

Weather report

Despite magnificent exceptions, it remains true that, compared to their colleagues abroad, or unless working for younger directors like Deborah Warner (see 'King John' last week) and Tim Albery (see below), most English actors are not encouraged to act below the neck with the dramatic intelligence they bring to the text of a play. Language is all. The head rules.

The architecture, argument and imagery of Shakespearean speech certainly emerge with unusual clarity throughout the trio of late plays directed by Sir Peter Hall at the end of 15 historic years running — not to say preserving — the National Theatre.

We hear, perhaps for the first time, all the words shouted on deck in the storm at the start of 'The Tempest' — they are important, establishing a hierarchy of arrogance and recrimination, heightened by the imminent prospect of death. The garrulous and impacted exposition of 'Cymbeline' is impeccably clear. When the psychotic jealousy of Leontes (Tim Pigott-Smith) in 'The Winter's Tale' is expressed in metaphors of a schoolboy's top, a spider in the cup and wives being sinched like ponds, these are isolated with such care that they cannot escape our attention.

But do they belong to the cool young man who is saying them? That a king who thinks like this may also be severely cracked to the edge of mimic absurdity — a point made in recent performances of the role by Michel Piccoli and Jeremy Irons — goes unacknowledged here.

Physical and mimic expressiveness is not for members of the court, concealed in Caroline velvet and stiff silk, but for eccentrics and outsiders in the lower, middle and supernatural orders: Paulina (Rileen Atkins),

THEATRE Sir Peter Hall directs late Shakespeare

MICHAEL RATCLIFFE

Antolycus (Ken Stott), Caliban (Tony Haygarth), Ariel (Steven Mackintosh) and, indeed, Trinculo, whom Mr Pigott-Smith plays as a dim, disarming and loose-jointed harlequin in Little Titch shoes. His fuchino is an Italian arriviste with a fancy accent and a body which moves with the ingratiating vulgarity of a gigolo still defining his pitch. So why such constriction for Leontes?

Few actors today achieve distinction and intensity on language and voice alone. Michael Bryant is one, and plays Prospero in Hall's 'Tempest' as a bitter old man, possessively affectionate, wearied and fearful of playing God. He asks first for heavenly music as a sign of forgiveness and then for release from confinement within the play itself by the liberation of our applause — a surreal and inspired link with the slaveries imposed on Ariel and Caliban by Prospero himself. Haygarth's naked, blood-stained Caliban, his genitals muzzled like a dog, is outstanding: fierce, sensual and ecstatic, the artist exiled in his own land.

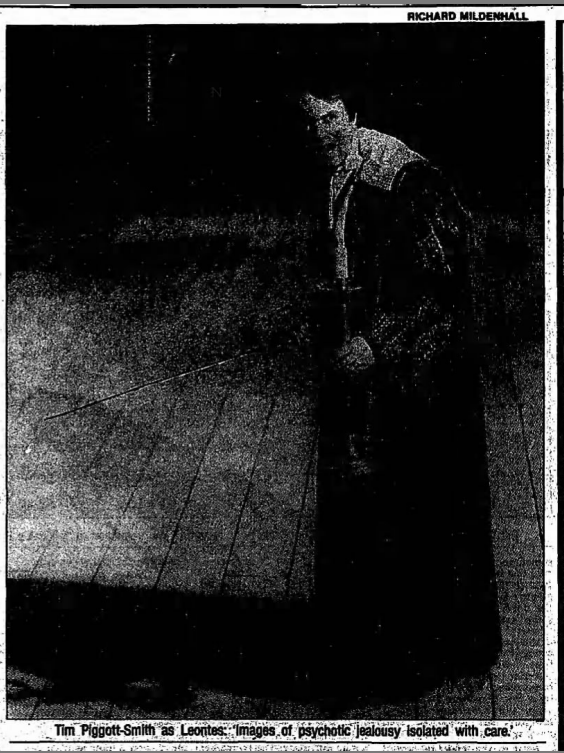
Alison Chitty sets the plays on a pale wooden floor, with a circle in the centre, a wall at the back and a golden astrological disc above. The disc, like the like Jodrell Bank for the intervention of Time in 'The Winter's Tale' and splits to allow Ariel; Juno, Iris and a glass rainbow to descend for Prospero's masque. The circle is filled with sand for 'The Tempest', hinges and folds (sometimes clumsily) to transport us

between the planks, grass and rock of Sicily, Bohemia, Lud's Town, Milford Haven and Rome.

Prospero's cell replaces the classical and baroque palace of Leontes and Cymbeline with a Faustian study from the top of whose tall-blossomed tower the magician observes the progress of his revenge. Black-winged harpies pounce on the tempting feast; fierce curs drive the shipwrecked villains away. The masks are both beautiful and sinister throughout.

'The Tempest' — luminous, lucid, and greatly enhanced by Harrison Birtwistle's sensuous and seductive score — is played without a break for just over two hours. 'The Winter's Tale' is more pedestrian, a cool and dry account of a very moving play. Despite a Hieronimo (Sally Dexter) of unusual warmth, a Perdita (Shirley Henderson) wise beyond her years and an Antolycus who roams Arcadia like a slippery-tongued gargyle — pallid, unsleeping and red-eyed — the play seems emotionally undernourished, the elements not yet combined.

'Cymbeline' is much more successful, its sense of wonder surviving its story better told. The longest and most preposterous denouement in the canon is played straight and raises no titters of disbelief because the naive king (Tony Church) takes every stage quite seriously without appearing daft. Geraldine James plays Imogen (as we are now advised to call her, after a British queen in Hollywood) and on the grounds that the name Imogen has no precedent before the First Folio of Shakespeare's play) with an imperious dignity and gentle desolation. The voice is light, fresh and contemporary; it animates the verse with brisk wit and simple feeling.



Tim Pigott-Smith as Leontes: 'Images of psychotic jealousy isolated with care.'

Ratcliffe on Tempest & Cymbeline

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