

No love on the moon

Theatre

Kate Kellaway is lured by an unveiled Salome, and finds a dog without any bite.

AUBREY BEARDSLEY, who illustrated the first English edition of Oscar Wilde's *Salome*, did not approve of it. His sinuous black-and-white figures mocked the exorbitance of Wilde's jewelled prose. In Steven Berkoff's production of *Salome* (Lyttelton) once again it is Beardsley (in a 1920s incarnation) who seems in command: dominating, disciplining, sometimes sneering at Wilde. Robert Ballagh's design and David Blight's costumes conspire against colour and honour a pure conception of the play. Salome herself is a sliver of a girl, a new moon.

The moon shines obsessively throughout *Salome* and it seems as though Berkoff himself has worked by moonlight; the lights are cold and white, the actors walk like astronauts under an opalescent sky. At times their black-and-white frieze freezes; the effect is to slow up the pace and give the play a trance-like intensity (at times too somnambulant for its own safety). Speech resembles movement: the cast speak as if they had only just learnt the use of their tongues. The sense is that they repeat words because they need to practise them. This almost conceals the redundancies of the writing. Berkoff creates an effect Wilde must have desired, of phrases which seem tightly petalled as a rose.

Since its première at the Gate Theatre Dublin, *Salome* has acquired an entirely new cast, with Berkoff playing Herod. He behaves like a host, (or perhaps like a director) accustomed to getting his own way. His mouth is painted into a red cupid's bow; his voice is compellingly

versatile; he projects it and then withdraws it. Sometimes words seem to be coming from some seedy inner chamber — he articulates the word 'naked' and makes it sound like an obscenity. He demands total attention — nothing less will do — as he tiptoes and roars (a strange combination). He is superbly partnered by Herodias (Carmen Du Sautoy) who stalks him like a bitter bird; a vulture who pits her power against his.

As *Salome*, Katharine Schlesinger flutters her sequined white fan in exactly the same way that a butterfly twitches its wings, so that the image alights in our head well before Wilde offers it to us. At times, she is to be found lying like a pearl on a ledge, quietly tempting Herod. Her dance of the seven veils is not so much a

out. He seems earth-bound, maker of leaden prophecies while the rest seem dangerous examples of weightlessness.

For all its virtuosity and visual excellence, *Salome* seems hollow at heart and no amount of brilliance can disguise the inadequacies of the play itself. At times, *Salome* seems a story which could have originated on another planet. Like the moon, it has no life — it is all craters and dust into which love has been subsumed.

Madame Mao (Liverpool Playhouse) makes *Salome* seem tame and her demand for the head of St John the Baptist modest. The Chairman's fourth wife was responsible for torture and death on a grand scale. She was one of the terrible Gang of Four, describing herself at her trial in 1980 as 'Mao's dog', ready to bite whomever he wanted her to bite.

Theresa Radic's potentially fascinating new play is a missed opportunity: her dog barks incessantly but has no bite at all. Her examination and explanation of power is blunt and over-simplified: she explains Madame Mao away with crudely feminist rhetoric. Throughout the evening, there is an exhausting sense that Madame Mao is 'on trial', that the play is her witness box. This is not helped by the fact that Tsai Chin at the moment gives the impression of acting under duress. She is the victim of her own nerves, alternately marching tensely through her lines or falteringly defeated by them.

Peter Oyston's production is committed but unfinished. Tony Steedman plays Mao as a rambling old duffer and the young cast, reciting revolutionary lines, seem incongruously fresh and English. Only Patrick Dineen's spirited music brings relief; and there is promise, too, in the scene where Madame Mao plays Nora in *The Doll's House*. Tsai Chin here resembles a little China doll — ready to command the house.



Demanding: Steven Berkoff.

dance as a simple invitation to the imagination. She has no veils; but under a rose-coloured light she instead gently suggests the unloosening of stockings, the unstitching of silk sleeves, without undressing. This auto-erotic dance seems at once beautiful and a cheat. It is like *Salome* herself, made not to give but to take — endlessly.

Jokanaan (Rory Edwards), the St John the Baptist figure, is imposingly marked out from the others; he seems more human. A warm gold light floods down on to his bare chest, singing him

Kellaway on Salome

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