

# Don't love, don't hate

Eyes peeled wide in alarm, skull cropped close between ears and tight curls above, voice held down to stanch a weeping grief, Antony Sher plays Johnnie Smit in the revival of Athol Fugard's *Hello and Goodbye* (RSC, Almeida) like a cross between a cunning schoolboy and a bewildered rat. Johnnie is a servile, poor-white joker ('I don't love, I don't hate, I play it safe') who has nursed a bitter, ailing father for 15 years. His favourite word is dynamite, but he would never light a fuse.

When bullying sister Hester (Estelle Kohler) turns up to claim her share of the compensation awarded father for the loss of a leg at work, Johnnie defies her from terror, not courage, and pretends the dead man is still dying in the room next door.

When she leaves to resume a life of prostitution in Johannesburg at the end of the play their search for the money has filled the room with a debris of family boxes, shoes, clothes, photographs, seed-packets and newspapers on to which Johnnie settles like a scavenger on its nest.

'Let's face it', he concludes with a sly wit as he takes up his father's old crutches in search of a new public life, 'a man on his own two legs is a shaky proposition'. We witness the making of a Port Elizabeth bum; he will relish the hour of dusk on the waterfront and return home every evening to wait, like Hamlet, for his father's ghost.

The texture of this 1965 two-hander—first staged by the RSC in 1973, with Ben Kingsley and Janet Suzman as 'The second-hand Smits of Valley Road'—is one of anecdote and evasion, aggression and defence. Suzman was angular and witty, Kingsley canny and slow; Hester was definitely boss. No more: Kohler is more plausible, but less sharp.

For all the heat engendered

## THEATRE

Antony Sher in  
Athol Fugard's

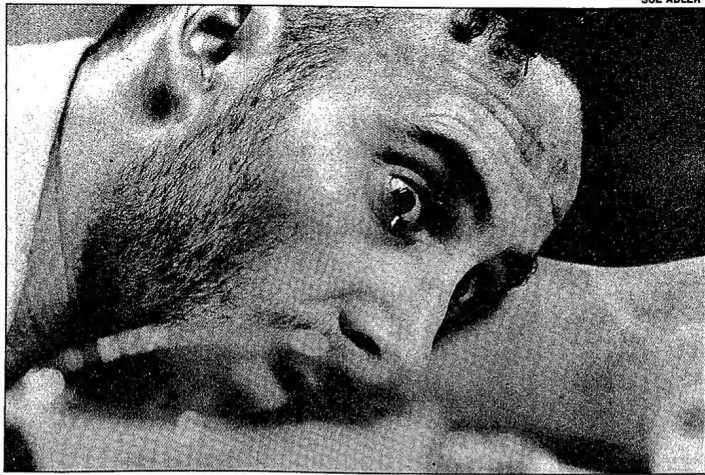
'Hello and Goodbye'

## MICHAEL RATCLIFFE

in Janice Honeyman's authoritative production, there is a demonstrational coolness to both performances that matches a circumspection in the play itself: it absorbs but does not move us. A collaboration between the RSC and the Almeida—this is the first of a series—should be essentially experimental in character, otherwise we might as well be watching the repertory at The Pit. This one is classy all right, but safe.

Three young Surrealists with impeccable middle-class minds watch in brimming elation as a beautiful blind girl pours afternoon tea, milk and sugar for them in 1922 without spilling a drop. They treat the occasion as both a victory over misfortune and a triumph of performance-art. Tom Stoppard's *Artist Descending a Staircase*, directed by Tim Luscombe at The King's Head, is a funny and touching radio play of 1972 being staged for the first time. It is Stoppard fresh from the exhilarations of 'Jumpers' and about to take the marvellous 'Travesties' on board.

The play begins in 1972 when all three Surrealists have grown quarrelsome and old, and one, Donner (Frank Middleton), has perhaps been pushed downstairs by one of the other two: Beauchamp (Peter Copley) or Martello (William Lucas). The 11 scenes move backwards to 1914, when the innocents pit their ambitions for art against the opening barrage of the First World War, and fast-forward again, as in a rewind, to 1972. The death of Donner



SUE ADLER

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remains a mystery: Beauchamp's tape recorder—on which he is recording folds of silence, like linen in a box—may, after all, have recorded the mere swatting of a fly.

'Artist Descending a Staircase' presents Stoppard in high form, allowing his characters to chatter lightly and often truthfully about skill, talent, craftsmanship, imagination and art, while abandoning the blind object of their devotion to suicide in the street. Sophie (Sarah Woodward) fills the heart of the play with great feeling, and the three younger artists—Karl James, Gareth Tudor Price and John War-naby—match the bitterness of their older selves with the ingenious heartlessness of youth. A West End transfer, which is deserved, should remove the interval apparently required by punters of pub theatre and play for 90 minutes without a break.

Some trouble has been taken to present sympathetically the world premiere of a play by

William Saroyan seven years after the playwright's death. *Don't Go Away Mad* (Donmar Warehouse) is directed by Keith Hack, designed by Voytek and imports Michael Moriarty, a star from New York.

Set in the recreation room of a terminal cancer ward in San Francisco around 1947, it proves, however, a garrulous and rambling piece about disappointment, affirmation and survival. Messages shrill like dinner bells throughout. It is easy to accept the concluding hope, as surviving patients work their way through the letter A in the dictionary, that knowledge is a kind of salvation, but portentous analogies abound, and when you lance the windbaggy and verbosity of the speeches, the meaning is always the same: rage against the dying of the light.

Had the text been trimmed, the pleasures might have stood out more clearly. Moriarty, with his round, gentle face and subtle intelligent manner, is

the essence of thinking, urban Irish America, and he plays George Porgie as an elegant dude who taps his feet and shadow-boxes his fists to fight the terrible pain. We should be seeing him in better plays by Miller, Williams, Thomas Murphy or O'Neill.

The sun not only appeared for last Wednesday's opening of *Babes In Arms* at the Open Air Theatre in Regent's Park; it set gracefully behind the clipboard wall of the Cape Cod summer playhouse in which Rodgers and Hart's backstage vacation musical takes place. This did not prevent two enterprising persons from bringing along a large, wire-haired dog to place across their feet as the August chill set in.

The show dates from the great partnership's peak between 'On Your Toes' and 'Pal Joey', but although it contains two outstanding songs ('My Funny Valentine', 'The Lady Is A Tramp') and at least four really good ones (among them 'I Wish I Were In Love

Again'), it is a cheerful, shapeless affair by the standards of Rodgers and Hart.

A series of teenage tiffs and reconciliations is strung with insolent disregard for the subtleties of cusing, between songs which may belong to the revue that Valentine White (Paul Reeves) and his chums try to stage against the manager's wish or to 'Babes In Arms' itself: it is not always clear.

An open air musical is a smashing idea; a musical actually about summer theatre fits very sweetly into Regent's Park. Ian Talbot's production improves on the vulgarised version which toured larger theatres a couple of years ago but although good fun it could, and should, have been more ambitious. Mr Reeves apart, the singing is eager rather than stylish or even accurate, and there is a great deal of generalised English 'American' behaviour with shiny-tight grins, popcorn and gum.

## Ratcliffe on Hello & Goodbye

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