

# High Romantic Hamlet

RICHARD MILDENHALL

**THEATRE**

'Hamlet', 'Salome'

'The Plough and Stars'

**MICHAEL RATCLIFFE**

DANIEL DAY-LEWIS plays Hamlet (NT, Olivier) as the scholar-epicure with a commanding, princely pride. His appearance is High Romantic, with a disrespectful grin; lit strongly from above, the eyes vanish in shadow and the face becomes a mask. Physically volatile, he moves swiftly to express mockery and anger, leaping across the floor like a spider-crab, and he fights a thrilling duel with Laertes (Peter Lindford) at the end.

What we see, however, is not yet matched by what we hear. The voice is inflexible on the big stage, lugubrious in range and colouring, slow to refine wit, too sluggish to pursue the dynamic force and dramatic argument of the verse. It is a performance of much promise, still in awe of the play and the role.

Richard Eyre's strongly cast, mainstream production looks good. John Gutter sets it in front of a colossal armed statue of the late king and on a sharp-angled corridor at the front of the stage; Liz da Costa dresses the king and queen in gorgeous abstract-patterned velvets and the entire court in Renaissance clothes, varied along the way by leaps to the years on either side of 1500; jackets suggesting Sheridan, high waistlines from Austen and *Fanny Hill*. Poor Gertrude looks like Mrs Bennett.

Judi Dench courageously plays her fearful, full-blown, and not over-bright beside the formidable Claudius (John Castle) to whom she clings. Michael Bryant's bossy Polonius is sharp, gruff and thoroughly unpleasant, a meddler with, and hater of, other people's love. Last time Mr Eyre directed the play Hamlet conjured the voice of his dead father from out of his own gut; no such risks are taken here.

The chief difference between Sarah Bernhardt and Steven Berkoff in respect of Wilde's rarely performed *Salome* (Gate, Dublin, one more week, then Edinburgh Festival in August) is that Sarah would have filled the stage with tigers, feathers, rubies and cushions whereas Berkoff's classic, reductive production dispenses with all props entirely: no wine, no veils, no sisters, *no head*. (Such things are incisively named).

Otherwise, they would have agreed. Sarah said that Oscar's tumescent prose-poem should be played with stylized gestures and no rapid movement, and that all its words should



Daniel Day-Lewis as Hamlet: 'The eyes vanish in shadow and the face becomes a mask.'

fall like pearls on a crystal disc; and so, as Herod is fond of saying, even all these things come to pass at the Gate.

The time is the late 'Twenties, the place a roof terrace with dining table and grand piano; the revellers, in evening dress, are curious, robotic and pale. (Set, Robert Ballagh; costumes, Nigel Boyd.) The actors finger the language like jewellers picking out gems from paste; their bodies move in a limp choreography by which their feet seem to tread honey while their hands flutter about them in admiration that stops just short of contact but is never still.

The entranced Salome (Olwen Fouere) arches her back like a dancer from the start, her movements both flowing and angular, her voice embracing both the tender malice and plain terror of the

young princess. Even the imposing Herod (Alan Stanford) and his blood-gorged consort (Barbara Brennan) inhabit the same choreographic dream-world, and what sometimes sounds like nonsense is transformed, by Berkoff's fierce purity and brilliance, into something very like a play. Edinburgh has chosen well.

The Gate's biggest international success in recent years was Joe Dowling's production of *Junos and the Paycock* which went to Edinburgh in 1987. The same team has now tackled *The Plough and the Stars*, but taken it straight to the voluptuous Victorian Gaiety just off St Stephen's Green.

The difference is between a show designed for a small, subsidised theatre with one of the sharpest listening audiences in the world, and one playing to three tiers of a thousand

expert at avoiding the most dangerous spot in any room — knowledge of precious value in Easter week, 1916. Rosaleen Linehan's termagant Bessie Burgess, on the other hand, kicks her way into the Clibberoes' tenement like a man and dies cursing at the end. She is withering, fearless, magnificent. If the National persists with its own O'Casey trilogy it could start to improve on a genteel, disappointing *Junos* by signing up Linehan for *The Plough*.

Robert Harling's *Steel Magnolias*, directed by Julia McKenzie at the Lyric, is a perky, punter-friendly, chat-box comedy for six women in a beauty parlour, which offers variations on the theme of the old American Back Porch Play: husbands, children, loneliness, women not present at the time, health.

## Ratcliffe on Hamlet

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