

Decoy-fox

THEATRE

'The Shaughraun' and

'King John'

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DION Boucicault's *The Shaughraun* (NT, Olivier) begins with an estate on the West coast of Ireland about to be sold because the young owner is a felon transported to Australia. Except that he's not — a felon, that is, and he's not in Australia either, but escaped, landed from a schooner, and about to walk on to the stage. It's that sort of play, and Howard Davies's gorgeous production realises all its grass-roots diversity and cunning with great intelligence and spectacular skill.

'*The Shaughraun*' (say something like Shockron and you'll get tickets for the right play) is an irresistibly well conjured, bold and exuberant piece of 1874. Boucicault set it in 1868, 23 years after the Famine, and one year after the Fenian movement for the independence of Ireland had taken its first civilian English lives on the mainland; the romance of Irish injustice was still thought capable of resolution in time.

All these things are indirectly addressed in the play, but Boucicault defines a neutral territory of patriotism and melodrama where Sligo society divides not between Irish and English but between the good and the bad. Robert the fugitive (Fintan McKeown), his beloved Artie (Eve Matheson) and his pert sister Claire (Felicity Montagu) are, of course, among the good. Kinchela, the lank-haired magistrate (Stephen Moore), not only sent Robert to Australia on false evidence but plans to trick the estate out of the girls.

No fewer than two heroes stop him: one Irish, one English, which is where Boucicault's cunning comes in. The first is Conn, the *Shaughraun* (Stephen Rea), a fearless, boasting clown prepared to play decoy-fox to distract the hunters from their man. The

second is the redcoat Molinoux (Shaun Scott), a fellow of the most exquisite innocence and correctness, utterly fazed by the Irish but a worshipper of Claire. Rea's *Shaughraun* is cleverly pitched, light and dry on both blarney and charm, whilst it would almost be worth seeing the play for Scott's delectably funny performance alone.

The cliffs, ruins, cottages, battlements and ravines of the Sligo coast (designers, William Dudley) turn, rise and sink in sections simultaneously on the National's now-functioning double-drum revolve. The company peoples it with the dexterity of goats while a darkly glittering sea throws a curve of expectant, protective magic around the whole play.

Both National and RSC strike form this week. Deborah Warner's production of *King John* (*The Other Place*, Stratford upon Avon), is, like all her work, distinguished by textual clarity, high collective energy and firm narrative grip. The appearance is timeless-modern, the clothes spattered and well used, greatcoats thrown hastily over civilian trousers and City shirts as though the wearers had been surprised by sudden civil war. (Designer, Sue Blane).

On a square space bare but for steel siege — ladders and plain chairs, Warner draws an ensemble performance of great consistency from which emerge as many individuals as the uneven writing permits: Susan Engel, splendid in reasoned grief and anger as the mother of young Arthur, pretender to John's throne; Robert Demeger, a Hubert transfixed by memories of deeds ill done, who chooses each word as though his life depended on it; Nicholas Woodeson, a witty, bullish king, cool in ruthlessness but moving in remorse; and above all David Morrissey as Philip Faulconbridge, the Bastard. Tall, young, impatient, humorous, big-hearted and big-mouthed, this Bastard speaks well with a warm, Northernish voice, and expressive understanding. Philip cuts a figure of great spirit, and Morrissey makes a Shakespearean debut of some note.

Ratcliffe on the Shaughraun

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