

Theatre

Michael Coveney at a turkey and a triumph from the RSC.

TALES of romance this week, my dears: Beatrice and Benedick pretending they don't want to have sex with each other, Don Juan succumbing to every passing opportunity, and Dumas's Antony saving his adulterous lover's honour by killing her dead when hubby turns up in Strasbourg; 'Elle me résistait, je l'ai assassinée!' That famous curtain line — translated with cruel accuracy in Glasgow as 'She resisted me, I killed her' — drove the folks wild in the Paris of 1831. Audiences don't change much, nor does their appetite for romance. Critics, on the other hand, loathe the idea of another Much Ado About Nothing, with which the Royal Shakespeare Company opens its main house season at Stratford-upon-Avon; who needs it, we ask, unless directed by Franco Zeffirelli or played by Judi Dench and Donald Sinden?

At Stratford, we have a mediocre production by Bill Alexander, badly designed by Kit Surrey and haphazardly lit by Brian Harris, which features the worst Claudio (John McAndrew) I have seen, a rantingly tedious Leonato (Paul Webster), a screechingly irritating Hero (Alex Kingston), a meddlesome but finally disinterested Don Pedro (John Carlisle), an unfunny Dogberry (George Raitrick), hopeless under-casting in the tail, and an unconvincing partnership between Roger Allam's technically accomplished Benedick and Susan Fleetwood's long overdue but stranded Beatrice. The applause was deafening. What do I know?

All comedy depends for its success on the actors' personalities; but *Much Ado* presumes an audience's conspiracy in the double-act of a professed bachelor and his Lady Disdain before they even come to wisecracking blows. We then watch the combatants suffer, squirm and survive the melodramatic nastiness of a church scene where Claudio disowns the true but allegedly fickle Hero.

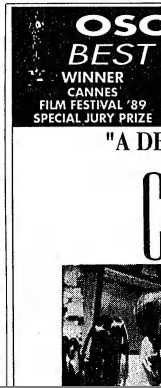
The RSC has previously defined Messina as a brutal outpost in the Brechtian aftermath of war, and a playground of the British colonial sunset over India; that wane of Empire, last chance for love, remains the play's best modern reading.

Now Messina becomes a mid-seventeenth-century post-Civil War hedge-strewn garden, costumes Caroline.

The wheeze is superficial, not clinchingly or poetically strategic, as were the aforementioned RSC productions of Howard Davies and John Barton. The best scenic upstot is the pulling of Benedick, concealed in a suspended cypress tree. Roger Allam, a wigged and mustachioed popinjay with the clipped and smilingly acidic delivery of Alec McCowen, puffs smoke signals when hiding, pokes his face through a floating cleft in the hedge, and holds his nose at Balthazar's song.

Allam is a deserving stalwart, has a great voice (McCowen plus glottal tonality) and superb timing. He wins a round on his banal embrace of us when bidden, surlily, to dinner: 'There's a double meaning in this!' And he plays Monsignor Love by deleting the face hair, rolling down his stockings and tottering away precariously on pink heels. Fleetwood is stricken and aghast by the topiary, but her predicament is a generally expressed piece of acting, not specific. The imbroglio is not ensnared.

This is the RSC vamping till ready, while the RSC champing and heady may be seen next door in Stratford in the glorious Swan Theatre production of *The Last Days of Don Juan*. Nick Dear has prepared a raunchily idiomatic new version of the first ever Don Juan play by



Coveney on Much Ado

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