

# Absence of malice

Nicholas de Jongh  
at the Olivier

**P**ETER Wood is the outstanding beautician among British theatre directors. His cosmetic services to drooping classics of a certain age are famous. But sometimes he has seemed more concerned with the art of the face-lift than probing below the skin. This time it is different.

His production of Sheridan's *The School For Scandal* is handsome and spectacular, with the electronic scope of the Olivier stage for once thrillingly exploited to provide a vivid series of scenic changes. But Wood has also attempted to free the play from age-old accretions of caricature and comfortable sentimentality.

The appealing result lacks the force of Jonathan Miller's revelatory view of the play's malicious gossips. And strangely the play's humane characters have far less realistic life than the high-society school of society scandalisers. But the production does have a governing motif, which John Gunter's emblematic stage designs powerfully, though overinsistently, reinforce.

The Olivier stage, with a backcloth of London silhouetted like a Canaletto drawing, is at first crowded with a tableau of miming whisperers. They are humans posing as gos-

sip columns, enthusiastically passing on the latest bad news about town. They reappear between scenes. And the mobile flats, the screens, the walls, the chairs, the very floors in every scene, are all papered over with the newsprint of 18th century journals. It is as though existence was founded upon newspaper rumour.

Lady Sneerwell, usually played as a superannuated grotesque, is coaxed back to life and seductiveness, if insufficient malice, by the flame-haired Jane Asher. First seen sprawling languidly and elegantly on her bed, and gladly receiving the morning feast of gossips, Miss Asher makes Lady Sneerwell a society-girl, disappointed in love whose libido has been diverted into backbiting. And even Guy Henry's Sir Benjamin Backbite and Crabtree are not the usual examples of low camp.

The play's central scene is arrestingly devised to make malicious gossip seem a way of life. Mrs Candour is the guiding spirit among the tattlers. And Prunella Scales, pink-bonnetted in a huge and hideous brown dress, portrays her as a neat little hypocrite, hot to hear the worst of everyone.

A natural comedy emerges. Wood brings Lady Teazle convincingly into this society. And daringly, against the text, he presents her not as the usual ingénue but as a mature fortune hunter. Smiling, cold and

lethal, Diana Hardcastle, in the best performance of the night, bridges the gap between the sentimental world inhabited by her smitten husband Sir Peter and the gossipers. Their marital duels jangle with cruelty. Or they will when John Neville, making a welcome return to the English stage, is fully at ease with Sir Peter. Mr Neville is not comfortable in the part of an irritable old bachelor brought late into marriage. When he discovers his wife, in the screen scene, this Sir Peter is scantily discomfited. The couple's reunion, which so subverts the play's attack upon humbug, seems in the sight of this Lady Teazle, even more preposterous than usual.

The production is least happy when dealing with a society beyond that of the chatterers. The dissimulations of the intriguing Joseph Surface are peremptorily managed by Jeremy Northam, decked out as an unnatural brunette, who manages neither smooth artifice nor comic guile under stress. And Denis Quilley as Sir Oliver Surface, seen stepping down from a real cut-out ship. The Olivier's central circular stage, glistening as if it were water, contributes sentimental bonhomie to his encounters with his sincere, impecunious nephew Charles. The production does not, therefore, have quite the scathing rigour and depth for which you hope, but it has a rich theatrical ingenuity and comic vigour.

## de Jongh on Scandal

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