

Michael Billington on Anouilh's star-vehicle which takes a jovial path to sainthood

Becket, the boulevardier

TWO stars, said Shakespeare, keep not their motion in one sphere. Actually he was wrong. Few plays that offer two major male roles ever fail at the box-office. And the main attraction of Anouilh's *Becket*, buoyantly revived by Elijah Moshinsky, lies in watching Derek Jacobi and Robert Lindsay squaring up to each other as temperamental opposites.

As a play, it strikes me as boulevard history: jovial but skin-deep. Anouilh's thesis, stated many times, is that Henry II suffered a bad case of thwarted homosexual love for his fellow-roisterer, Thomas Becket. Unable to penetrate his Saxon-bastard chum's emotional defences, Henry woos him with titles: first Chancellor and then Archbishop of Canterbury. But, once promoted to holy office, Becket undergoes a see-change putting the honour of God before that of his King. The result is death, martyrdom and flagellated regal remorse.

Anouilh's play has a sprightly wit which Jeremy Sams's cheeky new translation is keen, sometimes over-keen, to emphasise: Henry warns Becket that once his henchmen are given eating implements "they'll be forking each other across the table". But there are other times, not least in an incredibly vulgar scene featuring a Pope with an ice-cream vendor accent, when I was reminded of an Alan Bennett sketch about a camp ecclesiastical dignitary: "I'm not stopping, I won't take my cope off."

The real problem is that Anouilh sees history largely in terms of personal emotion. There is no hint in his loutish

hooray-Henry of what Trevelyan called "a clerical mind trained in the best European learning of his day"; even Becket's martyrdom is ultimately traceable to his inability to love. The play lacks any genuine moral dilemma in which Becket is torn between the claims of God and Caesar: instead he goes from nervous debauchee to intransigent cleric without, one brief monologue aside, any intervening period of self-doubt.

It is a play of phrases rather than ideas in which the actors have to implement Anouilh's somewhat crude outlines. Derek Jacobi does this excellently: in the early scenes, he counterpoints his affectionate caress of Henry's temples with deferential, ironic bows to his Norman master. And in his final stony encounter with Henry, he supplies the internal conflict only hinted at in Anouilh's text.

Henry is the noisier role and Mr Lindsay plays it with a fine swaggering élan. He has a tenor bark somewhat reminiscent of O'Toole but he cunningly suggests that Henry's autocratic anger is fuelled by emotional frustration. There is also striking work from Mark Hadfield as a murderous monk and from Andrew Jarvis and Ken Bones as a quick-change assortment of barons, prelates, monarchs.

Elijah Moshinsky directs this Gaillie pageant at great speed against a set of sliding panels that suggests the Bayeux Tapestry in perpetual motion. In the end it is an evening for connoisseurs of good acting rather than dialectical drama and as much an star-vehicle as Tennyson's *Becket* was for Irving a century ago.

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