

Theatre

Michael Coveney on two productions with little to say.

APPEARANCES are rarely deceptive. Sanitised vacuity reigns in *King* at the Piccadilly Theatre this week — and in *The School For Scandal* in the Olivier at the Royal National Theatre, where director Peter Wood has been as good as his reported word and interposed no ideas whatsoever between Sheridan's play and the audience, on the risible grounds that it's a masterpiece.

King suggests, inaccurately, that its subject was beyond moral reproach, extremely tall, and as mesmerisingly witty and quick on his feet as a lobotomised traffic warden. Apart from the sheer badness and fatuous hagiography of the musical, you can tell that the bittiness of the staging, its lack of pace and momentum, is directly related to the production team having nothing to say.

This is less of a handicap at the Olivier, where having nothing to say is wholly subsumed in saying it as smoothly and expensively as possible. The actors talk and disport themselves like popinjays in any modest English rep production.

But hold: the design is something else. Peter Wood's previous National Sheridan

collaboration with John Gunter, *The Rivals*, put the whole of Georgian Bath on the stage. This time, the buzz and movement of the gossip college is carried through to a sea of newsprint on furniture, stage floor and tapestries, and a floating confection of cartoon bubble tongues, licking around Lady Sneerwell's bed and flying out to a mistily expectant London skyline where flags, sails and rigging absorb the bitching ripples as if possessed by Shakespeare's Rumour.

So, in spite of Wood's protestations, there is an idea of sorts in Prunella Scales's Mrs Candour bumping along these ill winds like an overladen dinghy in a slipstream; and another one in the college slipping its needles into a collective giant sampler; and, who knows, another, in the gusting hither of Denis Quilley's bumptious Sir Oliver to inspect an invisible picture gallery through a suspended gilded frame.

Yet more: Joseph Surface (Jeremy Northam, a sneeringly plausible contrast to Richard Bonneville's cheerily rakish brother Charles) has done up his rooms with the fruits of his uncle's generosity in the Indies: the closet is a red pagoda library, the screen a geographic marvel.

No doubt reeling from such high intellectual conceptualising, and mindful of pleasing the more venerable critics, Wood's

cast jovially slaps its collective thigh and stamps its communal foot in all manner of superficially concocted business.

John Neville, returning to the British stage after 20 years in Canada — his embrace of the fictional outcast of Quilley is a moment fraught with symbolic resonance — is a sourly affable, squinting, dignified Sir Peter Teazle; his great encounter with Diana Hardcastle's unusually mature and raddled Lady Teazle is a model display of rhythmised snap and intonation.

King, alas, finds little redemption in its actors, led by the gigantic Simon Estes and the wasted Cynthia Haymon, magnificent singers both. However, Ray Shell's embryonic Black Panther and Godfrey James's rabid Alabama redneck indicate areas in the story that might have been more fully investigated, and not just by J. Edgar Hoover.

Instead, we are sold an Old Testament icon, descending on a gantry with the Nobel Peace Prize and raised on a rock like Moses for the great 'How long' oration at the Washington Capitol. We have an LBJ lookalike (Leon Greene), but no sign of Governor George Wallace. Estes tells Haymon, 'Coretta, I am just tired', which prompted a non-Baptist antiphonal response in my row.

The music of Richard Blackford is awful, and predictably orchestrated, most of the lyrics

Coveney on Scandal

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Fri, Jan 1, 2021