



MICHAEL BILLINGTON is entranced by La Grande Magia at the Lyttelton

This tough magic

RICHARD EYRE constantly says we have to rediscover "the theatreness of theatre". You could hardly have a finer example than his own stunning production of Eduardo de Filippo's *La Grande Magia* (1949): an amazing play that, in the tradition of *Cornelle* and *Pirandello*, uses games of reality and illusion to deal with man's moral nature.

Eduardo's great strength was that he wrote for a popular audience, which means that his ideas always grow out of a spellbinding story. Here, in an Italian Riviera setting, we watch the wife of the jealous Calogero take part in a vanishing act staged by an itinerant magician, Professor Otto Marvuglia. It is all a trick to enable the wife to snatch 15 minutes with her lover. Instead they run off to Venice, leaving Otto to cover up. He produces a box, claiming Calogero's wife is inside it: he should only open it if he has total faith in his wife's fidelity.

What starts as a hastily improvised deceit turns into a game which the duped husband starts to play in deadly earnest. Although the play comes to a sombre conclusion, it also suggests Calogero, in his tragic solitude, learns a kind of wisdom.

Eric Bentley suggests the play "is not about the nature of reality, it is about faith in one's wife". Actually, it is about both. Eduardo constantly plays tricks on the audience. But he also touches deep chords, suggesting life itself is a sustained illusion on which reality intrudes. The most heart-stopping moment comes when death suddenly breaks into Otto's world of experimental magic. "But why do we go through these experiments when they're so painful?" asks Calogero. "That's the bit I don't understand," replies Otto with infinite sadness.

The brilliance of Eyre's production lies in the way it captures the play's many-sidedness: its playfulness and tragedy, its paradoxical argument that illusion is both a protection and a snare. Anthony Ward's design is also full of extraordinary echoes: the Egyptian sarcophagus into which the wife initially vanishes is magnified into a giant wardrobe in Calogero's luxurious apartment, while Otto's shabby home is full of caged birds, reminding one simultaneously of imprisoned souls and his most fraudulent trick.

Alan Howard's Calogero, his finest performance in years, likewise endorses the play's multi-dimensionality. At first, for all his dandified elegance, he is like a child in his infantile jealousy and credulity: as he retreats into illusion, he matures into self-awareness and the sanity of the supposedly insane. Bernard Cribbins, always a good actor, is a revelation as Otto, combining the grizzled authority of a magician with hints of a touring magician from the earlier end of show business. And David Ross does a nifty, school-of-Len-Rossiter comic turn as an absurdly posturing cop, while Alison Fiske plays Otto's rancorous wife with a touch of Hylda Baker. But that is exactly as it should be, since the whole play is not only about marriage, madness, reality and illusion but about the glorious and cumulative mystery of theatre itself.

At the Lyttelton (0171-928 2252).

Billington on Magia

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