I

with as much, or more, panache as any director alive, but the camp style of this show is death to the play.

The camp tone carries with it a sort of in-built disparagement of its own wit. By sending Rosalind and Celia up, charm, femininity and the quality of their friendship is lost. Rosalind is one of the most forthright women in Shakespeare, but Adrian Lester doesn't preserve this quality. He makes her baneful, cowering. He's a handsome black actor who turns into a frumpy woman in shining blue silk with a headband and John Lennon specs.

Simon Coates's Celia looks like a prim middle-aged transvestite in glowing red silk. His dismay at finding himself in Arden is funny; but the astringent wit of Celia's lines is lost in favour of the amusements of drag. (Incidentally, lines were also lost because the actors were sometimes inaudible.) Only Jaques (Michael Gardiner) survives the camp treatment: the witty disaffected melancholy of his lines works perfectly.

Nick Ormerod's set is chic but underpowered. The white backdrops are a cop-out and the acid-green streamers – though the colour is fantastic – give us a severely minimalist Arden. Magic is entirely missing until the sensational ritual dance after which Rosalind, suddenly splendid in her wedding dress, speaks the epilogue with a new directness and charm. I confess that when she charged the ladies to like as much of the play as pleased them, she made me feel childish and mean – but unrepentant.

After the outcry about Sarah Kane's *Blasted* and its violence, it's hard to imagine that another play could compete. Yet at the Bush Theatre, a notice warns audiences that they may find some scenes in *Killer Joe* disturbing. I watched the final scene through the gaps between my fingers. But beneath the warning, there should be praise.

Tracy Letts's first play (*Tracy's* a man) is violent but funny, compassionate, superbly written and galvanisingly performed by a Chicago theatre company directed by Wilson Milan. It shows how violence on stage must be more than exposition. *Killer Joe* also clarifies the fact that the problem with *Blasted* is Kane's voice, which, though confident, cannot be heard above her plot. In the theatre, words must speak louder than actions.

Easter in repertory at The Pit, Burslem, Leicestershire EC2 0J 7J 638 889J; *The Merry Wives of Windsor* in repertory at The Olivier Theatre, RNY, London SE1 0J 7J 928 928J; *As You Like It* at 11 Feb, Abbey Theatre, London WC2 0J 7J 369 1730J; *Killer Joe* until 11 Feb, The Bush Theatre, London W12 0J 81 743 3388J

Kate Kellaway On Easter

Clipped By:



ianharris

Wed, Jan 8, 2020