

Michael Billington stumbles upon a generation gap in Bill Alexander's beguiling *Much Ado at Stratford upon Avon*

## The odd couple

**T**WO YEARS ago the RSC bombed badly with a woguesish *Much Ado About Nothing* set in some Fifties no-man's-land. They now make amends, at Stratford's Royal Shakespeare Theatre, with a visually seductive, socially consistent Bill Alexander production that aroused the audience to ecstasy but that left me temperately enthusiastic.

As always, Mr Alexander takes Shakespeare comedy seriously. He and designer Kit Surrey eschew Sicily and set the action squarely in an elegantly-hedged English garden that suggests Compton Wyngates or even Glyndebourne.

It lights beautifully (Don John's dark plottings all seem to take place in gathering dusk), is comically functional, with the secreted Benedick hiding inside a poplar, and neatly suggests a hierarchical, seventeenth-century world in which everyone knows his or her place. But if we still delight in this absurd comedy, in which gullibility is carried to inordinate lengths, it is largely because of the merry war between Beatrice and Benedick.

Watching Susan Fleetwood and Roger Allam, I had the feeling of a marriage made in the casting department rather than in heaven. Individually they are fine but, without wishing to be ungallant, they seem to belong to marginally different generations. That matters crucially because, as the Dench-Sinden pairing forcibly reminded

us, Bea and Ben have been badly bruised by a past encounter; here I got no sense of a long-standing relationship so that Beatrice's line about her heart ("Marry, once before he won it of me with false dice") fell into a void.

That said, Ms Fleetwood is a very good Beatrice for whom Hero has the right word — "self-endear'd". Like the heroine of Balzac's story, *The Dance At Sceaux*, she guards against emotional rejection by being mistress of the witty put-down.

But what Ms Fleetwood gets well is Beatrice's transformation from self-absorbed wit, dispensing one-liners from a garden swing, to a woman of true feeling: flattened against a hedge, she listens thunderstruck to Hero's analysis of her character and, in the church scene, delivers that death-trap injunction to Benedick, "Kill Claudio," with such intensity that not a titter runs through the house. This is real acting.

Roger Allam's Benedick is good but erratically directed. As a languid military bachelor, coughing up lungfuls of cigar-smoke from inside the poplar or reasoning himself into passion, Mr Allam is very funny.

But, since everyone harps on Benedick's sadness and melancholy when he comes out as a lover, it seems absurd for Mr Alexander to turn him suddenly into a Restoration popinjay tottering about in high heels. Mr Allam gradually recovers his

composure, but it is odd how one wilfully misdirected scene can upset the balance of a production.

The most complete performance of the evening comes from John Carlisle as Don Pedro. This is no princely cipher but an ageing Cavalier shrouded in solitude and hungry for emotional contact.

Mr Carlisle enters into the proxy wooing of Hero with suspicious enthusiasm and proposes to Beatrice with direct urgency. He creates a character where on the page one barely exists, so that even a tiny line like "The old man's daughter told us all", after Hero's assumed death, causes a sudden pang of remorse.

That is the good side of Mr Alexander's production — attention to detail. And, among the supporting roles, there is a marvellously sober Dogberry from George Rastrick, more interested in gazing lovingly at himself in mirrors than in advertising his malapropisms, and an impassioned Friar Francis from Mike Dowling, notably short on balsam.

Mr Alexander's production is elegant, pleasing, well-ordered: it captures the progress of the comedy by starting with Beatrice dangerously fencing and ending with her softly kissing in the rural twilight.

But if I was beguiled rather than transported, it was because I never quite felt this Beatrice and Benedick were one of nature's inevitable partnerships.



Making amends . . . Susan Fleetwood as Beatrice and Alex Kingston as Hero in *Much Ado About Nothing* at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre  
PHOTOGRAPH: DOUGLAS JEFFERY

## Billington on Much Ado

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