

Sour mash stew

THEATRE
Lindsay Duncan in
'Cat on a Hot Tin Roof',
Vanessa Redgrave in
'A Touch of the Poet'

MICHAEL RATCLIFFE

IT HAS taken the National Theatre more than 25 years, blessed with Tennessee Williams, and if Clause 29 of the Local Government Bill gets onto the Statute Book by Easter — as now seems possible — they have got round to *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (Lyrictheatre) just in time. The hero is a former college sports star whose friendship with a buddy now dead means more to him than his marriage to a beautiful, unhappy wife. Could this be what the Member for Spelthorne means by the 'promotion' of homosexuality?

The last time this play was staged in London, 30 years ago by the young Peter Hall, you had to pretend to join a club for the evening in order to see it (in Liverpool, too). Williams is a dispassionate mountain man unhappy Brick (Ian Charleson) is pursued by Furies as fierce as any that went after Orestes. Skipper's death has driven him into sullen alcoholic despair, and the fear planted by his father, Big Daddy (Eric Porter), that the friendship was somehow 'not right', together with his own guilt at the way he rejected it, will certainly keep him knocking back the sour mash long after the play is done.

This second act, in Howard Davies's production, is an absolute cracker. The quarrel between Brick and Big Daddy circles with a lazy and deceptive pointlessness over familiar ground until the older man sees an opening and plunges for the kill. Charlton, having bided his time on the edge of things for one-and-a-half acts, repels Big Daddy's accusation with a choking, barely coherent force, scuffling and leaping across the floor, lashing out with the crutch that supports his broken foot. He strikes back at his father with the only forbidden truth he has: that Big Daddy has terminal cancer and only a short time to live.

Porter, in long grey hair and beard, plays a role conventionally thought so inaccessible to English actors that even Olivier mislaid it for Colonel Sanders when playing it on television. He allows Big Daddy an intelligence that tem-

pers his irritability and a worldliness that begins to look wise. It is a wonderful, refining and truthful performance that transforms our preconceptions of the role completely and makes it his own.

The virtuoso first act still needs more energy, panic and speed. Lindsay Duncan plays Brick's wife Maggie with the pale mask and carnivorous lips of the mid-fifties, and a wicked, provoking grin. She employs two specially acquired wiles — a pugilist's strut and a debutante's sway — with which to deflect heretofore sexual frustrations in the hostile environment of Brick's family home.

She is a keen listener, and a wit, but her voice, at present, is brittle and thin. The heroines of Tennessee Williams are quasi-operaic roles which demand a lyrical diversity, strength and pliancy to put across the height hysteria of their lives. In all recent performances — including Joanna Woodcock's in the filmed 'Glass Menagerie' — that musical strength and colour have been missing, and they are missing here. The rest of the company, led by Barbara Leigh-Timm's flushed and blundering Big Mama, is inventive and strong.

Eugene O'Neill's *A Touch of the Poet*, directed by David Thacker and designed by Saul Radomsky at the Young Vic, is, like *Cat*, a play about boozing greed, the human wastefulness of hypocrisy, and the pain caused by an obsession with the faltering past. The comparison, on this occasion, goes against O'Neill, for 'A Touch of the Poet' (1957), premiered after his death) finds O'Neill at his most potent, rewriting till kingdom come.

It is a comedy-melodrama of resilience and recrimination set in the dining room of Con Maloney's tavern near Boston in 1828. Only four characters count: Con (Timothy Dalton), a violent drinker and veteran bell-ringer of the Peninsular War; his adoring wife Nora (Vanessa Redgrave), their rebarbative daughter Sara (Rudi Dolek) and Deborah (Amanda Boxer), the mother of Simon, loved by Sara but never seen. How Sara gets Simon despite the devastating severity of Deborah's intervention, how Con throws off his false Peninsular self and how the Irish and the Yankee give each other bloody noses to the general satisfaction of all is the matter of the play, which lasts three-and-a-half hours.

Dalton is a very good actor — elegant, devilish, witty — but Con is a huge part for a resourceful monster-performer, and that he is not. Davies, with her pale, young, heaving peasant face, makes Sara excessively shrewish and sour and employs a mannered form of delivery from the back of the throat which, at present, strangles too many words. The main reason for hurrying to see the play on the intimate arena stage of the Young Vic over the next two weeks — it transfers to the Theatre Royal, Haymarket, after that — is to see Redgrave's radiant Nora close up. It is a smallish role which she invests with a soft giggle, indestructible meekness and loving pride from which all traces of sentimentality have been struck.

Much more adventurous and rewarding, however — indeed an event of exceptional richness and interest — is the British premiere of Botho Strauss's dark and disturbing variation on 'A Midsummer Night's Dream', *The Park* (Crucible, Sheffield). It is translated by Tinch Minter and Anthony Vivas, directed by Steven Pimlott with Clare Venables, and designed by Tom Cairns. You will see nothing more ambitious outside London all year.

Oborn (John Ramon) and Thiana (Cecily Hobbs) return to the direct cities to teach the joyless citizens spirit, the fiercest point of love. Mr Strauss, like Tennessee Williams and Eugene O'Neill, belongs to the passionate school of romantic anti-materialists, so, naturally, they fall. Thiana, however, falls in love with a bull — the myth of Pausanias and the Minotaur is stirred into the mix — and ends up a martyr at her own silver wedding with only four guests — the lovers, previously quarrelling, now frozen with respect — and her own, discreetly hooded, son. Oborn loses his powers completely, forgets the words 'know a bunk' and cannot even get a job.

Not all of it works, particularly after the interval, and for that the playwright, translators and directors must all share responsibility, but the first half grips the spectator unforgettably in a mischievous, traumatic language of urban decadence where graffiti have replaced art-zen no longer fight for their women but come to gentlemen's agreements, and reality dissolves in the fear that they have all ceased to exist and are merely dreaming one another's lives. Pimlott and Cairns pulled off the same trick in 'Twelfth Night' this time last year, when Ramon was an outstanding and dangerous Feste. He confirms himself here as one of the most gifted young actors around, mixing danger with a harsh pathos and gentle despair.



Lindsay Duncan as Maggie the cat with 'carnivorous lips of the mid-fifties and a wicked, provoking grin'.

Fond old men

MR KING has retired from London Transport and now plans to return to his native Trinidad. To celebrate he takes his daughters out to a restaurant. Over dinner it becomes apparent that Barrie Keeble's *King of England* (Theatre Royal, Stratford East) is a witty modern version of 'King Lear'. Mr King (Rudolph Walker) tries to make over his house to his two daughters, but when he proposes a toast to England, as if to thank a benign host, Susan, a tough name (Claire Benedict), refuses to raise her glass. King's other daughter, Linda (Ellen Walker) has a plently spunky personality to match her gold lame dress and will drink to anything. Philip Hedley directs this scintillating production with its diverting 'storm scene' in which

Michael Ratcliffe On Cat

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