

THEATRE

'A Walk in the Woods'

'The Father', 'The Illusion'

MICHAEL RATCLIFFE

American stage career is distinguished, has even less to work on. He is Sir Alec's feed, and performs the task with selflessness and candour. Ronald Eyre directs.

In *The Father* (Cottesloe, NT) we watch a man go knowingly insane. David Leveaux directs Strindberg's blistering masterpiece without a break at just under two hours, and the effect is of Greek tragedy hurtling from crisis to resolution and never releasing its grip. The Captain (Alun Armstrong) is defeated in the war of attrition with Laura, his wife (Susan Fleetwood), when he realises that no man can be certain he is the father of his own child.

Here performed in a powerful new version by John Osborne, *'The Father'* is not so much a misogynist manifesto for male rights as a statement of womb- envy at its most extreme. Everything about it suggests that Strindberg's expectations of life were so demanding that he longed to experience the immortality and fulfilment of motherhood while giving up none of the power-perks of being a man. There is much that is absurd in such confusion, but Strindberg knew that too, and if there is one thing missing in Armstrong's explosive, anguished performance it is a full awareness of the playwright's black wit and the risks that may be taken with it in performance.

The gleam of decisive campaigning leaves the eyes of Fleetwood's serpentine Laura only for brief interludes of listlessness which fake the concession of defeat and conceal a

gathering of strength for the next round. Her meekness in victory is appalling. Jean Heywood, tenderly Geordie, is marvellous as the old nurse who slips the Captain's straitjacket on, for this is a world where men are either children or warriors; there is no life in between.

Paternity also informs Corneille's comedy *The Illusion* (1635) with which the golden age of French classical theatre first makes its elegant, self-conscious bow. An old man seeks the help of a great magician to find the son who ran away ten years earlier to escape the severity of the parental home. Shadows are conjured to play out the missing adventures and *'The Illusion'* ends with the last scene of a costume tragedy in which the boy dies. Never fear: he has become an *ac-tor!*

The play is being given its British professional premiere by the Actors Touring Company directed by Mark Brickman using (also) the Penguin reading translation by John Cairncross. (Bulmerabe College, Reading, last week; Leighton Buzzard and Havant this; Lyric Studio from November 29). ATC is a lively shoestring company with a sharp sense of plain design (here *Lez Brotherston*). A cast of six doubles the roles, which is fine, but begs a few questions in *'The Illusion'* where reality and impersonation are already central themes.

Does the proud father ever find his son? Corneille merely implies yes, but Brickman is explicit with an epilogue of great charm in which the old boy arrives in Paris as the actors of his son's company begin striking the set. The two embrace warmly and the players persuade him to join them in a curtain call for us, the twentieth-century spectators of a play called *'The Illusion'* by Pierre Corneille. A collector's piece, worth collecting.

Michael ratcliffe on The Father

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