

Michael Billington finds passion lacking in 'Tis Pity . . . at the Olivier

No heart attack

WHY has Alan Ayckbourn chosen to direct John Ford's 'Tis Pity She's A Whore?

I assumed, jokingly, it might be because he saw it as a prequel to A Small Family Business with a family at odds against a background of Italian corruption. But watching his cool, hyper-efficient but somewhat passionless production at the Olivier, I got no sense of an un governable obsession: what I saw was a quattrocento, Romeo-and-Juliet style story of star-cross'd love delivered with detached professionalism.

For the first time I even found myself doubting the quality of Ford's play. It deals famously with the incestuous relationship of Giovanni and Annabella. But there is no sense of taboos defiantly broken or of inhibitions flamboyantly shed. Ford simply shows their relationship as tender, loving, pathetic and inescapably doomed, as Giovanni says, "Tis not, I know my lust but, 'tis my fate that leads me on."

Everyone praises Ford for his lack of sensationalism, give or take the moment when Giovanni enters with his sister's heart impaled on a dagger. But I wish the play were a little more feverish and had something of Webster's hectic morbidity and ability to link the cosmic and the commonplace.

Ford was a better story-teller than his Jacobean predecessors but a chaste poet: only two characters employ a language that gives the play a spine-tingling excitement. One is the Friar who delivers a chilling, admonitory speech to Annabella in which he evisions a Dante-esque Inferno full of unending deaths: "There are glut-tens fed with toads and adders; there is burning oil poured down the drunkard's throat."

But the language also springs to life with the Spanish avenger, Vasques, whose master weds the pregnant Annabella and who throughout employs a rich, rancid prose: "To know what farret it was that haunted your cony-berry, there's the cunning," he tells his master with rather more vigour than social tact.

It is, in fact the secondary characters who come off best in Ayckbourn's production,

played on a revolving Roger Glossop set that offers us some memorable vistas of galleried corridors and ecclesiastical windings. Clive Francis is a superb Vasques: his walk is a stealthy growl over hot coals and he sniffs out corruption with the malignant relish of a private investigator.

Richard Cordery also does full justice to the bungling Friar handing out stern lectures to the incest-mongers while making assignations with a bit of crumplet in the confessional. And Russell Dixon is exuberantly funny as the comic suitor, Bergetto, bracing himself to leap off a foot-high step as if it were an Olympic diving-board.

My main doubts concern the young lovers. The aim clearly is to present them as gauche, moonstruck and adolescent at the start and, at the end, matured through suffering. But there is an element of intellectual sophistry about Giovanni which I find no trace of in Rupert Graves's nice, preppy, clean-cut lad in a bottle-green suit: only with the murder of his sister and his subsequent entry, when he came in clutching her heart in his hand rather than presenting it as if it were an unorthodox kebab, did he strike a note of deep passion.

Suzan Sylvester's Annabella has innocence and charm and makes the first declaration of love shyly touching but I hold this should be a story about two lovers swept along by an irresistible force rather than about a young couple with severe dating problems.

Ayckbourn stages the play proficiently giving us, as in A View From The Bridge, the sense of a total society. The marriage of Annabella and Soranzo (Michael Simkins, suitably tormented) gives the impression of something rushed and furtive in a mouldy crypt.

The climactic banquet, with its multiple deaths, shows innocent bystanders caught up in brutal chaos. And, after the ball is over and moral judgements pronounced, you are reminded that someone has to come along and sweep up the corpses. But it is a circumspect, deliberate production of a headlong play and one that is a little too tasteful to convey the dangerous ecstasy of incest.

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