

Michael Billington on the second of Peter Hall's farewell productions at the National

The devil in Prospero

THIS is going to be the year of *The Tempest*: the Ninagawa Company, the RSC, the Old Vic and Cheek by Jowl all have productions in the pipeline. What I shall principally remember from Peter Hall's Cottesloe production (which is infinitely better than the Masque-like version he did in 1974) is Michael Bryant's transformation of Prospero from the usual benign schoolmaster into a testy little nut-brown necromancer who is almost a Mediterranean Faust.

The concept is not wholly original: Gielgud in Brook's 1957 production offered an angry, bare-chested despot. But Bryant pushes the idea much further than anyone I have seen. From the first scene with Miranda it is clear that this Prospero has spent 12 years simmering with rage at his usurpation. Bryant manages to turn Shakespeare's laziest exposition into a passage of recollected fury: he goes almost purple at the very thought of his brother, Antonio, and when he describes how he and Miranda were "heaved" out of Milan the humiliation still burns. But Bryant's wry chuckle at the mention of the noble Neapolitan, Gonzalo, hints that his humanity is not quite dead.

You need this internal tension within Prospero to com-

pensate for the lack of conflict within the play itself: since the hero has his enemies in his power we are dealing with a theatrically stacked deck. But the Hall-Bryant interpretation also rescues the play from being a valedictory poem full of set-piece arias and turns it into a renunciation of diabolism.

When Bryant comes to the celebrated abjuration of his powers he stops dead in his tracks on "graves at my command have waked their sleepers, oped and let 'em forth" as if confronting the fact that he has been practising the blackest of magic. The conjuration of heavenly music (excellently supplied by Harrison Birtwistle) thus becomes an urgent plea from a man who has been dabbling in Satanism.

This area of the play is explored with exceptional intelligence and Bryant gives a first-rate performance of a man traumatised by powers he has previously exulted in. But although Hall's production banishes received ideas, I wished it made more of the Prospero-Ariel relationship.

Steven Mackintosh plays the spirit as a metamorphosing Ovidian gender-bender who can turn at will into a sea-nymph with long blonde locks and bulging mammaries. But I missed within him that yearning hunger for freedom con-



● Jennifer Hall as Miranda

stantly thwarted by the imposition of one more task; and his final release has none of the emotional impact of the Strehler production where the flying Ariel was unhooked and sped like lightning through the auditorium.

Hall's production has clarity, taste and some extremely well-managed spectacle. In the storm scene he freezes the action so that you get the point that foul weather is no respecter of rank. And Prospero's isle is simply a circle of sand (bathed by Gerry Jenkinson in late-afternoon, five o'clock shadow) extensively populated by sinister bald elves who turn into monstrous, black-winged

birds or red-eyed hounds. But not even Hall can disguise the fact that the play, after the tortured complexity of *The Winter's Tale*, is more oratorio than drama: just as you are getting involved, for instance, in the plot to unseat Prospero you are diverted by a Masque, here treated as a piece of baroque opera with Juno descending from the heavens as in Glyndebourne Monteverdi.

Hall's very fidelity to the play exposes some of its flaws. Where he succeeds is in injecting reality into the sundry power-struggles. Ken Stott (despite a collapsing 'tash) and Basil Henson make the usurping lords malign plotters clearly unmoved by Prospero's final charity.

Tony Haygarth's Caliban is both a horned, fanged monster and someone with the pathos of exploited people everywhere. And although the comedy scenes are not exactly riotous a clear contrast is established between Tim Pigott-Smith's Trinculo in Little Tich boots and John Bluthal's martial, peppy Stephano. But in the end this production will be remembered for Bryant's revisionist Prospero and the fact that it replaces sentimental rubbish about Shakespeare's farewell to P's art with a story about a tetchy Italian diabolist regaining a dukedom.

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