

Michael Billington reviews *The Changeling*; its star talks about playing innocence and evil

Fateful attractions

RICHARD EYRE'S production of *The Changeling* at the Lyttelton is like a blood-stained calling-card. As director-designate of the National, Mr Eyre offers tantalising hints of things to come. He transposes the play's action to a 19th-century Spanish slave colony, radically alters the dimensions of the stage and suffuses everything with a full-blown theatricality. Visually, the production is magnificent; but it is flawed by erratic casting and some reedy speaking that fails to relish the play's language.

Middleton and Rowley's play (1631) is a Jacobean classic that unites sex, class and money. It reeks of modernity in its notion that loving and loathing are inseparable and in its idea that we are essentially defined by our actions. Beatrice-Joanna, the daughter of an Alcázar lord, hires her father's detested servant, De Flores, to murder an unwanted suitor: she is enslaved both by the event and the killer who tells her, in one of the most resonant lines in Jacobean drama, "You are the devil's creature." But when the heroine is destroyed by her passion, in an ironic subplot set in a madhouse, we see a doctor's wife, Isabella, retaining her chilly integrity when seduced by a counterfeiter lunatic.

T. S. Eliot condemned the subplot's nauseousness and Una Ellis-Fermor suggested it could be cut altogether. But Mr Eyre and his designer, William Dudley, remind us that the whole play is predicated on the notion of love as a "tame madness." The opening image is of the principal characters being conjured up from a huddle of floorbound lunatics. And Mr Dudley's set consists of a tunnel-shaped stage that is all rot-encrusted Spanish baroque and sun-burnished walls flanked on either side by towering, white-tiled stoyim that descends into some infernal pit. It is as if the Marat-Sade were pressing in on a world of colonial opulence and intelligently reinforces the idea of the play.

But Mr Eyre thickens Middleton and Rowley's brew by adding the idea of race to that of class. De Flores is no Jacobean captive but a ferociously black in white livery who clearly awakens fierce sexual longings in his mistress: the more she condemns him as a "standing board" the more you feel she is aroused by him. And, in a witty piece of grouping, Mr Eyre shows both De Flores and his

madhouse counterpart, Lollio, literally looking down on this world of tormented white lust from a curved balcony high up in the roof.

As a concept, the production has a drawing-board brilliance. But a play comes to life in the hands of its actors and, at the moment, the ideas are stronger than the performances.

Miranda Richardson is a fascinating actress who always suggests something darkly sinister under a doll-like beauty but her effects are too minutely achieved for a big space like this. What she underplays, in particular, is the heroine's governable sexual obsession with De Flores. Where previous Beatrices (Diana Quick and Emma Pipher both played the role in 1970) have shown a quirky fascination with his corrugated features, Mr Richardson treats him with patrician disdain. She comes into her own in the later scenes of degradation ("This fellow has undone me endlessly" is rancidly sexy) but Ms Richardson offers an internalised portrait of a woman torn between love and hate.

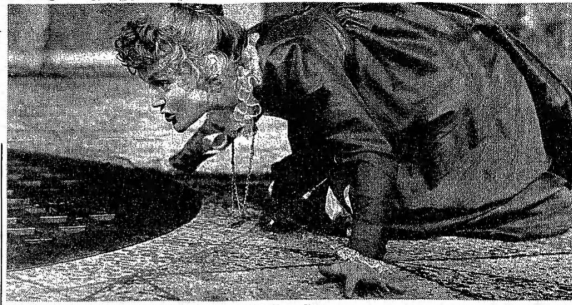
George Harris is a striking De Flores. He has a contained power and built-in hauteur that reminds me of Viv Richards, leaning nonchalantly on his hat before smiting the Essex bowlers round the park. But even Mr Harris's best effects are visual: in particular, his gleaming, lubricious smile at the mime-show wedding of Beatrice to her chosen groom, Alsemero.

Paul Jesson is all agonised nobility as the deceived husband and David Ryall gets across the willful resultfulness of Beatrice's dad. And there is a notable cameo from Rebecca Pidgeon as Isabella, Beatrice's madhouse alter ego. There was a great moment in Peter Gill's 1976 Riverside production when the two women passed within a hair's-breadth of each other: here a comparable effect is achieved by having Isabella suddenly made manifest behind Beatrice during a madhouse masque.

Mr Eyre has opened his account with a bold, arresting production very different in style from Peter Hall's militant classicism. What worries me is not so much the Rebel of regional accents — everything from Goordle to Liverpudlian — as the sense that the play's meaning is being imparted visually rather than verbally.

Classical theatre is partly about a communicated delight in language: I only hope Mr Eyre puts that high on his list of priorities as he takes over the National's next seat.

Bill will be back next week.



Torn between love and hate: Miranda Richardson in *The Changeling*.

PHOTOGRAPH DOUGLAS JEFFERY

Creature of the deed

Desmond Christy

MIRANDA Richardson played Ruth Ellis in *Dance With A Stranger* and that made her a star, a part she doesn't like playing. So she behaves as if her mother had told her not to talk to strangers, even in interviews.

She talks easily about her new role at *The National*, but doesn't want to talk much about anything else: "There's a limit to how much I can tell you about my flat, my cat and my garden."

Richardson is playing Beatrice-Joanna in *The Changeling*, one of those Jacobean tragedies that is much possessed by death but even more so by sex. From the mo-

ment Beatrice-Joanna hires de Flores to commit murder she evil multiplies with a Macbeth-like intensity and speed. "There's no time for thought," says Richardson, "It's like a relentless wheel of fate. A perversion of everything that is blamed on fate." And that is how she thinks Richard Eyre's production will feel to the audience.

Audiences and actresses, including Miranda Richardson, find it hard to accept Beatrice-Joanna as the instigator of all the evil.

"You could argue," says Richardson, "that Beatrice-Joanna didn't have the idea of murdering her betrothed in the first place at all — it was Alsemero who put the idea in her head. Alsemero who is supposed to be the

great innocent. I cling to that idea anyway."

But innocents can be a problem. "I always think of actresses who can maintain this wonderful air of innocence. You don't always know whether you've got that or not. So what complicates things is a sort of self-monitoring — which, I'm quite guilty of — and almost a playing of the innocent because you don't trust that you have that quality."

Eyre "allows everyone their freedom but then he brings all these strands together," she says. "We've had time to do things a few different ways and are still changing things, which I find very exciting. I said to Richard Eyre the other day, 'Why should it feel like a failure to ditch something that you've been working on?' It

shouldn't, but inevitably that's the start it does."

"Sometimes you wake up in the middle of the night and think, 'Why didn't I do it that way?' It doesn't always work but it does give you that extra jolt of adrenaline — which is really all that Beatrice-Joanna is living on by the end of the play."

She seems to have no definite plans after *The Changeling*. But aren't the offers pouring in? "It's really not like that. Everybody's got a false idea about me, that I'm rolling in meshebes. The Spielberg (*Empire Of The Sun*) was the biggest financial kick I've been on. But there's not that much that comes in."

At which point a wardrobe mistress comes in to rescue Miranda Richardson from any more questions.

In praise of older women

Radio

Val Arnold-Foster

A GOOD week for connoisseurs of one of the delights of radio, the voice of the older woman. Baroness Elliott, Baroness Sear, Gwen Frangcon-Bayles and the Reverend Elsie Chamberlain — two politicians, an actress and a cleric. No knowing their combined age, since the Rev was not saying — an apparently coy gesture from such a down-to-earth woman. But, so she said, "people would think I ought to

have shut up by now". Not a sentiment many male clerics of her age would voice.

Robert Carvel talked to Lady Elliott of Harwood in Carvel in Conversation (Radio 4, Thursday and Saturday). She is 85, and still an active member of the Upper House. Her voice was clear, precisely Edwardian — "gels" for girls — and still with the confidence of one who had always moved in the highest circles. Born a Tennant, half-sister to Margaret Asquith, she married Walter Elliott, later a Tory minister, and sailed into a variety of post posts.

Like all the Carvel conversations, full of sparkling tidbits: Jimmy Maxton had been a Tory at university, whereas Elliott had been a socialist — and

Lady E had beaten Macmillan at golf. No militant feminist, she would prefer to "let the men to back me".

Lady Sear, a familiar and impressive politician and broadcaster, has never been told Cliff Morgan in the My Heroes series (Radio 4, Friday), an extreme feminist. She had never adopted an "anti-men" attitude: "extremely unproductive," she explained. A sensible woman with a variety of experience, she talked with notable common sense. Her Liberal beliefs springing partly from her observations of Communism versus Fascism before the war, she remarked that Hitler, after all, had been a hero to some. She talked with admiration of others, from her history teacher at school to Lord Gri-

tem on heroines. The presenter, Jenni Murray, admitted to first admiring Florence Nightingale, and even more the Victorian woman who had changed her name and her clothes to become a senior army doctor.

Gwen Frangcon-Bayles had the same blessed clarity of speech as the two politicians — and the same good sense. She was on Desert Island Discs (Radio 4, Sundays and Fridays); Sus Lawley and she chatted together in the kind of relaxed way that neither of Miss Lawley's predecessors could have achieved. And it was noticeable how, like the other women, she had reached a ripe old age without getting pompous.

It seems BBC bosses are worried about the mildest swear-

Billington on Changeling

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