



Derek Jacob's Richard II: 'Enormous intelligence and diversity, arrogance and scorn'; Simon Callow and Alan Bennett in 'A Question of Attribution': 'English comedy of the highest kind.'

## Leading questions

### THEATRE

#### 'A Question of Attribution'

#### 'A Question of Geography'

#### MICHAEL RATCLIFFE

WHEN the swimming pool she is due to open springs a leak over the weekend Her Majesty (Prunella Scales) acquires an unscheduled free afternoon and wanders the corridors of Buckingham Palace to find Sir Anthony Blunt (Alan Bennett) about to remove a studio Titian for restoration, replacing it with a blistered Annunciation of the Siense School. The brilliantly sharp and funny scene that follows in Bennett's *A Question of Attribution* (NT, Lyttelton), is based on the fact that HMQ has no wish to be taken for granted and would, without prompting, have noticed the disappearance of such a familiar friend from the walls.

It is also a sequence of wonderful jokes, each one of which amuses us while failing to make the recipient on stage laugh at all, thus extracting a second joke from the fastidious rejection of the first. Bennett's Sir Anthony mortifies his distaste for royal attempts to lighten the atmosphere by assuming an expression of ruthless rogues and tucking his chin into his chest. She reacts to his own mandarin shots at playfulness as though they had not been fired. The effect is of a pos-shooter ping-pong off the sides of a battleship. But the battleship smiles, charms, questions and smiles again.

The questions plummet like hawks. 'Has art always had a history?' she asks, still smiling. 'It's all the thing now, isn't it?' Warning to the subjects of provenance and pedigree, forgery and take, she finds her Keeper resisting the direction of her line, and persists: 'If something is not what it claims to be, what is it?'

Blunt's sweaty hands flutter behind his back and press a red silk handkerchief discreetly. 'An enigma?' he ventures, with just the hint of a question mark to cover his tracks. Simon Callow directs the scene with a delicacy and strength that lift it well clear of revue and confirm it as English comedy of the highest kind. Bennett and Scales pitch it to perfection.

Blunt is also being questioned by Chubb, a cultural self-improver from M15 (Callow) who takes him through endless projected snapshots of beautiful young men, looking for names to shop. A third line of enquiry compares Titian's 'Allegory of Prudence' with the studio painting, which turns out, after cleaning, to show not two men but three and, on further X-ray investigation, four and even five. Who is the fifth man? Blunt grows philosophical and feigns weariness of the game.

Bennett's written portrait is sympathetic only in allowing Blunt to recognise the occupational hazards of barren pedantry and obsession, and his performance—dry, vain, patronising, flirtatious and almost totally uncamp (witness his impeccable delivery of a classic trap-line like 'Colin, can you move the banner?')—is on the Guinness level and one of the best things he has ever done.

'A Question of Attribution' is preceded by the stage premiere of *An Englishman Abroad*, the play based

work, however, it addresses areas of the national psyche ignored by most playwrights and reminds us of what might be done by a theatre of prophecy on a large stage.

The subject is the disappearance of individual freedom and the 'vast conspiracy of silence' with which most Englishmen and women have been letting it go. Set in a special training centre towards the end of this century, 'The Churchill Play' is a robust and aggressive lament for the identity for a Britain hijacked by the mythology and requirements of a militarised ruling class. The trainees—prisoners, in effect—decide to put on a play about 'The greatest, biggest, bloodiest monumental Englishmen of them all' to entertain the parliamentary committee visiting the centre. In anger and revenge they turn on the visitors, but the rebellion dies because, so the argument goes, it is half a century too late. This is a deeply pessimistic play.

Inconsistencies and carelessness abound. Who has written the Churchill Play? What is it really for? How 'bad' is it supposed to be? Most of the characters are underwritten and only a handful escape from stock. A dramatic manifesto aimed less obliquely and less clumsily at the counter-revolution now deciding the future of our lives would have been more useful, but if 'The Churchill Play' inspires a younger writer to write one its revival will have been

made worthwhile. Barry Kyle directs.

The main difference between *A Question of Geography* (RSC, The Pit) and 'The Churchill Play' is between Russian spiritual resilience and godless English despair. John Berger and Nella Bieski's play, transferred from The Other Place at Stratford, takes place in a settlement on the edge of the Gulag, among teachers, doctors and civil servants technically no longer prisoners but forced to remain in the settlement doing important jobs. All of them have known despair and passed beyond its reach. This is an extraordinary, optimistic and moving play, loosely constructed and too long, but marvellously directed by John Caird and superbly acted by Harriet Walter, Clive Russell, Jimmy Gardner and Linus Roach, to name only the four leading players.

In a less interesting and varied week, there would be more space warmly to recommend Derek Jacob's *Richard II* (Phoenix), a performance of enormous intelligence and diversity, arrogance and scorn, taking us through the long speeches of discovery and introspection with an emotional spontaneity that never loses the intellectual argument of the overall line. This is the best performance of the role I have seen since McKellen's 20 years ago. True, Carl Toms designs with the vague and tasteless pictorialism of *Richard of Bordeaux* 35 years before that, but Clifford Williams's production is well spoken and clear. More of all these things, I hope, when *Richard III* joins *Richard II* in repertory next month. Meanwhile, see Jacob.

## Ratcliffe on Spies

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