

Theatre

Michael Coveney finds multi-cultural successes at the RNT.

IF ONE had to isolate one single characteristic of the Royal National Theatre under the artistic direction of Richard Eyre, newly dubbed CBE, it would be its responsible catholicity. Bond, Bennett and soon Tennessee Williams in the Lyttelton. Farquhar, Rodgers and Hammerstein this year in the Olivier. In the Cottesloe, artistic directors of two of our leading black and Asian theatre companies — Yvonne Brewster of Talawa and Jatinder Verma of Tara Arts — have been given their respective heads.

The new production by Brewster of Lorca's **Blood Wedding** is an interesting attempt at the sort of cultural reclamation of European classics that is the great task of the late twentieth-century theatre.

Lorca's Cuban connection is well documented, and it makes sense for black artists to pin down the overlaps between the tragic music of a Caribbean shanty town and the Spanish *vega*. Kendra Ulyart's design surrounds a giant linen tent-napkin with bean bags, flame trees and wild orchids thrusting out from a battered oil drum (the production was sponsored on tour by BP).

The explosive events of the forbidden marriage and its grisly consequences are supervised by Lorca's symbolic country figures of Moon and Death, here represented as a village bogeyman and raving savage. The transposition works well, as does the phallogentric imagery of Lorca's runaway horses in the coiled, physical performance of Gary McDonald as the doomed Leonardo.

The play really requires a more brilliant heat, and a more fully sustained choreography, than it receives here. But Mona

Hammond, angry with foreboding, is magnificent as the grieving mother, and Cyril Ikechukwu Nri flamboyantly impulsive as the bridegroom.

Jatinder Verma is the brainiest of all multi-cultural theatre spokesmen in Britain, but his work on the stage does not always match the quality of his polemicism. No complaints, though, about *The Little Clay Cart*, the Sanskrit classic which Verma (with some verse and songs by Ranjit Bolt) has presented with real spirit and seductive gravity in the Cottesloe.

In Lorca, the elemental gods are sinister and mysterious; here, the Indian deities humorously supervise the love of a Brahmin merchant for a rich courtesan threatened by the intervention of the blustery brother of a bad king. The story is enmeshed in the fascinating metaphor of the rolling dice and an appealing, trance-like style of performance which Verma relates in his programme notes to *Rasa* theory, 'the evocation of the state of rapture through aesthetic distance'.

Although the production is more deliberately exotic, and the play more precious, than Peter Brook's *Mahabharata*, there is a real sense of tragicomic hierarchy. Verma's Taruffe, Nizwar Karanj, proves his charm and versatility in a cast with many notable Tara performers: Shelley King, Cuckoo Parameswaran, Vincent Ebrahim and Yogesh Bhatt. The delightful red pavilion setting of stained wood, with its ornamental garden traps, is designed by Magdalen Rubalcava, and the irresistible music and drumming is by V. Chandran (with Adrian Lee).

Both Cottesloe plays are distinguished by reverse colour-blind casting (ie, a couple of whites among the blacks), which suggests that we are much further along the road in these matters of racial integration than is often claimed and sometimes realised.

Clay Cart, attributed to

Coveney On Blood Wedding

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