

Mistress of melancholy

Michael Billington salutes some dazzling acting and a striking production at the Haymarket

PETER Hall's production of *Orpheus Descending* at the Haymarket is baleful, poetic and mysterious: a stunning evocation of the South as Hell. It also boasts a luminous star performance by Vanessa Redgrave. What it cannot disguise is the fact that Tennessee Williams's play (a 1957 revision of his early *Battle of Angels*) is a flawed, top-heavy piece in which symbolism and reality never achieve the effortless marriage you find in Chekhov and Ibsen.

Williams is bending the Orphic myth to his own purpose. His hero, Val Xavier, is an itinerant young guitar-player who wanders into a Southern town where he gets work and a wife in a dry-goods store run by an ageing burlesque, Lady Torrance. She is the daughter of an immigrant Italian bootlegger whose orchard-cum-wine garden was burned down, with him inside, when he sold liquor to negroes.

Lady is now married to an ailing Southern bigot who, she eventually learns, murdered her father. In a symbolic attempt to avenge her father's death, she is opening a confectionery inside her store and out of need and desire she turns to Val for sexual comfort. But when he is warned by the local rednecks to get out of town Lady prevents his departure, thereby ensuring their mutual destruction.

Williams's generosity and compassion are not in doubt: as in *Streetcar* he shows how the spiritual and sensitive will always be defeated by the brutal and materialistic. But Williams is also a social playwright who suggests that the South (and by implication America itself) is blighted by a corruption that only four of his characters are capable of resisting: Val, who sees himself as a legless bird that sleeps on the wing; Lady, whose confectionery is a symbol of beautiful defiance; the Sheriff's wife who does visionary, religious paintings; and a

wayward beauty, Carol Cuttrey, who speaks eloquently for Williams when she cries: "Something is still wild in this country. This country used to be wild, the men and women were wild and there was a wild sort of sweetness in their hearts for each other but now it's sick with neon, it's broken out sick, with neon, like most other places."

Many plays, like this, have a ground-floor of realism and an upper-storey of symbolism. The problem here is that the ground-floor cannot support the weight imposed upon it. You wonder how Lady Torrance has lived so long in ignorance of the fact that her husband killed her father. Val seems less an individual than a snakeskin-jacketed myth.

But, even more crucially, Williams never makes it clear whether Val's relationship with Lady is part of the process of corruption or a rebellion against it. Orpheus and Christ myths are imposed on the material rather than growing out of it; and as Harold Clurman, who originally directed the play pointed out, there is "an unresolved emotional conflict" about what Williams really thinks or even feels.

The play enshrines Williams's faults as well as his virtues. But what is striking about Peter Hall's production is the air of fatality with which he invests the proceedings. He uses sound, light and music (superb electronic score by Stephen Edwards and sound design by Paul Arditti) to create an unearthly sense of doom from the opening mix of barking dogs and distant, roaring trucks. He also instantly establishes a non-realistic tone by having an azure light shine beyond the transparent wall of Alison Chitty's dry-goods store while a local harpie recounts past history; a device constantly repeated when the characters lapse into memory. Hall's fine production exactly matches Williams's own bleak romanticism.

Vanessa Redgrave (as she did in *A Touch of the Poet*) as Lady also plays precisely what the author has written: a woman whose voice is "often shrill and her body tense" but who also has a girlish softness. Equipped with a Palermo accent and a mass of unkempt blonde hair, she hits just the right note of wary suspicion in the early scenes, even wagging her fingers at Val when she says "No monkey business with me." But she also shows the transformation brought on by sexual fulfilment and the prospect of revenge: she sports frilled skirts, crimson earrings and a kind of manic exuberance still shot through with the inevitable Redgrave melancholy. An astonishing performance. Jean-Marc Barr is workman-like as Val but lacks the blinding sexual charisma that should single him out as a threat to Southern values: instead of looking trapped in a suit he seems quite at ease in one. Julie Covington, however, has just the right quality of a stricken doe as the maimed and isolated Carol. Paul Freeman, with hatred burning through a sallow death-mask of a face, is excellent as Jabe Torrance.

I have grave doubts about the play which lacks the concrete reality to sustain its mythic pretensions but the Peter Hall Company shows the salubrious ideal of in-depth casting and respect for the writer can be imported into the West End. At least, one hopes they can.



Vanessa Redgrave . . . a girlish softness PHOTOGRAPH: DAVID SILLITOE

Round-up of the latest Christmas shows

Nottingham
Robin Thorner

Dick Whittington

CHRISTMAS begins here. In Nottingham Kenneth Alan Taylor's traditional family pantomime has become a popular feature of his five-year tenure as artistic director of the Playhouse. This one will help to

pay for a new play by Stan Barstow in the second half of the season.

"What's your favourite part of the pantomime?" the dame asked four-year-old Katie during the child molesting scene that covers the preparation of the set for the big walk-down at the end. "This bit," she replied. With lines like that, it's mine too.

All the other corny rituals that you remember from your own childhood are there — the songsheets and slapstick, the ancient gags and little dancing

girls, the thigh-slapping principal boy and, of course, the chance to yell. On the first night here the audience was enthusiastically ahead of the script.

There are no television non-entities doing their familiar set pieces here — it's true reparatory pantomime, with the company given the chance to ham their hearts out, ad-lib about the script, and generally camp things up, and the designers given enough cash to cover themselves in kitsch.

John Jardine's Sarah the Cook belonged to an ancient tradition of dancery and printed

comic Professor from Roddy Maude-Roxby with pipecleaner legs sticking out of long khaki shorts and even a large polar bear who might have stepped out of *The Winter's Tale*. The show is never dull, pleasantly cynical ("The important thing is not to win but to win easily," someone announces of the Olympic Games) and raucously involving. Next to *Titus Andronicus*, possibly one of the best family shows this Christmas.

Derby
Robin Thorner

Billington on Orpheus

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