

Michael Billington on Nicholas Hytner's camp new production

Farquhar in postures new

FARQUHAR'S *The Recruiting Officer* occupies a special place in the National Theatre's history: back in 1963 it was the company's first, home-grown triumph. But where William Gaskill's production, like Max Stafford-Clark's recent one at the Royal Court, anchored the play in a detailed provincial realism, Nicholas Hytner's new version at the Olivier treats it, by and large, as a colourful and cheerful charade: it is great fun but it puts the camp back into Restoration Comedy.

Farquhar's 1706 play admittedly requires a delicate moral balancing act. In its portrait of Captain Plume and Sergeant Kite descending on Shrewsbury to muster men, it combines an acid critique of contemporary recruiting tactics with a humane tolerance of soldierly sexual exploits. It is a naturalistic social document and a hymn to male camaraderie. But the key point, as Roy Porter notes in the programme, is that instead of seeing Shrewsbury through the Redcoats' eyes, "we see the outside world through stout Salopian common sense".

Something of that comes across in Hytner's production. Mutinous shaven-headed locals raise two fingers to the military on arrival, and the rich scene where Kite and Plume deviously enlist two local lads by playing on their greed and chauvinism builds to a superb climax in which the Gren-

diers' band clinch the trick with a stirring rendering of *Over The Hills And Far Away*: a moment as powerful as anything in *Oh What A Lovely War!*

What this production lacks, however, is any real sense of place. Ashley Martin-Davis's sets consist of mobile russet and ochre towers whose blanked-out facades suggest a rustic De Chirico: no hint here of the topographical precision of Farquhar's text with its references to St Mary's and St Chad's clocks. We also get jockey cut-out cows and sheep which imply less an agricultural country town than S G Hulme Beaman's *Toytown*. This is Shrewsbury viewed with urban irony rather than on its own terms.

Hytner's approach to characterisation is also somewhat patchy. Alex Jennings lends Captain Plume an insouciant, hand-on-hip swagger while all the time suggesting a deep-down decency: when he announces, "I'm not that rake that the world imagines," you realise he is a role-playing young bucko. But it is typical of the way this production skates over the text that where in the Royal Court version Plume arrived exhausted and begrimed from a 30-hour ride, here he enters as spruce and trim as a bridegroom.

Desmond Barrit's Captain Brazen also exemplifies the production's resort to camp comedy. Barrit is such a loved

performer that the audience chuckle with delight at the first sight of his gargantuan posturing; and there is something undeniably hilarious about him attempting to seduce Melinda by edging his embonpoint along the back of a park-bench. But Farquhar's Brazen is not just a boorish braggart, he is also an opportunist adventurer who has come to Shrewsbury to recruit, and of that there is little hint in Barrit's fantastical fop.

Two performances, however, explore character rather than trade on personality. Sally Dexter's Silvia, who adopts male attire in order to pursue Plume, is a wonderfully spirited hoyden whose instinctive reaction to Melinda's gibes is to land her one on the jaw: Dexter gives us a county girl who you feel will fit snugly into Plume's masculine world. Ken Stott is also a first-rate Sergeant Kite: a swart Gypsy long used to acting as foil to his captain at whom he shoots an unforgettably woeful look when mock-rebuked for his recruiting zeal.

It would be churlish to deny that Hytner's production gives the audience a good time. But in endorsing Farquhar's innate Irish geniality, it forfeits much of his social and psychological realism. It comes dangerously close to being a romp instead of a revelation of the eternal ruthlessness of the recruiting business.

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Billington on Recruiting

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