

ARTS

Joe in the nineties

MICHAEL BILLINGTON sees Phyllida Lloyd's Lyttelton revival of What The Butler Saw

"GOD's curse light upon all directors!" wrote Joe Orton after watching Zeffirelli's National Theatre Mach Ado in 1967. But even he might have changed his sardonic tune if he could have lived to see Phyllida Lloyd's Lyttelton revival of *What The Butler Saw*: it's beautifully paced and shows absolute understating of Orton's peculiar mix of verbal precision and sexual anarchy.

What is fascinating about the play — unrivaled at Orton's death — is that it has survived the absorption of its central ideas: that there is something arbitrary about routine classifications of gender and sanity. Set in a private clinic, it starts with a randy shrink, Dr Prentice, attempting to seduce a prospective secretary. With the arrival first of Prentice's wife and then of a suspiciously zealous government inspector, Dr Rance, it turns into a Gothic variant on bedroom farce in which sexual roles are freely swapped, cops get drugged, the seemingly sane are straitjacketed and the only happy unions are incestuous.

Orton's aim in 1967 was clearly to shock: to smash taboos and to evoke some pre-civilised world in which the libido was unchecked by restraint. But even then there was a certain quaintness to Prentice's argument that "Many men imagine that a preference for women is, ipso facto, a proof of virility": by the late sixties we were already in the age of public androgyny. And the notion that the dividing line between madness and sanity was often precariously thin was becoming ultra-fashionable in the era of R D Laing.

It is not Orton's ideas which keep the farce alive so much as his respect for the classic mechanisms of the genre. He is at his worst when he strains for outrage: the running gag about an exploding statue of Winston

Churchill and a disembodied penis doesn't exactly knock you out. But Orton is at his best when he shows authority disintegrating into panic: Prentice, for instance, frantically trying to discard an unwanted lady's shoe.

Orton pushes the rules of farce to the limits, but it is his ability to depict gathering chaos with algebraic precision and Wildean finesse that keeps us laughing rather than the supposed novelty of his ideas.

That is certainly the impression left by Lloyd's production which starts with cool deliberation and gradually escalates into hilarious frenzy. John Alderton plays Prentice perfectly as a practiced, suede-shoed seducer who descends by degrees to a bloodied and haunted wreck. Richard Wilson also rightly makes Rance a figure of puritan sobriety who only gradually reveals his mania and lechery: the conspiratorial gleam that comes into his eye when he announces that "Boys cannot be put in the club. That's half their charm" is pure delight. And Nicola Pagett's Mrs Prentice, malevolent in a black slip, and Debra Gillett's shocked secretary, hurled on and off the consulting room couch like a rubber doll, likewise observe the rules of the game.

In 1969 the play was booed by the gods and attacked as a hymn to perversion: now we laugh knowingly at its jokes about gender-bending and the madness of power.

What actually makes the play so exhilarating is Orton's ability to theatricalise received ideas: when at the last the characters ascend skywards on Mark Thompson's glittering golden platform it is as if the world of farcical mayhem has suddenly been invaded by Euripides and stables satire has mated with *The Bacchae*.

At the Lyttelton (box office 0171-929 2252) until April 12, then touring.

Billington on What the Butler

Clipped By:



ianharris
Sun, Jan 31, 2021