



Richard Price as a star QC in *Hare's* judicial system that is an 'inefficient justice apparatus that will grind down a human spirit'. Photograph by Richard Mildenhall.

The fine art of getting through Biro

Theatre

Michael Coveney is witness to a critical miscarriage of justice.

WATCHING David Hare's blindingly topical and craftily brilliant new play *Murdering* Judges on the Olivier stage of the Royal National Theatre is like watching a modern city state conduct its own inquiry.

Richard Eyre's rich production has panoramic scope and sharp detail: an Irish family man, Gerard McKinnon (Robert Pattinson), makes one mistake and is sent to Wandsworth prison for five years, a black lawyer, Irma Platt (Alphonsine Emmanuel), takes up his brief and becomes more sympathetic than she should; a south London detective (the stand-up comic Keith Allen, inspirational casting) is found by his girlfriend Sandra (Lesley Sharp), a bright new recruit from Hendon, to have brought an unsafe prosecution in his pre-emptive strike against armed criminals.

Hare/Eyre attack their subject from above and behind, involving the full panoply of the buzzing High Court, busy legal chambers on the Embankment, an overcrowded prison, the hubbub of a police station up its neck in paperwork, and the Crash Bar at the Royal Opera House Covent Garden.

These packed locations are unswayed with amazing grace in Bob Crowley's design of photographic blow-ups magically enmeshed with practical scenery, and enhanced by the eloquent lighting of Mark Henderson. The dissolve principle also prompts pleasingly retinal confusion, as in the intricately magnificent finale to the first act, where all points of view are orchestrated into the overture of *The Magic Flute*.

The texture is strong, the construction faultless. Hare skillfully controls the release of the information we need, and does so in speeches of some pith and moment. In addition to the two pivotal relationships, which are explored in scenes of great delicacy and finesse, there are critical and entertaining examinations of the judiciary, the police and the prisons.

Michael Bryant's canny old judge is finally too smooth for the Home Secretary, Kevin (Peter Wight), who explodes with 'We've nowhere to put the bloody prisoners you keep sending us', while Richard Pasco's expatriate star QC sidles off to the canapés. Paul Morley's front-desk sergeant, inundated with minor criminals and form-filling duties, enlists and form-filling duties, enlists and form-filling duties, enlists and form-filling duties.

After an appeal court hearing, the play ends with new revelations and fresh starts. Hare's point is that Gerard's crime is not of sufficient consequence to justify the complex, inefficient punitive apparatus that will grind down a human spirit and possibly wrap it out of Irma.

Irma suggests that the rituals of law may anaesthetise its practitioners against seeing the world another way round.

Gerard deduces that he may as well assume the role he has been assigned and takes up a book of Irish history. Irma addresses the John Wilkes Society as the first step in a campaign to reform the law. And Sandra, PC Bingham, who is posted above south London in a classic Hare scene at the end with Irma, reports to the chief superintendent. There is no alternative police force where

bobbies read the *Guardian* and eat salads.

The visit of the Shachiku Company of Tokyo to the RNT's other main auditorium, the Lyttelton, in *Grand Kabuki* (one more week) is a genuine highlight of the Japan Festival. Three items are enacted on the hollow wooden stage where a band of singers — *shamisen* (three-string mandolin) strummers and flautists — sits sculpturally still, like a Buddhist musical *Polluburo*. Offstage clappers and wooden blocks heighten a mood already



Masayuki Tamashiro as the Fifth.

These are led by two remarkable *belushi* 'omogatai', men playing women in white face, traditional wigs and kimono with utter femininity and no trace of pantomime camp. Nabe (Kobuki stars inherit their status) dances at a festival and is transformed by two butterfly-like sons — into a raging lion in a long white mane of Tibetan yak hair.

Kankuro also plays a holy man seduced by a princess in order to release the rain dragon at a time of drought. The prince is Buntō Tamashiro the Fifth, whose complete mastery is displayed in the evening's third piece. A dying maiden inhabits the form of a heero in a snowstorm, an image Tamashiro creates in stillness, the slightest inclination of the head, the merest lifting of an ankle. The climax is one of overpowering beauty and sadness. There is something markedly oriental, too, about Steven Berkoff's *Kvesek* (as in *Levenching*), a compelling, worrying) in an exhilarating blast of foul-mouthed Yiddisher cockney, which uses interior monologue, soliloquy and dialogue to weave a brutal tapestry of sexual fear and domestic aggression.

Berkoff plays Frank, an East End clock salesman who brings a divorced friend (Henry Goodman) home for a supper of stinking cabbage and burnt lard. Frank's one-breasted wife (Anita Dobson) is sexually dissatisfied and deceives to Frank's manufacturing contact (Stanley Lebor). A kiss is just a kiss, but to Frank it's a threat: 'The month keeps coming at me, followed by the face.' The second act is too long, but Berkoff's production is the fiercest and, alongside the kabuki, the most technically enthralling in London.

Three other West End offerings seem stilled and old-fashioned by comparison. *Becket* at the Haymarket is a spirited strength by Elisha Moshinsky to enlighten Aquin's baring chronicle about Henry II and his turbulent priest, Robert Lindsay, after his television triumph in *GBH*, reminds us what a first-rate stage actor he is.

Derek Jacobi stars limply as Becket, overloading the living intake of breath through his

teeth to indicate vulnerability, but improves in stillness as the play deepens under him. The crisis in the friendship is never properly dramatised, and Jeremy Sims's new translation is gratuitously scatalogical. Good set, though, of pastel-colored medieval sliding panels designed by Michael Yeargan, resident designer at the Yale Repertory.

The Glory of the Garden by Stephen Mallatrat at the Duke of York's is a pathetic scull of a satire on the Arts Council with Jill Gascoine as an underwritten masseuse and Russell Dizon as an overplayed entrepreneur who has been stashing away public funds while presenting bingo in a fictional (sounds like) West Yorkshire Alhamra, buttressed by the fake reviews of James Davivski's stage-struck hang-on. The plot inconspicuously expires in a second-act travesty of *The Goodness of Parrot*.

A *Swell Party* at the Vaudeville is a songbook compilation of Cole Porter very like the one at the Mermaid years ago with the additional ruse of 'outing' the composer/lyricist. Porter looks like Nickolas Grace plays Cole as a bag-eyed, feet-floored fawn whose musical genius was only matched by his homosexual promiscuity.

A Wednesday matinee audience of old dears, for whom the term 'theatre outing' means primarily a bus pass and a warm gin and tonic, went very quiet for a few minutes before deciding, collectively, to take all this on the chin. David Gilmore's production, though, obliged with a tacky sound system, is full of great songs backed up by a vibrant piano duet of Martin Smith and Gary Ford. Grace is kept under good pressure by the unbeatable Angela Richards, the evergreen David Kerzner and a fancy newcomer, Anne Wood.

Coveney Judges Judges

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