

Long night of lost souls

Theatre

Michael Coveney on true confessions at the National.

AMID a ritual bout of fatuous jeremiads concerning the 'state of the West End' — what if the managements are pooling their resources (about £17.28) to put on a compilation musical of the compilation musicals? — it has been a fascinating week of rescue and revival in theatres that really matter to London: the National, Greenwich and the Lyric, Hammersmith.

The Night of the Iguana (Lyttelton, RNT) is Tennessee Williams' last great play of any size or texture. The author had not quite fallen apart with booze and drugs in 1961, and he created a steamy scenario of guilt, demons and sexual confusion among a few lost souls on the veranda of Maxine Faulk's hospitable jungle shack overlooking the Puerto Barrio in Mexico in 1940.

Richard Eyre's production, for which Bob Crowley has filled the stage with plastic jungle greenery and a monster garden shed, is none the less a little lost in the Lyttelton's acoustics, which are unsuitable for confessional intimacies.

But it does contain an absolutely knockout performance by Alfred Molina as the tour guide Larry Shannon, a heretic priest from Graham Greenleaf who has molested one of his young party of Texan girls and is drying out and lying low in a fever of exultant edginess and hallucination. Molina's performance is weighty and light, full of lungs and twinkle, lit with bright energy and a positive and sympathetic rage.

Shannon finds God in other people: in the raunchy Maxine (Frances Barber, not exactly 'bigger than life and twice as unnatural', but impressively joyful) and, especially, in the impetuous artist and spinster Hannah Jelkes, whom Eileen Atkins invests with an astringent melancholy and a moving spiritual toughness.

Hannah is tending her 97-year-old poet grandfather (Robin Bailey) who finally expires, with the play, on completing his last, Rilkean verses. She has released to Larry her virginal experiences in a

Nantucket cinema and on a Singapore sampan, dignifying these tawdry encounters with the simple poetry of tolerance, and pinning down at last a play which seems ever likely to fly off in any direction.

Eyre imposes the right rhythms, and a rich atmosphere, while not skimming on the imagery (of a captured iguana struggling at the end of its rope) or on the peripheral, horribly gleeful quartet of fat German tourists who are celebrating the bombing of London.

An squally forgotten and even more problematical rarity, Shaw's 1898 **Caesar and Cleopatra**, has been handsomely revived at Greenwich by Matthew Francis, with Alec McCowen as Shaw's ideal political hero and Amanda Root as the kittenish Queen of the Nile.

There remains an insuperable element of stilted baloney in the versed issue of the Egyptian succession. But McCowen and Root manage to smuggle in a warm and shifting tutor/pupil relationship not unlike that between Higgins and Eliza Doolittle.

The casting, even though McCowen is not the Romanosid supremo Forbes-Robertson must have been, is just right. At this stage of the Syrian annexation, Caesar is in his mid-fifties. Shaw infantilised Cleopatra by about six years to eliminate the sex threat and cancel the 'deification of love' he despised in *Antony and Cleopatra*. Root grows to near-womanliness, acquiring a Judi Dench-style catch in her voice to sublimate the childish, eager tones of the early scenes.

A peevish sacrificial murder (the victim, Frank Moorey, is incomprehensibly got up like *Widow Twankey*) brings McCowen to the boil, and to the furious discharging — body still, eyes blazing — of the great speech about murders committed in the name of right and honour and peace.

The tone of the play is perfect throughout: dry, wry and muscular. McCowen sets the pace but is admirably followed by Michael Grandage as the Sicilian carpet dealer Appolodorus, Jim Dunk as Rufio and Timothy Kightley as Theodotus, who humorously doubles as a bobbing boatman at the Alexandrian quayside.

Julian McGowan's witty designs ingeniously match

Shaw's impracticable demands for a lighthouse, a palace rooftop and the magical eeriness of the Syrian palace where McCowen is discovered itemising his alone-ness to the Sphinx. His condition is reinforced by events in the play, and his brusque, uncaring departure, with his promise of sending out Mark Antony, is a chill admission of defeat.

There is more stylish skirting of history in David Hirson's **La Bête** at the Lyric, Hammersmith, a Broadway flop (ie, the *New York Times* didn't like it) entirely composed in rhyming couplets on a brilliant white, tilting antechamber devised by the two Richards, Hudson (designer) and Jones (director).

Once you spot that Elomire is an anagram, the rest falls into place: this is Molière's vagabond company, including the Béjart family, on tour in the southern provinces in 1654, several years before Parisian glory at the Palais Royal.

The preface to *Tartuffe* and the issues of the 'Comic War' are previewed in Elomire's defence of the moral purpose of comedy, while the new boy Valère, with his crass neologisms and mediocre Spanish farce, embodies the light entertainment imperatives.

Whereas Bulgakov, in his successful Molière play, pits the successful dramatist against his sponsoring monarch, Hirson — a promising 33-year-old New Yorker — cleverly launches a theoretical dispute between unknowns within a provincial sponsorship crisis. Elomire has been served a writ by a popinjay Prince. The troupe, against Elomire's wishes, is embroiled in a command performance of Valère's parable of the two boys of Cadiz, and Elomire is left seethingly to contemplate the beast within his comic muse.

The structure is audacious, with an opening half-hour monologue of infiltration for the pretender which is stupendously well executed by Alan Cumming, preening, self-mocking, improvising, teasing, boasting and fawning in a fantastic flood of controlled and campy histrionics.

Jeremy Northam's bleary-eyed, half-shaven Elomire can only await the glorious intervention of Prince Conti, whom a tear-drenched Timothy Walker in a poodle wig, mauve stockings and a stage-filling



Frances Barber and Alfred Molina in *'The Night of the Iguana'*. Photograph by Richard Mildenhall. The stage looks ravishing, and Hirson has Molière's trick of infusing a banal verse scheme with thought, feeling and argument. A bad news postscript from the Salisbury Playhouse, where an admirable project undertaken in concert with Paines Plough and a company based at Chalon-sur-Saône, near Dijon, has come seriously unstuck on Nigel Gearing's adaptation of George Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London*. Anna Furse's tame production fails to capitalise on the ensemble potential of *Life among the Paris plougeurs* and London tramps, and makes too little of Sally Jacobs's mobile array of eight tin trunks.

Michael Coveney on Iguana

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