

On with the status quo

NOT THE LEAST of several ironies fluttering delicately around the Mayakovsky Theatre of Moscow's performance of *Tomorrow Was War* at the Lyttelton Theatre on Wednesday was the voice of Vanessa Redgrave welcoming us warmly to a National Theatre on none of whose stages has she, alas, ever performed. Later she reminded us through the words of a character—she was doing a heroic *liv* headphone translation for the entire three hours of Boris Vasiliev's play—that truth must never become dogma, but is bound all the time to test its strength and purpose. Yes, of course, and it was Lenin who said so.

She was both supportively wonderful—catching, by a quick turn of voice, the patronising litigiousness of a father towards his daughter's friends from school, and the dignity of the girl's suicide ('she simply . . . fell asleep') when he was wrongfully arrested for embezzlement and she was faced with expulsion from the Komsomol—and also misleadingly so. It was often impossible to know which of the many characters was speaking, with the result that all of them—parent, headmaster, party member, drop out, ideologue—sounded justified, gentle and wise.

But then the play, which looks back with hindsight on a school class in the summer of 1940, and brought the NT's triumphant first International Theatre Season to a touching, instructive but not quite triumphant close, is inclined to do that, too. It speaks less with the voice of *glamour* than with the conventional blanket forgiveness which leaves everything and everyone exactly where they were. It seemed a very circumspect affair

THEATRE

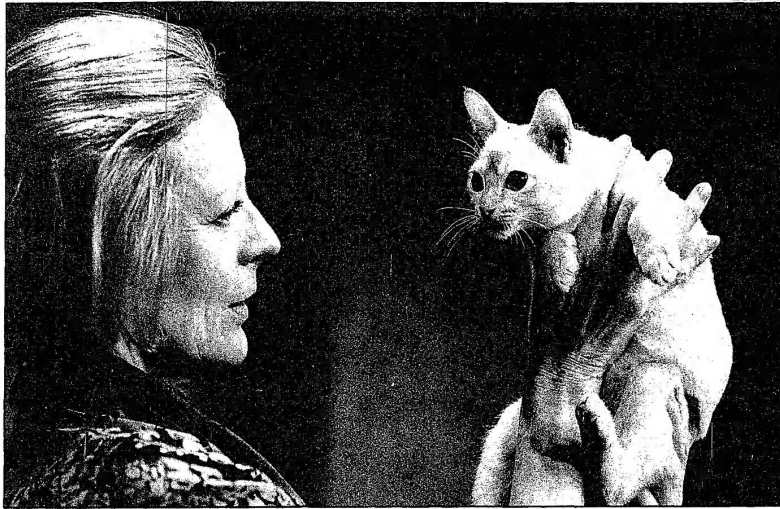
Mayakovsky Theatre
and Maggie Smith
in Peter Shaffer's
'Lettice and Lovage.'

MICHAEL RATCLIFFE

compared, for example, to the defiant emotional extravagance and cosmopolitanism of Victor Slavkin's 'Cerseau,' which preceded it by six months in 1985 and was seen at Riverside in July during LIFT, or Valentin Gubarev's extraordinary Cherebny play, 'Sarco-phagus,' now transferred to The Mermaid by the RSC and on no account to be missed.

Surely there were Soviet plays and books before 1985 suggesting that girls might want to be girls and that a fanatically exact interpretation of Stalinist orthodoxy was not altogether a good thing? The 'rebellion' of Vasiliev's class 9B is only against the unfeeling strictness of their form mistress, and it is a measure of its equivocation elsewhere that we were tempted to wonder whether Valendra Andronova might not after all have had a point. O. E. Prokofieva played her with relentless precision, swooping down on all irregularities like a skinny, fanatic bird. She was also the first to crack into tears at the curtain call, which was not only entirely proper and Russian but confirmed that she had been acting with the intensity of painful truth.

Maggie Smith is back in the West End, acting with her wrists, describing circles in the air, winding invisible wool, wringing her hands and raising her eyes, tearfully helpless before the complexities of the micro-chip age. She is the star of Peter Shaffer's new comedy *Lettice and Lovage* at the Globe, and the first main difference between this display and its



Maggie Smith in 'Lettice and Lovage,' acting with her wrists, describing circles in the air, winding invisible wool, wringing her hands and raising her eyes.

predecessors is that, following two marvellous performances in plays by Cocteau and Poliakoff at HammerSmith and the National, we now know she is acting like this because she wants to and not because she can no longer do anything else.

The second is that, for once, she has an adversary and partner entirely her match — Margaret Tyzack—who gives the funniest and most touching performance of the night. Tyzack plays lugubrious cello to Smith's skittering fiddle, turning upon her partner's wilder fancies the heavy-lidded countenance of a gundog turned to stone. She mourns the architectural destruction of London with passion; she is gorgeous.

'Lettice' is a fey heritage comedy about the decline and fall of practically everything in which Miss Smith plays an incorrigible romancer and stately home guide sacked for embellishing dull facts with theatrical imagination by Lote Schoon (Tyzack), her ferocious employer at the Conservation Trust. How the two lonely women

come together in shared regret for the pride and grandeur of the world all gone' takes up the rest of the play; why they do not end up in bed together is its greatest mystery, and when they perform historical charades with a sitcom fervour that leads to a charge of attempted murder Mr Shaffer leads us way past embarrassment and whimsy into the land beyond belief.

Michael Ratcliffe On Lettice

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