

Michael Billington on the Lyric's stirring Faust completed

Soul of pleasure

YOU either surrender to Goethe's Faust or you don't. My own reaction, after watching the full seven hours of Parts One and Two at the Lyric Hammersmith, is one of astonishment: astonishment both at encountering this great mythic poem on the English stage and at the success of David Freeman and his 12-strong company in encompassing so much of it. Peter James says this production is crucial to the Lyric's future: it will, if there is any justice, guarantee it.

But how good a play is Goethe's Faust? George Steiner calls it "sublime melodrama". He argues that Goethe, unlike Marlow, evades the tragic implications of the story in that his hero is saved and ends up with an act of Rousseauesque benevolence — draining the marshes to build a new society — before being borne away amidst falling rose-petals and an angelic choir. Following Thomas Mann, Steiner even argues that there was in Goethe a decisive *Bürgerlichkeit*: a word implying middle-class solidity and confidence in the way of the world.

He may be right. But that is not how it comes across in performance where the play emerges as something larger than a pseudo-medieval tragedy about a man who sacrifices his immortal soul to earthly pleasure. Goethe replaces the religious battle between good and evil with the opposition of activity and passivity. As Faust says in Robert David Macdonald's version, "Life and Liberty are theirs alone who fight for them each day." His discovery is that doing is superior to being; and, while this may undercut the sense of tragedy, it places Goethe at the forefront of modern thought.

In fact what is startling about Part Two is the way Goethe, even as he sends his character hurtling through time and history, anticipates modern ideas. Faust arrives at the bankrupt court of the Holy Roman Emperor. So what does he do? Invents paper money and thereby causes rampant inflation. Even more prophetic is the scene where Faust's old pupil, Wag



Callow... tragic aura

ner, creates artificial life in the shape of Homunculus: an alchemical hermaphrodite imprisoned in a glass bubble. In Mr Freeman's production the image of Linda Kerr Scott's test-tube baby propelling herself round the stage is impressive: a pity her words rarely penetrate the sealed bubble.

But this is a rare lapse in a production that keeps the balance between ideas and images. Mr Freeman saves his big Flo Ziegfeld effect for the Rocky Inlets of the Aegean Sea where Homunculus enjoys a mystical union with the sea-nymph Galatea. The stage suddenly explodes with cascading fountains and fires, downstage-tanks, filled with splashing nymphs and naked philosophers, foam to the brim. Far more exciting than the hi-tech effects of big musicals, it unites Busby Berkeley and Bishop Berkeley and manages to create the effect of an aqueous paradise.

The key to David Roger's design, in fact, is the incorporation of earth, air, fire and water: we even get *Leurus* flying near a sun comprising a blazing, light-bulbed disc. But the success of the production lies in the fact that the images always reinforce meaning. The land-reclamation of the final scenes is evoked through something as simple as the rhythmic movement of stocking-masked figures hugging sandbags onto the stage to the tolling of a melancholy bell. Far from seeming like some Greenpeace Utopia, it

suggests the immeasurable impossibility of Faust's task; but it is the pursuit rather than the goal that matters which, in the end, seems to me the whole point of Goethe's play.

The theatricality of the production is matched by Mr Macdonald's translation which accommodates Goethe's shifting styles and achieves a Byronic gaiety (appropriate for a play in which Byron is celebrated in the figure of Euphorion). Thus Mephistopheles, thrust into an alien world of classical sirens, announces, "Though I know how to manage Northern witches, I'm none too happy with these foreign bitches." And when asked to conjure up Paris and Helen he replies, "You think one pulls such things out of the blue. A case of 'whistle-and-she'll-come-to-you' in which the Bacall-like anachronism seems entirely fitting.

Simon Callow's Faust also embodies Goethe's point that continual striving is the very point of human existence. He shifts in this version from tormented medievalist to modern man to, at the end, a bearded Tolstoyan patriarch sharing something of the great writer's passion for communal welfare. But although the play may not, technically, be a tragedy, Mr Callow endows Faust with what I can only call a tragic aura in his discovery of the spiritual emptiness of mere enjoyment.

Peter Lindford's Mephistopheles is sleek and witty and even brings a resonant sadness to his climactic lust for the angels who spirit away the body of Faust. And Caroline Bliss is not only memorably fetching as Helen but also gives dignity and weight to her stoic acceptance of "earthly destiny" after the fall of Troy.

I would be a liar to deny there is the odd moment when you tune out of this epic play. (Great art risks boredom: only second-rate art is permanently entertaining). But not since John Barton's *The Greeks* have I seen such a stirring piece of reclamation and one that proves Goethe's Faust is not some theatrical dinosaur but a practicable, stageable possibility and a moving salute to the humanist idea of individual growth.

● *Faust Parts One and Two* play in repertory at the Lyric Hammersmith until May 14.

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Invite you to meet

Billington on Faust Part Two

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