

# Undammed Faust

**THEATRE**  
Freeman rampant in Goethe's poem and a steaming 'Don Juan'

**MICHAEL RATCLIFFE**

The trouble with Faust (Lyric Hammersmith), now being given as complete as you are likely to see it in a production of exceptional intelligence, simplicity and resourcefulness by David Freeman, is not that it lacks theatrical imagination, but that it has too much. It is rampant with it. Turresque landscapes and dizzying vistas abound. Greek and Gothic creatures seize the action and show no sign of giving it up. 'Sirens prelude above', reads one stage direction with a flourish of the hand.

A second problem is that much of the dramatic poem is written in vigorous rhyming couplets — Eng Lit's unsmarter form — and a third, hardest of all to solve, is that many scenes are either blunt or discursive, too short or too long. What 'Faust' lacks, almost entirely, is theatrical technique. If it is a designer's joy, it is a director's nightmare, and actors attempting to construct a character within it will find that there is no sustained graph of crisis, development, conflict or change.

It was written at various intervals over more than 50 years and grew, writes Robert David MacDonald in the preface to his performing translation used here (Oberon Books, £5.50), like a word. MacDonald's rhymes eschew the splendour of Goethe, but catch precisely his pathos and wit.

The two parts are given on separate evenings, and consecutively each Saturday. Part One, to which I referred last week, covers the territory of narrative familiar from Gounod's opera and Berlioz's magnificent Goethean 'Damnation of Faust'.

In Part Two Faust and Mephistopheles save the Holy Roman Emperor from bankruptcy by inventing paper money; Faust returns to Classical Greece and mates with Helen of Troy, who produces a son; Mephistopheles wins the Emperor's battles by supernatural means; and Faust becomes the richest man on earth by reclaiming the land from the sea. He dies full of remorse and escapes to paradise by angelic sleight-of-hand. Why some of these things have to happen is rarely clear. It is essential for the enjoyment of Part Two simply to accept that they do.

David Freeman's great gift as a director is not to shock with incongruities but to maintain the pulse of a dramatic narrative when it is scarcely perceived to be beating at all. In 'Faust' Part One he is less sure with the long speeches and domestic ironies, but in the allegorical time-trip-

ping of Part Two he draws the invisible thread tight with a masterly hand and a clear head.

A subtle chain of sight and sound ensures that something is always on the move, sustaining the barely definable rhythms of a liturgy or rite: drumming, humming, buzzing; the mutter of small drums, the thunder of centaurs' hooves, bells, cymbals, gongs; archaic pliancy, three chords in pinning repetition or the tug of a receding tidal hiss. (Music, Nigel Osborne.)

The tiny Homunculus (Linda Kerr Scott) battles the walls of its amniotic sphere with little fists in the effort to push through into life; a disc blazing with light bulbs descends to consume the son of Helen and Faust, echoing the fates of Icarus and Lord Byron and the pre-summptions of Faust himself. Fountains shoot from the earth and water sprays from the ladder of heaven in a classical Wainwright Night whose depravity and nakedness shock the post-Christian Mephistopheles (Peter Lindford) forever homesick for the more covert vices of the dark north.

The epic ends in a ceremony of heavenly conciliation, recalling the conclusion of Peter Brook's Mababharata: the floor of the stage patterned with flames burning in glass.

Goethe's protagonist is a force of nature rather than a theatrical role in any sense familiar to us. Simon Callow carries him with heroic energy and selflessness, but for so personal an actor it is an unrewarding job with which he does not always look at ease. His sensuality and curiosity well suit him to it; his optimism and wit do not.

Lindford's Mephistopheles has the easier theatrical task. He maintains the brilliant promise of Part One; ageing with his blood-victim, ill-at-ease in the world of pagan Greece, a mobster off his beat. Don't miss.

Brief notes elsewhere. Goethe's Faust is close kin to Moliere's revolutionary Don Juan, now directed by Ian McDiarmid in the John Fowles translation at the Royal Exchange. The play ends with

## Ratcliffe On Faust Part Two

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ianharris

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