

Michael Billington is confused by Nick Dear's new play set in ancient times at the Old Vic. Is it historical drama or universal metaphor?

Now and Zenobia

NICK DEAR'S *Zenobia* is a very curious play: decently written, extensively researched but lacking any clear, over-arching theme. We see the eponymous heroine become regent of Palmyra in 287 AD on the death of her husband, attempt to turn the Syrian desert city into a cultural capital and challenge the decaying Roman empire by conquering Egypt. But she comes up against a hard-headed emperor, Aurelian, who in 272 puts down her revolt, takes her prisoner and eventually leads her in triumph through Rome.

Dear has an appetite for history, as we know from his earlier plays about Hogarth and George III: indeed his *In The Ruins* offers far greater insight into the mad king than Alan Bennett's more celebrated work. But here, though the story is well told, it is hard to see its contemporary relevance. Are we meant to admire Zenobia as the head of a multi-cultural kingdom seeking to defy American-style Roman domination? Or is she an example of the corruption of power in that she shops her generals and the philosopher Longinus to the Romans to save her own skin? It's hard to see what point Dear is making other than that past civilisations eventually end up as cultural plunder for British explorers.

Zenobia herself, although superbly played by Penny Downie as a swashbuckling figure in leather chaps, is also hard to anatomise: she emerges as a loveless Cleopatra who is a mixture of civic idealism and brute pragmatism. It is also never quite clear why her son, although infatuated with Emily Raymond's sexually ambiguous, scientifically-minded Porphyry, eventually turns into a destroyer. Oddly, it is the detested Romans who are more dramatically coherent, particularly as represented by Trevor Cooper's foul-mouthed, misogynist Aurelian and Sean O'Callaghan as his faithful tribune who finally gives his emperor a lingering kiss.

Mike Ockrent's joint RSC-Young Vic production successfully evokes the atmosphere of a distant civilisation and Tim Goodchild's design artfully shows Palmyra's disintegration into topless towers. But, although it briefly crossed my mind that the play might be a parable about the Gulf War, it never pursues the possible parallels. And, while it is always informative, it never translates history into universal metaphor.

Young Vic box office: 0171 928-6363.



Dear hunters . . . Zenobia (Penny Downie) does battle with Roman soldiers in Nick Dear's play set in ancient Palmyra

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Billington on Zenobia

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