

THEATRE
MICHAEL COVENEY

Out of his pram

An excellent play about Stanley Spencer and an overlong attempt at an old French classic

Love is in the air among the artists this week in two major openings. Les Enfants du Paradis and Stanley, powered by two Renaissance men of our theatre fortysomething friends and rivals Simon Callow and Antonio Sher. Callow has made his mark on film as 'personality' actor and in print as biographer of Charles Laughton and Oscar Wilde, while Sher ticks off the great classical roles in between writing novels, drawing and painting.

Sher's old and charcoal figures have always been lumped and lashed, lovingly or abusively, in the styles of Bertie Cook and Lucian Freud; his onstage impersonations often bear traces of his own drawing board. In another trick of physical transformation, he now becomes the pragmatic mystic of Cookham, Stanley Spencer, Pam Gems's excellent new play, Stanley, provides him with the outline of the bumpkin, bohemian artist who lives and breathes painting as a vocation. He did Charles Laughton's Bombardier or Sir Douglas's Van Gogh.

The Cotswolds is transformed by designer Tim Hasky into a Spenserian chapel of the Cotswolds and Glasgow. Restoration scenes, the walls hanging with torse and limbs, and scenes of biblical moment that characterise Spencer's imaginative and suburban torment. Sher as Spencer is precise, equanimous, atop of his own erection, as he paints his wife Hilka's inner thighs. The beds into which Spencer climbs like a frisky squirrel finally confine Hilka as she nervously creeps up the stairs. The newly knighted Stanley 'cathartes' on 'talking to Hilka' and painting in Cookham. Hilka's death, in a Cookham hospital, is a central village.

Spencer's secondary love, the lesbian painter Patricia Preece, is gloriously impersonated by Anna Chancellor, removes her clothes, or thrusts herself in black lingerie, as a forbidding counterpoint to Stanley's true devotion. Preece's aspirations are fascinatingly suspended between her devotion to Stanley and her own career motives. The scenes focus through Stanley's fantasies, her voice carefully conveying destructive devotion in a long, whining carter.

The play loses momentum, and some of its actors, in the second act, but John Caird's production, and Sher's wonderful performance carry us through. His from the classic and



Photograph by Neil Lambert

Sher and Sher alike: Another uncanny transformation, this time into Stanley Spencer

the poet assassin Lactantius, give tremendous performances undated by inevitable comparisons with Antony and Marcel Herrand.

Garnatz is the enigmatic beauty who has bewitched and ensnared two mimetic titans of the nineteenth-century French theatre, the sweet-tempered Baptiste Dubouas, and the heroic tragedian Frederic Letourneux. Here, the inevitable comparisons with Jean-Louis Barrault and Pierre Brasseur are not particularly flattering – how could they be? – to Rupert Graves and James Frisley. The miming of the former – notably in the explanation of the pickpocketing incident – is not nearly precise enough, and the bombast of the latter is sufficiently overpowering to make the actor or celebrate him, a fatal loss of nerve.

On the credit side, the romantic scenes between Baptiste and Garnatz are beautifully done, the music of John White is exciting and atmospheric. Robin Don's rapidly whirling, scaffolded set may upset those of a nervous disposition, but it does work well as a Warren of backstage locations and Parisian streets as well as the Funambule, Baptiste's dream factory, itself.

The gaiety of nations is always evoked by the really bad musical, and in 'The Fields of Ambrosia' (where everyone knows 'ya' we have a genuine stinker to set alongside such splendidly awful specimens of the genre as *Bernadette*, *Children of Eden* (directed by John Caird) and *Which Witch*. The story of Jonas Cowdell, a travelling state executioner in 1918 Mississippi, is based on a long forgotten Stacy Keach film. There are more volutes than Voltaire about this Canticle; he falls in love with one of his female customers, comes to no good and finds himself strapped to his own chair. Hides on his own petard, you might say, or frid in his own pain.

In such a week of romantic excess it is too easy to lose sight of the genuine merits of August Wilson's *Two Trains Running*, in which this wonderful American writer continues his twentieth-century saga of the black community in Pittsburgh. It is now 1989, and the denizens of a diner *Chin* are still on there, of a rally to commemorate Malcolm X. Paulette Randall's production is beautifully played by a cast including Ray Shell, Tony Armstrong and Jerry Jules. In a reversal of the structural dynamic in *Stanley*, the play's vector grows and deepens, transforming what might have been a black *Cher* into a dynamic dramatic poem, vibrant with manners and mantras, reminiscent of Eugene O'Neill at his pipe-dreaming, saloon bar best.

Stanley *INT* Cotswolds, London SW1 (0171-582-2525); *Les Enfants du Paradis* Barbican, London EC2 (0171-639-8891); *The Fields of Ambrosia* Aldwych, London WC2 (0171-379-3367); *Two Trains Running* Tricycle, London NW6 (0171-528-1048)

Is Stanley Spencer in the theatre anything like the real artist? William Feather gives his verdict

The silliest mistake is to have Stanley saying that 'Frankie' Bacon suggested sending Hilka, his ex-wife, to see Dr Freud. Why concoct an impossibility when there's so much true improbability in Stanley Spencer's life, especially his love-life? It's an isolated blot on an otherwise fine play. Spencer's words back in his mouth, sometimes in a new context but always appropriately, Anthony Sher scuttles and harangues, turning the words past us with endearing yet appalling zeal.

Spencer liked charcoal and would have loved the notion of the Cotswolds transformed into a scene-painter's vision of the Church House, with *The Restoration*, Cookham under scaffolding, with the Clydeside shipbuilding down the sides. Back on the origin, and loss of space in which to talk and talk. Spencer's eye for detail comes across, also his eagerness to wear people down to his way of thinking. Deborah Findlay, as Hilka, does, resists and goes with terrible distress. Anna Chancellor, as Patricia Preece, is a snob worthy of sub-plot in *Jazz* Williams. She and her friend Dorothy Heworth are diagnosed as 'sophisticated'. Heworth wears the trousers in their relationship but is developed into a sympathetic character, once she has dropped her. Owen Roverat, Henry Lamb and Dudley Tooth, Spencer's dealer, put in appearances as traits and advisers. So does blustering Augustus John (David Collings). His role here is to admit that he sold out whereas Spencer persevered to become the celebrated Sir Stanley, funding his painting things round Cookham in the clapped-out family pram.

Coveney On Stanley

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