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Peter Lindford as Mephistopheles and Simon Callow, right, as Faust; A chameleon cheekiness and a persuasive craving for ecstasy PHOTOGRAPH: DOUGLAS JEFFERY

# A holy healthy Faust

**The Lyric Hammersmith's version of Faust blends spectacle and language magnificently. Michael Billington reports**

GOETHE'S Faust is not exactly unknown in English. Irving played Mephistopheles ver 700 times in what Shaw alled W. G. Wills's "foolish ravesty." In 1924 Arnold Bennett records seeing a nearly full ersion at the Old Vic ("was oing very strong when I left at 1 pm"). More recently Theatr lwyd presented Part One and obert David Macdonald slimned the whole epic into 3½ ours at the Glasgow Citizens, roving that Goethe's masteriece is stageable.

But the Lyric Hammersmith, hose very existence was ecently threatened, is now offering as complete a version as e have probably seen in Britin. And, on the evidence of art One, I would describe avid Freeman's production as ssential viewing: witty, imagiative, erotic and preserving a hrewd balance between language and spectacle. Indeed, with actors swinging by their toes from the over-arching iron bridge of David Roger's set, it gives the lie to all that rubbish about British actors being exclusively text-bound. If this came from Eastern Europe, we'd all be going bananas.

What makes Goethe's Faust different from Marlowe's Faustus is that we know from the start that the hero is redeemable: Mephistopheles makes a bet with God which he is bound to lose. The tension in the play springs from within Faust himself. Stuck in his gloomy, Gothic study with its worm-eaten junk, he tells us, in Robert David Macdonald's admirable translation, that "two souls within me struggle for possession." The one is sensual, earthbound man: the other "strives for purity of mind." Out of that internal dialectic springs the drama; and when Faust says that he craves "the agony of elation" he speaks for modern man.

But Goethe scholars frequently claim, like T.J. Reed, that "Faust is above all a poem rather than a readily practicable stage-drama." Not on the evidence here. Indeed what strikes me is the way Goethe blends not only lyric verse and four-beat doggerel but what we would call holy and rough theatre: a point firmly grasped by Mr Freeman.

The first half of the evening bustles along with the picaresque ebullience of an Enlightenment Peer Gynt. Thus Peter Lindford's floor-sniffing canine is metamorphosed in a puff of smoke into a magical Mister Mephistopheles who hangs upside down from the arched bridge. In the Leipzig beer-cellar the topers suddenly find themselves breathing flame.

And in the Witch's Kitchen, where Faust goes to be rejuvenated, we get Robyn Moore as a fellating, breast-massaging witch, a stage crawling with chattering simians and a spectacular transformation in which Simon Callow's wispy-haired Faust emerges from the cauldron stark naked to run scampering over the iron bridge.

Aided by Nigel Osborne's music which employs everything from Chinese gongs to tabors, Mr Freeman's production delights in theatricality and combines pure pantomime with the reckless pursuit of knowledge. I find more problems in the second half where Faust's love for Gretchen leads to accidental murder, infanticide (Gretchen kills her illegitimate child) and execution. Brecht once asked a very good question: why doesn't Faust get married ? He said that Goethe supplied the answer at the end of Part Two when Faust's sensual and spiritual side are at last united in productive work for mankind.

But, judged in isolation, the Gretchen episode is ill-plotted (Goethe skips casually over a year in time) and is here less than fully realised. Alyson Spiro's Gretchen is good but wanting in lyricism; we don't get the full thunder of the Dies Irae; and when it comes to Walpurgis Nacht, a vast ship's ladder descends from the flies leading to much frigging in the rigging but suggesting at times a rather debauched holiday-cruise.

My reservations, however, are swept aside by Mr Freeman's grasp of the complex architecture of the play and by the astounding versatility of the 12-strong company. Simon Callow's Faust moves persuasively from moth-eaten academic rancour to intemperately youthful exuberance (he also speaks the verse beautifully).

Peter Lindford's Mephistopheles, at one point blasphemously posing as Christ on the cross, has a lithe, chameleon cheekiness much assisted by the translation: "naturally," he claims, "when God created woman, he made a pretty one — he's only human." And the company, whether as angels descending from Heaven on ropes or as witches having a ball, display an acrobatic Meyerholdian vigour.

Final judgement must wait until we see Part Two next week. But already Mr Freeman, using his operatic experience to the full, has colonised a world classic and pinned down the Faustian craving for ecstasy that links him to modern man.

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## Billington On Faust Part One

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