

Michael Billington on Steven Berkoff's incantatory *Salome* at the Lyttelton

Herod and the hypnotists

IT IS nice to think of Oscar Wilde putting the finishing touches to *Salome* in Torquay. Out of that ultra-respectable Devonian resort came a play that was famously banned in 1902, that was the source of Strauss's violently sensual opera and that now turns up at the Lyttelton in a lethally stylish Steven Berkoff production that has been totally re-cast since its premiere at the Gate Theatre, Dublin.

My doubts about the play are as strong as my admiration for the production. Mr Berkoff in the splendid new Faber edition (which comes complete with Beardley's priapically exotic illustrations) describes Wilde's language as "hypnotic and narcotic".

That is precisely the problem: its incantatory rhythms and piled up similes send one into a drowsy trance. It is language in which sound takes precedence over sense: when, for instance, Salome says to Jokanaan, "Thy hair is like the cedars of Lebanon, like the cedars of Lebanon that give their shade to the lions," one is struck by the inappropriateness of comparing his ringleted, vertical locks to a cone-bearing tree with spreading branches.

But, instead of apologising for the language, Mr Berkoff nakedly confronts it: the actors hold every phrase up to the light like jewellers examining a precious stone for flaws.

And instead of swathing the play in the kind of Biblical historicism one associates with the paintings of Alma-Tadema or John Martin, Berkoff locates it in a spare, stark 1920s world. Everything on stage is calculated, deliberate, artificial from the measured intonation to the movements of Herod's sycophantic, giggling dinner-guests (with their patent-leather hair and sheath-like frocks) who seem to be mincing through a quicksand.

The concept (as of a Symbolist prose-poem transplanted to a Michael Arlen world) is so strong that it easily survives a total cast-change.

But, although Mr Berkoff is at pains to point out that he always intended to play Herod himself, I cannot say his performance eclipses the

one I saw Alan Stanford give when the Gate production moved to Edinburgh.

Where Mr Stanford, all carmine-lipped bulk, played Herod as an incarnation of Wilde himself, Mr Berkoff offers us a crazed, bullet-headed tyrant.

His voice oscillates between a hollow boom and a sinuous rasp. He tenses vowel-sounds out to unnatural lengths so that his cry of "Salome, let us be friends" evokes childhood memories of Darrell Fancourt's Wilko prescribing lingering punishments. And he snickers to the courtiers as he accuses his wife of sterility.

It is a demonically compelling performance, but its mimetic busyness rather works against the production's verbal purity: when, for instance, Herod promises Salome "Four fans fashioned from the feathers of parrots", Mr Berkoff flaps his arms like a bird with ruffled plumage. You admire the technique at the expense of the phrase.

But if Mr Berkoff sometimes out-herods Herod, the other performances are in harmony with the overall style.

Katharine Schlesinger's Salome is like some wickedly depraved child, provocatively stroking her thighs in front of Jokanaan and demanding his head with the nagging insistence of a spoilt, sensual brat.

Carmen du Sautoy is also an unforgettable Herodias. Clad in a black, armoured, Erte-esque gown, she moves through the action with the slow steeliness of a spider enmeshing a fly; and she signals her moment of triumph by revealing a smile like a Toledo blade and a pair of legs that make you wonder at Herod's obsession with her daughter.

I still think the play is scented rhetoric, but Mr Berkoff's production, Roger Doyle's Sattiesque piano music (played by Eleanor Alberga) and the highly disciplined chorus work combine to create a world of hermetic decadence.

I should, in fact, like to see the National emulate Joe Papp in New York by letting Mr Berkoff, a controlled maverick, loose on an authentic classic.

Billington on Salome

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