

Catch with both h

RICHARD MILDENHALL

THEATRE

**'Orpheus Descending'
and 'The Bells'**

KATE KELLAWAY

TENNESSEE WILLIAMS'S *Orpheus Descending* (Haymarket) burns like a fire in which both death and passion are consumed. A beautiful young man arrives at a dry goods store in a small southern town and warns: 'I can burn down a woman... any two-footed woman.' 'Niggers' are hunted by gangs with blue-jet blowtorches. A 'wop' has been burnt alive in a winegarden. Tennessee Williams's men and women are marked by life and the effect of the language is itself branding: words are repeated until they scorch.

In Peter Hall's production, while the fire burns within, rain falls outside. It shines on the window of the confectionery store and part of the word *Hamburger*, lit up in neon, sparkles through it. Alison Chitty's design has followed Williams's directions almost to the letter.

The lights within are dim but the talk electric when Lady meets a man she will find sweeter than the confectionery she sells. As Lady, Vanessa Redgrave changes magically from the extinguished middle-aged wife of a dying husband to a young woman, laughing a tell-tale laugh, wearing blue gloves that turn her arms into stems and a dress out of which she seems to flower. She can show how humiliation is akin to mourning; she can pitch a complaint so that it sounds like a compliment. Her mood changes as simply as the store sign — from closed to open.

Val (Jean-Marc Barr) answers her perfectly with his peculiar gravity and beauty. He also has exactly the right quality of withdrawal and self-absorption. He holds his guitar as if it were a lover and announces, aged 30, that he is no longer wild.

Peter Hall's production is true to the spirit of a work which is at once wild and trapped. Val seems free but believes that we are all in 'solitary confinement inside our own lonely skins'. Lady's husband Jabe (Paul Freeman) is a sick yellow predator, but disabled by sickness. Carol Cutrere (Julie Covington) shows off in order to live but in her crushed shoes, half out of her coat, she is the glittering white-faced prey. 'What on earth can you do on this earth but catch at whatever comes near you with both your hands until your fingers are broken?' she says.

'Orpheus Descending' is about trying to catch whatever comes near you with both hands — until violence breaks you. This is an evening of terrible violence that shakes the watcher to the roots. It conveys with particular force Tennessee Williams's obsession with life as corruption and death as purification. 'Orpheus Descending' is scattered with bones as symbols of this: the magic bone that the old negro brandishes, the frail bone of Carol's wrist, the bones in Lady's neck which Val massages with the art of an osteopath. Carol's words serve as an epitaph to the evening: 'Wild things leave... white bones behind them.'

At the Leicester Haymarket Studio *The Bells* do not jingle for Christmas, they jangle. There is a sleigh but, more importantly, a slaying in Leopold Lewis's Victorian melodrama which has been revived with skill by Simon Usher and David O'Shea.

Mathias (David Gant) has murdered a Polish Jew. He is reminded of the crime by bells that keep chiming in his head. The evening gets off to an enjoyable start when Hans



Art of the osteopath: Jean-Marc Barr with Vanessa Redgrave.

Kate Kellaway on Orpheus

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Sun, Feb 23, 2020