

Steve Goldman on the revival of a double bill by Terence Rattigan

## From farce to resurrection

**T**ERENCE RATTIGAN once wrote: "A play can neither be great, nor a masterpiece, nor a work of genius, nor talented, nor untalented, nor indeed anything at all unless it has an audience to see it. . . Without an audience, it simply does not exist."

Playbill, which consists of two short plays, *The Browning Version* and *Harlequinade*, was first presented by the playwright in 1948. Revived at the National in 1980, it now re-emerges in the West End for a short run, performed by the Royalty Theatre Company.

The double bill is, by the playwright's own standards, undoubtedly alive. The question is whether it's still kicking. The answer is: just about.

Traditionally, Playbill has been presented with *The Browning Version*, Rattigan's stark depiction of the collapse of a schoolmaster, followed by the screwball antics of *Harlequinade*, a humorous but featherweight attack on the performer's persona.

The director, Tim Luscombe, has switched the order in the belief that today's audience can handle leaving the theatre with a bellyful of the schoolmaster's angst. But more important than the sequence is whether the playwright's work can still hold its own forty years on. The answer is: just about.

*Harlequinade* is set on the stage of a theatre in a small Midlands town where a company prepares for a production of *Romeo And Juliet*. It's a comedy in which the theatrical world collides with external reality, the joke being that the thespians only relate to the outside world in dramatic terms.

Arthur Gosport (Paul Eddington), the leading actor of his day, discovers that he is both a father and a bigamist when a bubbling bumpkin, Mariel Palmer (Sarah-Jane Holm), pops up at the theatre to greet her long-lost dad. The dilemma, when he discovers he is also a grandfather, is that he is now too old to play Romeo.

Luscombe directs the farce with high camp, which suits the material well enough. Although barbs such as those directed at the Arts Council take on a new meaning in the piece, one greets this first half of the revival as a curious oddity, like

an exotic specimen preserved in a jar. Seeing *Harlequinade* for the first time, my feeling was of watching a Cole Porter musical without the music.

*The Browning Version* is clearly another story. Here Rattigan recounts the final days of schoolmaster Andrew Crocker-Harris (Eddington), about to depart from his public school after being forced into early retirement. When we meet the character, he is losing his spiteful wife (Dorothy Tutin) to the charms of a young master (John Dutton). His health is failing him and his colleagues and students have rejected him.

When a pupil (Daniel Beales) gives the master a translation of *The Agamemnon* by Browning, the old man is swept away by a wave of 20 odd years of suppressed emotion. The disciplinarian melts to reveal the shell of a young man who once sought to inspire his love of language in others and who now realises his epitaph will be "The Himmeler of Lower Fifth".

Though the supporting characters are one-dimensional cut-outs, the figure of "the Crock", as he is known to his pupils, is clearly a consummate role.

It is handled with the utmost sensitivity by Paul Eddington, who plays the character as a stoic with an upper lip so stiff you could wipe your feet on it, which, accordingly, the host of dubious characters who enter his home proceed to do. When Eddington hits rock bottom, we sink with him, and as he summons up his honour to start life



Triumphant: Paul Eddington anew, we remain by his side. Eddington breathes new life into the work, and the result is a story of resurrection as powerful as any ever told. ● *Harlequinade and The Browning Version at the Royalty Theatre until April 30 (01-631 0650).*

## Steve Goldman on Rattigan

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