



Paterson Joseph as Patroclus in a Troilus And Cressida which bridges times ancient and modern PHOTOGRAPH: DOUGLAS JEFFERY

War and lechery in no-man's-land

Nicholas de Jongh at the Swan, Stratford

WARS and lechery' dominate the world of Troilus and Cressida. But this tabloid-newspaper reductionism describes the hardest, the most cerebral of all Shakespeare plays. Theatre directors from Guthrie to Adrian Noble by way of Peter Hall and John Barton have been lured by the sheer difficulty of translating its argument to the stage.

Sam Mendes, the bright young hope of theatrical tomorrows, is thus plunged in at the deep end, after directing Shakespeare only once before. His

grim and high pitched production shows sign of strain, but the signature of promise is scribbled right across it.

Mendes has followed his peers by imposing modern frames of reference upon it. But the tactic is not simply engaged. When Norman Rodway's Pandarus, performing like an Edwardian actor laddie, appears in party spirit, he is dressed in blazer and boater.

Mendes locates the play, temporally speaking, in a no-man's-land. The modern military light kahki garb, medals, black leather, portable radio and desk lamps go, so to speak, hand in glove, with breast plates, armour and cutlasses.

The precipitating goads of

national spirit, erotic desire and male pride here become timeless energisers. But in the intellectual combat the Trojans are conceived as classic adherents of stiff-backed honour, while the Greeks range from Paul Jesson's Ulysses, the master of lost heroics, to contemporary icons of menace: Claran Hinds as the bisexual Achilles, in an astonishing performance which even surpasses Alan Howard's once definitive portrayal, prowls suave, quiet and watchful in black leather and a nasty smile. He exudes all the charm of a python — except with his boyfriend Patroclus (Paterson Joseph, far more than a war-toy in their rather sexless exchanges). The bald

bullock Ajax is a mindless, roaring boy, the great warrior's antithesis. In the magnificently ritualised and frightening battle scenes the gulf between ancient and modern is bridged: the whole grand folly indicted.

The Troilus and Cressida affair is fitfully despatched by Ralph Fiennes's coolish rather self-absorbed hero, more in love with voice music than the girl. And Amanda Root, as if she were playing Juliet, makes Cressida a tragic victim rather than a flirtatious main chancer. Simon Russell Beale's Thersites, an alternative comedian belligerently roaring out his contempt for the dogs of war, becomes the production's focal point.

de Jongh on Troilus

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