

Vanessa takes possession of the soul of Isadora

Theatre

Michael Coveney contrasts two greats, Redgrave and Sher.

A GREAT actor's task is not just to seduce the audience; it is to possess and inhabit a role to the point where impersonation merges with the actor's personality.

Two different, but equally compelling, performances on the London stage strike to the heart of the mystery, with the added frisson of historical reference: Vanessa Redgrave as Isadora Duncan in *When She Danced* by Martin Sherman at the Globe; Antony Sher as Brecht's cartoon version of Adolf Hitler in *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* in the Olivier auditorium at the Royal National Theatre.

Redgrave's Isadora is an act of immersion in the legend of someone whose artistry may be held responsible for the worst excesses of modern dance. She encouraged people to think they could perform without technique; but when she danced, she changed people's lives. Redgrave inhabits a poetic state of being which corresponds, no doubt, to the trance-like condition of Duncan emoting savagely to Tchaikovsky's *Pas de deux* and Beethoven's Seventh.

Nabokov thought Isadora resembled "a Roman matron after revival". Indeed, Sheila Gish approximated to that description in a fine performance in this same play at the King's Head three years ago. But Redgrave moves on a different plane, in a different sphere, one of mystery and communion, of private rapture made dangerously public at one of Isadora's lowest ebbs in Paris in 1923.

In Bob Crowley's superb design of a single golden column, tall blue shutters, blue silk curtains and a chandelier, Isadora's hotel environment on the Rue de la Pompe is both tawdry

and magnificent. She has no idea where the next bottle of champagne is coming from. And she is deeply in lust with Sergei Esenin, the poet she met and married on her Moscow trip of the previous year.

Esenin, played with a winning athleticism by Oleg Menshikov, speaks no English, is 18 years her junior, and a destructive alcoholic. A crisis is caused by his recital (in Russian) of his poem about drowned puppies, 'Song of a Dog'. This triggers memories of the tragedy in 1913 when Isadora's two children by Gordon Craig were drowned when their nurse in a car accident.

Sherman's text provides a discussion map of the artistic temperament: Redgrave ('I never rehearse my feet') stands magically still and suffused with

feeling as an adoring young pianist plays a Chopin étude.

Otherwise, her movement is as free and as graceful as Duncan's must have been; and she glitters, fine shoulders exposed, in a white toga-towel robe. Elemental is the word, as it was in her recent staggering act of poetic self-immolation in Simon Callow's fine film *The Ballad of the Sad Café*.

Robert Allan Ackerman's production competently orchestrates the babel of the stage around Redgrave. Various set speeches serve as testimonies: the young pianist whose mother gave birth dreaming of Isadora, the translator who saw her in St Petersburg and has never cried since, Alison Fiske is a brisk 'American' assistant, while Frances de la Tour duels equally with Redgrave as the

forlorn, physically hamstrung linguistic cypher Miss Belzer.

Kevin Elyot, as an Italian filing clerk mistakenly assumed to be a consular official, is the sole survivor of the King's Head production and a very funny butt of a sponsorship dinner at which a dreadful infant prodigy (Jodie Scott) apes the Duncan style and is applauded by the politician as a worthy exponent. There is a notable West End debut by Michael Sheen as the eager pianist, though the sound effect to which he mimes at the keyboard is diabolical.

Shaw said of Sarah Bernhardt in Sudermann's *Heimat* that she did not enter the character, she substituted herself for it; Eleonora Duse, he said, was better in the same role because, with her, 'every part is a separate creation'. There is a distinction

to be made, perhaps, between great performance and great acting. Peter Hall thought so, in discussing Olivier and Ralph Richardson. It is the same with Sher and Redgrave: the first performs, the second reveals her soul through various feats of acting.

Sher's Arturo Ui, which I find comparable to Leonard Rossiter's but less absurdly and manically funny, is conceived on a spectacular trajectory in spite of the stop-start quality in Di Trevis's disappointing production. As in the last West End revival (with Griff Rhys Jones), the 'historical parallels in Hitler's rise are ponderously spelt out. In addition, historical snippets are sung by a linking narrator (Nick Holder) to a new score by Dominic Muldowney which cleverly, then incessantly,

toys with 'Buddy, Can You Spare A Dime?' Uitz's design is old-fashioned and cumbersome after so many elegant Olivier stagings inaugurated by the RNT's first South Bank Brecht, *Galileo*.

The Chicago gangsterism is played with all the obvious clichés of crackling gunfire, bad movie-dumb accents, blinding car headlamps in the massacre scene. The translation by Ramin Bolt is no improvement on the available versions of George Tabori and Ralph Manheim. The support acting is ordinary.

Sher battles through all this in a built-up Olivieresque nose and a series of 'look at me' tantrums starting with a nice nudge at his own Richard III prototype by swinging downstage on upended Tommy guns where once he used crutches. He presents a street hoodlum down on his luck, publicly reviled even (like his Slylock), with a sudden, joyously violent explosion as he head-butts a journalist in the groin.

The takeover of the Cauliflower Trust, the burning of the warehouse, the annexation of Cicero: all are dutifully related to historical fact, which suggests the RNT believes either that the play cannot stand on its own satirical merits, or that we cannot read programme notes. The whole point, surely, is that the superb theatrical mechanics of the play fall into place once Ui grows into Hitler.

Sher glimpses his flat-handed salute fleetingly in the mirror during the acting lesson (Michael Bryant is a fruitfully old-ladyish thespian) and judges to perfection the amalgamation of clockwork fascist gestures and the ecstasy of oratory.

Like Ian McKellen's British fascist Crookback in the adjoining Lyttelton, Sher is finally isolated on high behind a microphone, hair slicked down over his left temple, the full horror let slip in full spate. 'Earth's womb still teems with monstrous tyrannies,' runs Bolt's last line. Indeed it does. What else is new?



Conceived on a spectacular trajectory: Antony Sher in *'The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui'*. Photograph by Frank Hermann.

Coveney on Ui

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