



NEIL LIBBERT

## Dustin come to judgment

TO COME straight to the point, Dustin Hoffman takes to the London stage in *The Merchant of Venice* (Phoenix) with a Shylock of striking physicality, unsentimental pride and sardonic power. He is the brittle outsider in a city the rest of whose male inhabitants are more than usually bland: a slight figure in priestly black generating the electricity of indignation and injustice from a small body, gleaming eyes and large expressive hands.

The hands are remarkable. They are his associates and his defenders, sweeping aside compromise, shaping an argument, claving a threat of revenge out of thin air; at one point they (unconsciously?) stab out a parody of Christian blessing as he seeks the protection of Christian law. The voice is guttural and dark, the intonation American; he puts his case directly to the audience and moves us with the loss of Leah's jewel. He breaks up the verse with idiosyncratic confidence; it is not what we're used to, but the meaning is always clear. The brilliant smile is concealingly humorous and, once, even benign. Shylock's orthodox piety may be offended by the vile squealing of the wry-necked fife, but he lets Lancelot Gobbo go with an indulgent grin. The boy ate too much: perfectly understandable, but let someone else pay for the food.

Hoffman's unselfish performance justifies the Peter Hall Company's decision not to promote him as a star outside the ensemble. If only the ensemble were worthy of him. The three women, led by Geraldine James's studly and increasingly troubled Portia, should become so now that the rushed ordeal of a gilty first

ONE DAY, a girl flirts with a signalman, he misses a signal, a train crashes. Odon von Horvath's *Judgement Day* shows how innocence may go — simply.

It is hard to believe that this fascinating, subtle play (translated by Martin and Renata Esslin) hasn't been performed here before. At its British premiere at the Old Red Lion, you are close enough to study the perjured faces of Hudetz, the signalman (Stephen Boxer), and Anna (Matilda Zeigler). Behind them, Claudia Mayer has designed a wall — of teapots, icons, old dresses and antlers — which stands like accumulated, arbitrary evidence. This suits Horvath's theme.

He shows how guilt gathers up every detail of a life and how it may bring a man and woman together. Anna and Hudetz meet in secret and their passion for each other is a kind of mutual confession.

## Green light of guilt

Stephen Daldry's stunning production is characterised by a dark wit. Hudetz's neighbours, believing him innocent, throw a party in which they impersonate a train and come chugging towards him, each carrying a lit candle — like his conscience on the move. Mrs Leimgruber (Merelina Kendall) also entertains; she relishes her own words, as if gossip were edible. But we are never in doubt that talk damages and that, as she herself says, 'the truth is different'.

A *Midsummer Night's Dream* (The Open Air Theatre, Regent's Park) might perhaps be renamed a *Midsummer Night's Dream-in*. In Guy Slater's production, set in the Sixties, lovers drop out, fairies drop in, and Puck ( Trevor Laird), tall, black and in crushed velvet, deals in drugs and whips out a flash-knife smile. Titania (Sally Dexter) is powered by flowers and Tricia

wretched Antonio's ships have come in after all.

Life after Lotte Lenya for the theatre songs of Kurt Weill has been vigorous and ever diversifying, from Milva, Dagmar Krause and Teresa Stratas to Julie Wilson, Barbra Streisand and Sting. Something about the timing of Ute Lemper, however, (Almeida Festival, 16 to 18 June) has attracted exceptional media and public attention here, and promises to take the songs to large, new audiences across the board. Both Theatre Royal was sold out last Monday for her first British appearance, in a demanding and generous programme of 24 German, French and American songs.

She is young, beautiful, serious and sexy; a star who comes on stage so quietly she precludes the possibility of applause; a missionary committed to altering the innocent to the political and musical meaning of Weill's work. What sets her apart from most of her predecessors and contemporaries is an exceptional lyrical gift, which spins melodies of longing on *pianissimo* of silk-thread and keens into lost worlds of injustice irredeemably gone.

To this she adds, when appropriate, the brass of the Broadway Forties and the raffish snap of a Berlin cabaret trio. Whether the songs are best heard end-on-end for more than two hours will always be questioned, but the chance to hear so much marvellous and often unfamiliar music — such as 'Die Rote Rose', a chromatic *valse oubliée* in memory of Rosa Luxembourg, and 'Youkai', a seductive tango habanera about an island that never was — should on no account be missed.

THEATRE

Hall's 'Merchant of Venice'  
and Ute Lemper's Weill

MICHAEL RATCLIFFE



Morrish's Helena resembles, to use Hermia's phrase, 'a painted maypole'. She is a fine athlete and chases Demetrius to comic effect. But her speech is the equivalent of a stamped foot. Hermia, too (Vicky Licorish), is over-boisterous.

The players boast an affable Bottom (Christopher Benjamin), an exceptionally funny Thisbe (Robert Styles) and a lion so charming (Jason Hart) that the assembled company can't resist tickling him. Sixties nostalgia makes for a friendly evening, although it converts magic into a familiar job.

Dropping out is more fun than coming out. In Beth Hingley's new play *The Debutante Ball* (Hampstead) Teddy (Jane Horrocks), a hysterical forced into virgin white, slices with a blade into her flesh. She is not fit for the ball. Nor is anyone else. The ball happens between the acts. We are detained in a green-and-caramel marbled suite with

bathroom, in a southern State. The effect is bewildering and stifling, the writing vulgar, hilarious and poetic by turns. Images are offered as flashily as the gold fixtures that decorate the bathroom. The effect is of being waylaid by a lunatic who sounds knowing but is quite vacant.

KATE KELLAWAY

## Ratcliffe on Merchant

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