

Lust conquers all

LUST makes bargains in Middleton and Rowley's *The Changeling* (Lyttelton). Beatrice wants Pincus killed to win Alsemero, De Flores will murder him to enjoy Beatrice. De Flores (George Harris) — usually played as a foul-faced white man — is here unusually tall, ugly and black and dominates in a glaring white suit that creeps up to his neck. His face is scarred, his tongue lolls in his mouth. He is all appetite and threat.

Richard Eyre's production is set in a nineteenth-century Spanish slave colony: like the decision to have a black De Flores, the choice brilliantly exaggerates what is already there. William Dudley has designed an interior of blazing gold: honeycomb ceilings and burnished doorways. Fires and walls match the lust and concealment of the plot.

In this setting, Miranda Richardson is perfect as Beatrice. She appears gilded herself and her face has an incandescent quality. De Flores says she smells of amber. She looks like a piece of amber. And when she talks it is as if talking itself were a revelation. In each speech she makes a discovery — but the most important discoveries come too late.

'The Changeling' is charged with lust and revulsion — and with a sense of their closeness. Richard Eyre's production is also charged with danger, a word that rings out repeatedly. Beatrice says of De Flores: 'I never see this fellow, but I think of some harm towards me, danger's in my mind still; I scarce leave trembling of an hour after.' Alsemero tells Beatrice at the end that she should never have crossed 'this dangerous bridge of blood.' In this production, the dangerous bridge of blood is at the top of the theatre and on it, in a fearful but thrilling scene,

THEATRE

'The Changeling'

'Façades'

KATE KELLAWAY

De Flores butchers Pincus. Throughout, there is no embrace without fear and passion is acted with an ardour that makes you feel you have never seen an embrace on stage before.

But it is an evening of unequal excitement — thrills and lulls. In contrast to the baroque world beyond, the scenes inside the madhouse seem mild and recreational in spite of the fact that the lunatics live on a grey staircase and are regularly whipped. The point is perhaps that, unlike the rest of humanity, fools and madmen are safe.

It is unkind and also unfair to compare Edith Sitwell to De Flores but her problem, like his, was to do with her face. Painters and photographers were fascinated by it and now William Humble adds his portrait to the rest with *Façades* (Lyric Studio). Sitwell (Frances de la Tour) resembles a passionate crustacean, bound by a black carban and weighed with rings. She has a voice that disfigures the body but the languorous beauty of her speech and her superior intelligence can do nothing to change her face, spare her humiliation — or win her love.

Her poetry (at least on the evidence of what is quoted during the evening) does not provide an escape from self. Her striking, adult nursery rhymes flash with detail as gaudy as her brooches and with features as pronounced as her nose. Humble has chosen cunningly the images most tainted by her own obsession: the sun, for instance, is a pockmarked, plague-stricken face.

Humble concentrates on the period before 'the misery and the grandeur' when Sitwell was in love with Pavlik Tchelitchev (Garry Cooper), a homosexual Russian painter. But Pavlik withdrew love, sympathy and himself. He attempts here to turn his lack into her gain: 'You have no physical life — be proud of it.' Frances de la Tour's achievement is to show that Sitwell never gladly renounced her physical life. In contrast, D. H. Lawrence (Garry Cooper) is a laughable figure who in

between tubercular coughing attacks tells Edith she's got 'sex in the 'ead'.

The word most frequently applied to Edith was 'extraordinary'. Simon Callow's production, thanks chiefly to Frances de la Tour's devastatingly authentic performance, is extraordinary too. Bruno Santini contributes an ugly mausoleum of a set. Silver and malachite green suggests dead nature: ugly, frozen but sparkling — like Edith herself.

London is unfamiliar in Nick Ward's 'The Singingness' (St. Others) (The Lyttelton). Although the set could, at a pinch, be a spruce version of Charing Cross Bridge, the tramps that doss beneath it are a romantic invention. Ed (Michael Turner) has lost everything but his cultivated accent. Jimmy (Dermot Crowley) from Northern Ireland has charity but little to spend it on. Their minds are improbably orderly; thought is tidied by the fact that 'life' is over. Resignation is shown to be safer than hope.

Jimmy's question about London is also the play's question: *But has the beast a heart?* When young Katy (Cheryl Maikler) and Carl (John Lynch) arrive in London they say 'I love you' to each other as a pious insurance policy against the city. Their words seem raw and will burn out before the night is done.

Nick Ward's London is peopled with simple characters from different classes and age groups. They range from a ragged prostitute to an amusing policeman and William Goodchild, a post politician. His family form an unhappy constituency: a punk son, a mother stifling a scream and an affair with her father-in-law, and an anorexic daughter who in a powerful scene overhears the family secrets and appears herself like a skeleton taken out of the cupboard.

The problem is partly that we encounter the characters too fleetingly to care about them. Ward conveys not so much the strangeness of others as their separateness, which makes for inert theatre. At the edges of the stage the actors wait passively — the space in between is a London in limbo, an unused dance floor. At its weakest the dialogue dopes down on a bolster of cliché. But the attractive quality of the play is its attempt to end numbness and salvage tenderness. The beast has a heart — but it needs to be faster on its feet.



Kate Kellaway on Changeling

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