

Rumbles in the ranks

Theatre
Michael Coveney goes on parade at the National

THE ecstatic pang is missing from Nicholas Hytner's RNT revival of *The Recruiting Officer* in the Olivier. George Fawcett's comedy of recruitment and callous amatory intrigue in sleepy Shrewsbury has been given the pastoral toytown treatment, with an onstage Grenadier band and a leading performance of languidly elegant efficiency by Alex Jennings as Captain Plume.

Jennings exudes brutal confidence in the aftermath of the famous victory at Blenheim. The community converges to be bought, laid, and conscripted in the name of the Queen's shilling. Jennings cunningly suggests that Plume is more talk than action, and leaves the dirty work to a cynical hit man, the gypsy sergeant Kite (admirably growled in his rasping Glaswegian by Ken Stott).

The official decadence is embodied, too, in Plume's fellow recruiting officers. Brazos, an effeminate braggart and swindler transformed by Desmond Barris into an overweight but nimble sycophantic producer with a lacy slicking salute and a penchant for rubbing himself up against any convenient furniture, human or inanimate. The performance is brashly original but, like the proceedings generally, proves to be a little short-winded.

The Shrewsbury yeof brigade, marching, singing, punching the air like soccer fans, is an intrusion of choreography, not an intelligible cross-section of down-trodden rural life, for all the Salopian oods and Welsh border-obs. The Cheek By Jowl principle of mixed colour casting has been resoundingly adopted but with less overall success than in the RNT's *Fuente Ovejuna*.

Hytner's approach, intelligent and refreshing, is for once mechanical, not driven. Ashley Martin-Davis's set, an undecorated Protestant church which is dismantled in scenic blocks against a bare painted countryside dotted with model sheep and pigs, is similarly frozen.

This stoniness is of a less enchanting calibre than in William Gaskill's 1963 Old Vic production, when Robert Stephens found deep emotional resonance in Plume and Maggie Smith an effervescent sexual adventurist in the Justice's daughter, Silvia. Silvia's story is the mainstrip of the plot. She fights to retain both Plume's affection and her father's money in the disguise of an officer, Jack Wilfrid. Fawcett's first two Silvias were Peg Woffington and Anne Oldfield, one lusty and mannish, the other sweet and sparkling. The same comparison can be made between Sally Dexter, who is spirited and rumbustious, and the softer, funnier version of Maggie Smith.

Suzanne Burden plays the rich catch Melinda as a screeching bird-brain, while Paterson Joseph's Worthy, Plume's sidekick and Melinda's devoted, is a bit of a wide-eyed body. The action tumbles decorously across the Olivier stage, a severely anodyne contrast to the

cramped and bitter production of Max Stafford-Clark at the Royal Court four years ago (in which Jim Broadbent was the definitive Kite). It should improve with playing and become another popular item in the RNT's repertoire.

True sensation-seekers, however, must nose out Ken Campbell's deliriously funny *Pigsport* at the Riverside Studio. The monomaniacal maestro's proboscis goes in quest of the ideal woman's bottom, only to discover that the nether haven it really seeks is his own.

In a comic and literate sense, Campbell could be said to be disappearing up his own nose. He admits to being profoundly two-faced and develops a schizophrenic theory of acting which requires the sublimation of his spanking-squire tendencies in the softer, feminine aspects of his personality.

First, he is embroiled in a vividly evoked house of correction behind Foyle's bookshop.

A scuffle results in a broken nose which is mended to the specification of a nurse's possession. Encouraged by the nurse's mother, Campbell adopts his feminist persona (Cheap wig, false, Greenpeace top) to attend a healing service in a Catholic church in the Hasidic quarter of Stamford Hill.

These adventures, which are like episodes in *Frisson's Shandy*, are told with the spell-binding gusto of a truly possessed performer. How are they framed? In the grip of a fascination with an old Captain who died in Oman after advising on archaeological locations for *The Zoroastrian*. The Captain turns out to be God, with whom Campbell conducts a concluding dialogue of rapid intensity dressed in his newly-acquired City of London business suit.

The narrative complexity of

Pigsport is carefully worked. The first encounters with God are in Coates primary school in Ilford. Nasal performing is learnt from an affectionately remembered leading lad at Colechester Prep, where Campbell develops an entirely radical method of playing third act detectives in thrillers; he learns the words (as opposed to reading off the obligatory notes) and goes looking for clues.

It is a dream, a minimalist actor (who made the stage seem fuller when he left it) is charged with seeing every performance of Ken Dodd for a year. One of these takes place on the Solomon Islands, and Campbell sidetracks into a textual progress of a Dodd joke in pidgin English, complete with pantomime song-sheet and cucumber. The performance itself assumes the bacchanalian character of a Ken Dodd evening, than which I can pay no higher compliment.

'Tunde Ikoli's *Go! Local* at the Theatre Royal, Stratford East, is distinguished merely by the song composed for it by Ray Davies of the Kinks and the presence in the cast of Tony Armstrong-Jones, Paul Barber, Christie Cotterill and Ron Pember, fine actors all. The old East End (in the shape of a ramshackle minicab business) is taken over and spiced up by a pair of crooks, initially supposed to be social security spies, for the new East End.

The altness of the writing and acting only suggest that nothing valuable has been lost in the process. The unchallenged assumption, much, is that nothing is gained. Philip Hedley's condescending production supposes that audiences go to his theatre with no greater expectation than of seeing something like *EastEnders* on a bad night with swear words.



Elegant Alex Jennings as Plume. Photograph: Richard Milderhall.

Coveney on Recruiting

Clipped By:



ianharris

Sat, Feb 29, 2020