

Rodents in the room

MIKE LEIGH'S *Smelling a Rat* (Hampstead) is an unconventional bedroom farce in an almost conventional bedroom. The room (decor by Eve Stewart) is dominated by a shiny king-size bed resembling a tangerine 'blancmange' upon which lie an unsightly family of soft toys. Believing that Rex (Eric Allan) is abroad, two couples let themselves into his house and inspect his bedroom, mocking his exercise bike and fire extinguisher. Rex's employee in the pest control company and wife are the first couple; Rex's son and girlfriend are the second. But Rex is not in Lanzarote, he is in the cupboard.

There are six built-in cupboards which is as well for there is much getting in and coming out of closets although nothing is revealed in the process. Mike Leigh is fascinated not only by ordinary people with something to hide but by characters whose whole personality is in eclipse. Rocky (Greg Cruttwell) is the only one who never climbs into a cupboard or disappears behind frosted glass into his father's bathroom — but he is a sort of closet himself — rigid and almost speechless for the whole evening with an expression as if sucking a massive gobstopper. His silence is so loud it makes him the focus of our attention.

The comic and the sinister conspire with each other: Mike

THEATRE
'Smelling a Rat'
and **'Candide'**
KATE KELLAWAY

Leigh has a wonderful gift for conversation so rock-bottom-boring that it is hilarious. But, here, the small talk is also unsettling because there is so much unanswered. Melanie Jane (Saskia Reeves) moves like an animated soft toy and wins the prize for the most pointless comments of the evening, intended to stir Rocky out of his catatonia. Charmaine (Brid Brennan) is also memorably silly with her prudish laughter at her husband Vic's jokes. Vic himself (Timothy Spall) answers his wife's laughter with an awful sound of his own: 'Raaa...'. His talk is a masterpiece of mangled language ('I could sink a shish') and verbal nervous tics — every other sentence contains the words 'in as much'. The effect of the evening is unnerving: where punishment is expected, there are rewards; where revelation is called for there is none. Even the end is not final: the rats have got away.

In Jonathan Miller and John Wells' production of *Candide* (The Old Vic) Bernstein's musical of Voltaire's novel, three students are being



Rocky (Greg Cruttwell) 'looks as if he has a gobstopper in his mouth' and fails to respond to Melanie-Jane (Saskia Reeves).

instructed in happiness. They are at the top of a happiness hierarchy, living the best possible life, in the best possible house, in the best possible world. And it is hard not to leave the theatre saying 'the best possible evening out.'

But Voltaire warns wittily against such excesses, and a superb cast, led by Nicholas Grace, support his views, demonstrating the idocy of unreasoning optimism and of superlatives. The overcast sky, from which two vast masks look at us with closed eyes — one smiling and one moaning — insist that life is inclement and uncertain. Volcanos, storms, and war may be a problem for ingenuous *Candide* (Mark Beudert) but present no obstacle to the designer, Richard Hudson. When war breaks out, giant military puppets march out and in spite of their fearsome height biff each other gently with their swords.

War leaves Cunegonde (Rosemary Ashe) collapsed in her blue dress in the centre of the stage, a fallen woman who has yet to fall much further.

She has competition from an older fallen woman (Patricia Routledge) who tells a hard luck story of extraordinary proportions culminating in an account of how she lost one buttock. The tale of what brought her down, brought the house down last Tuesday. *Candide's* fortunes are compellingly sung and disillusion seems to attract the lushest tunes. The great pleasure of the evening is in seeing reason beaten up by absurdity but surviving to tell the tale.

The *Relapse* (The Mermaid) is set in what Vanbrugh describes as 'nimble times' and he wrote with such a nimble wit that you come away from 'The Relapse' with a new set of curses ('Stab me in the vitals') and a strong grounding

in seventeenth-century chic (the length of periwigs and the desirable size for calf muscles).

The British Actors Company are proud to direct themselves.

The result is not, as you might expect, undisciplined. On the contrary it is constrained — far too constrained for Vanbrugh. Vanbrugh described London as an 'uneasy theatre of noise'; the British Actors Company present an uneasy theatre of quiet in a soapstone-coloured courtyard. However, Kate O'Mara's *Berinthia*, an older woman dressed in girlish pink, has a sleazy charm; she is mistress of lewd innuendo and particularly effective in demonstrating what it means when a woman says 'nay'.

Melissa Murray's adaptation of *The Woman in White* (Greenwich Theatre) ought to

be renamed 'The Woman in Off-White'. This is Wilkie Collins in reduced circumstances. The problem is that the elaborate plot of the novel refuses to keep up with the pace set by the play and the result is confusing and unsustaining. Helena Bonham-Carter's Laura is a puzzle: she subdues her beauty, appears with piquant waxen face and fretful manner; her hands dart out from her white mantle like lizards tongues; she crumples away. Her performance is typical of the mood of the evening: it seems in Sue Dunderdale's production that mystery has been mistaken for and overtaken by ill humour.

It is a relief when Count Fosco (Michael Byrne) speaks, if only because he is in high spirits.

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Kellaway on Smelling

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