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Jet-propelled mania: Trevor Eve and Marion Bailey at the Cottesloe

PHOTOGRAPH: DOUGLAS JEFFERY

Michael Billington hails a dazzling Pirandello with some performances to match

The frenzied faces of Eve

THE National Theatre has come up with a minor gem: Pirandello's 1919 farce, *Man, Beast and Virtue* being given in the Cottesloe in a new version by Charles Wood. The play suggests Feydeau rewritten by an ironic moralist; and, at a time when we have seen some blunderbus assaults on farce, William Gaskill's production is a model example of how to handle the genre.

Like a lot of early Pirandello, the play deals with marriage and adultery: it puts, however, a savage spin on a familiar theme. Paolino, a frenzied private tutor, discovers that his married mistress, Mrs Ferella, is pregnant. The problem: that her husband, a lascivious seafarer with a woman in every port, denies his wife sex on his one-night visits home. Paolino's solution is to turn up at the Perellas' dinner-table armed with an aphrodisiac chocolate-cake designed to drive the Captain into his wife's bed and thus preserve her spotless reputation.

You could, if you wanted to get heavy, see the whole play as a Pirandellian essay on the masks society forces us to adopt. The virtuous wife finds herself being literally berouged and bedizened like a waterfront tart; the adulterous lover turns into a saviour of marriage; the bestial sea-captain is forced to behave like a faithful husband. But the play is less a cerebral document than a high-spirited inversion of the normal rules of farce. Conventionally, the genre deals with the destruction of the household; Pirandello shows the ludicrous lengths we go to in order to preserve the sanctity of home and marriage. I am reminded of Eric Bentley's comment that, along with Shaw and Wilde, he is one of the three great wits of the modern stage.

William Gaskill's production, the best he has done in years, seizes on the idea that this is a commedia story about the husband, the wife and the lover pushed to absurd extremes. Annie Smart's designs burst with bright, primary colours suggesting an Italianate version of Mabel Lucie Attwell. And the acting has exactly the clarity of outline you need in farce, as if the essence of the character were being projected with maximum speed.

Trevor Eve as the flustered lover is the lynchpin of the evening and he gives a brilliant display of jet-propelled mania that takes one back to the heady days of the National's *A Flea in Her Ear* in 1986. Mr Eve's face is a sallow mask behind which detours lurk; his swept-back hair has a volatility all its own; and his body is always at odds with his intentions so that, in a fit of suicidal desperation, he threatens to do himself in with a spoon. But the key to his performance lies in his swift emotional transitions. Accused by a doctor-chum of fathering an unwanted child, he mimes explosive indignation before coming out with a limply apologetic, "We didn't intend to." I suggest a Feydeau season be mounted forthwith starring Mr Eve.

Marion Bailey as the wife wittily combines virtue personified with retching spasms of morning sickness; and she lends just the right pathos to the scene where she is daubed with clownish rouge and turquoise eye-shadow to give her the mask of allure. Terence Rigby wholeheartedly plays the brutish salt as a florid, be-whiskered satyr whose animalistic appetite ironically saves the day. And Pauline Delany looks in to good effect as a slow-moving peasant maid who would make a tortoise look like Arnie.

Pirandello's great gift as a dramatist was to convert intellect into passion. In this play he expresses an idea through farce. The biting irony at the heart of this sprightly piece is that it celebrates bourgeois propriety while showing that it is actually founded on lies, deceit and chocolate-cake.

Billington on Man Beast

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