

THEATRE Michael Coveney

Physical misfits and physical jerks



PETER BROOK'S *The Man Who* (this week and next, Newcastle Playhouse) is 'a theatrical research' inspired by Oliver Sacks's collection of neurological case-book studies, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife For A Hat* (1985).

Does a series of disconnected fables constitute a theatrical entertainment? Is *Tales from the Arabian Nights* a good book? In the everyday theatre we take actors' presence for granted.

In *The Man Who*, dysfunctional medical patients re-define their movement unprogrammed by the usual instructions from the brain. The miracle of movement is quietly reasserted.

The professor who mistakes his student for a hat-stand is a comical buffer. But the man who is instructed to make a sentence using the words 'heap' and 'crowd' and comes up with 'A heap is a badly made crowd' is a natural wit.

On a beige square stage, four actors play doctors and patients in stark, laboratory conditions. An Iranian musician, Mahmoud Tabrizi-Zadeh, beautifully underpins moods of melancholy, bewilderment and joy on his array of traditional instruments.

A rose is not a recognisable rose until a man pricks his fingers on the stem. A red glove is held up. What is it? 'A sort of receptacle.' What does it contain? 'It contains its contents' (Quite so). The man puts it on: 'Of course, it is a glove. A red glove.'

Taking nothing for granted is a good plan for an artist and an even better one for the rest of us. The way truth is at the root of Brook's show which, for all its simplicity, is impregnated with a spirit of agitated inquiry and acted in the same way.

Iteration, disconnected thought, random precision, inexplicable movement: the tall, willowy Sotigui Kouyate (Brook's unforgettable last Prospero) and the tiny, compact David Bennent (his ditto Caliban) seem, in their contrasting ways, to be reconsidering the very process of putting foot on a stage. The latter finally concentrates on walking, and we marvel at how we do it without thinking: 'Every day is a mental marathon.' Yoshi Oida shaves on one side of his face and is terrified of his own left leg, or tyrannised by the musical memories he does not want to lose.

In Sacks, you learn about right and left and different sides of the brain. In the theatre, you accept and glory in the phenomenon as you would a limp or a stutter. And Bruce Myers performs the tics of a man stricken with Tourette's syndrome, an involuntary profusion of extravagant grimaces and jerks, ruefully remarking that he can never go to an auction.



Five finger exercise: Sotigui Kouyate and Yoshi Oida in *'The Man Who'*, directed by Peter Brook

The whole catalogue of physical aberrations, so gracefully rendered, seems indicative of the secret imaginative life, of a way at looking at the world that may be preferable, and indeed richer, than our own. Thirty years ago, Brook's RSC *Marat/Sade* brilliantly conveyed the madness of asylum inmates as part of a great, epic production: the study of 'madness' in

Brook's theatre today is part of his investigation into the physiology of acting, the projection of 'normal' human behaviour on a stage, and the wellspring of theatre itself. Will that do as 'a show'?

If not, will *Hot Shoe Shuffle* (Queen's Theatre)? In this hyperactive tap-dancing Australian musical, director (and lead dancer) David Atkins uses movement with the indiscriminate wildness of a jujitsu jacksass. The evening is not so much one of escapist entertainment as of depressing asininity.

An ill-considered and badly arranged compilation of Forties big band items by Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway, George Gershwin and

her husband's adultery. Instead of settling down to dinner, and accepting that there is no sauce for the gander (a man's adultery was not acceptable in the house in search of her own romance. She finds it in Cairo.

Although Susan is disappointingly reconciled with Sir James (Philip York) two years later, she has belatedly acquired 'a past', some secret life of her own, and the sort of serenity that only comes from showing your strength and acquiring new dignity. Sarah-Jane Fenton conveys this transition with sincerity and aplomb.

But the play belongs to Sir Richard Kato QC, the bachelor divorce-lawyer who combines two functional charac-

Coveney on The Man Who

Clipped By:



ianharris

Sat, Jan 30, 2021