

THEATRE
Cheek by Jowl's
'A Family Affair'
MICHAEL RATCLIFFE

His greatest ally is Lipochka herself, a young Bonaparte in bloomers who sees her father returned to prison without raising a pencilled eyebrow and becomes Lazar's rapacious and inexhaustible wife. Their triumph is to turn a marriage of mutual opportunism into a conspiracy against the world. Miss Sharp, fresh from a series of depressingly earnest roles at the National, confirms herself as one of the most exhilarating young comic actresses we have.

The heart and motor of the household are the sofa and two towers of holy pictures which receive propitiatory pats against troubles to come, or slaps of gratitude with the flat of the hand when more spectacular saintly services have been rendered. (Designer, Nick Ormerod). Parodies of Russian life recur: even the biggest villains melt at the first plink of a balalaika; vodka both causes and stills the tremble of the morning hand.

Donnellan excels in the choreography of ample movement and intimate detail in tight, confining spaces: the Swan stage, which has no sides, is not the best place for either, but 'A Family Affair' confirms the company's standing and is likely to go from strength to joyous strength as it takes the road from Worthing to Carlisle before arriving at the Donnat Warehouse on April 27.

The difference between Alan Ayckbourn's production of 'The Pit' and that of Philip Prowse (Citizen's, Glasgow, until Saturday) which I reviewed last week, is between a production which attempts to accommodate every element in Ford's play and one which, cutting the text, goes deterministically for a single explanation — in Prowse's case, the stinking corruption of the seventeenth-century Roman Catholic church. Ayckbourn offers no explanations, which is, in the end, more disturbing.

His revelation of Ford's text — much of it from the front of the Olivier stage — is more lucid and intelligible. His actors are better, but by no means in every role and often only just. Giovanni (Rupert Graves) and Annabella (Suzan Sylvester) are portrayed as smirky, suburban kids, but the monotony of their speaking inhibits their expressiveness. Neither show is the least bit erotic, and without the tangerous itch of a threatening passion, where is the point of 'Tis Pity She's a Whore'?

Ayckbourn's production takes its stylishness and tone from the two actors who get their laughs with the play and not against it: Russell Dixon, who plays the booby suitor as a man who takes out his frustrations of life near the bottom of the heap by kicking rose trees and old men; and Clive Francis as the villainous Spaniard, Vasquez. The glittering prurience with which Vasquez perceives the truth ('Her own brother! Oh, horrible!') perfectly articulates the moral ambivalence of this play.

It is performed on a towering necropolis (designer, Roger Gossop) whose convex stairways arch against the black sky like the enclosed palaces of the artist M.C. Escher. The belvedere city turns like a great ship in the moonlight revealing a library, a garden, or a long colonnade through its heart, transforming itself for the final catastrophe into a double loggia packed with the masquers and musicians of a late Renaissance feast.

This Island's Mine, written and directed by Philip Osment for Gay Sweatshop (Drill Hall) is a kind of theatrical novel into which themes of pride, concealment, self-discovery and exploitation are worked across a wide range of characters — by no means all gay — and settings from the mining suburbs of South Yorkshire to West Hampstead, Hackney and the American South. It embraces, among many things, the wartime romance of a Viennese Jewess and a GI; the ghost of a bitter White Russian princess, gays sacked by the ignorant, blacks beaten by the police; Prospero, Caliban and an old cat stuck up a tree. The techniques are cumulative and cross-referential, the tone instructive, ironic, gentle and warning of the need ever to defend personal liberties under siege. It is done by Mr Osment and his company — particularly William Elliott, Margaret Robinson and Diane Hall — with grace, sharpness and wit. Tour starts March 15.

Tis Pity Radcliffe

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