

order to release the rain dragon at a time of drought. The princess is Bando Tamasaburo the Fifth, whose complete mastery is displayed in the evening's third piece. A dying maiden inhabits the form of a heron in a snowstorm, an image Tamasaburo 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 *Kvetch* (as in 'kvetching', complaining, worrying) at the Garrick. But the elegiac is only a screen for the vicious. This is 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 cloth salesman who brings a divorced friend (Henry Goodman) home for a supper of stinking cabbage and burnt latkes. Frank's one-breasted wife (Anita Dobson) is sexually dissatisfied and decamps to Frank's manufacturing contact (Stanley Lebor). A kiss is just a kiss, but to Frank it's a threat: 'The mouth 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 stilted and old-fashioned by comparison. *Becket* at the Haymarket is a spirited attempt by Elijah Moshinsky to enliven Anouilh's boring 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 starts limply as Becket, overdoing the hissing intake of breath through his

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

**The Glory of the Garden** by Stephen Mallatratt at the Duke of York's is a pathetic squib of a satire on the Arts Council with Jill Gascoine as an underwritten masseuse and Russell Dixon as an overplayed entrepreneur who has been stashing away public funds while presenting bingo in a fictional (sounds like) West Yorkshire Alhambra, buttressed by the fake reviews of Janine Duvitski's stage-struck hanger-on. The plot incompetently expires in a second-act travesty of *The Government Inspector*.

**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 lookalike Nickolas Grace plays Cole as a bug-eyed, fleet-footed 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 plagued with a tacky sound system, is full of great songs backed up by a vibrant piano duet of Martin Smith and Gary Hind. Grace is kept under good pressure by the unbeatable Angela Richards, the evergreen David Kernan and a feisty newcomer, Anne Wood.

## Michael Coveney on Becket

Clipped By:



ianharris

Mon, Mar 9, 2020