

## THEATRE

# A magical mastery tour

Michael Coveney enjoys illusion, allusion, **ANTHONY SHER'S RIVETING TITUS** and a promising new Irish writer

One of the continuing themes at the Royal National Theatre is a productive dalliance with the Neapolitan drama of Eduardo de Filippo (1900-1984). **La Grande Magia** (1948), in Carlo Ardito's 1992 translation, is an astonishing play about illusion and belief – 'Grand Magic' – that cloaks an adulterous affair in the collaborative cabaret of a bogus, small-time magician up to his armpits in debt.

Professor Otto Marvuglia, in the unexpected, bulky shape of Bernard Cribbins, is playing the garden of the Hotel Metropole on the Italian Riviera. Into his Egyptian sarcophagus steps slim, beautiful Marta di Spelta (slim, beautiful Fiona Gillies). She is whisked away to the harbour where, rising rapidly from the Lyttelton's pit, her lover's speedboat outbids any magic trick of the professor; theatrical illusion itself will eclipse the illusionist. The abandoned husband, Calogero di Spelta (Alan Howard), cries wanly, 'Excuse me, would you be kind enough to rematerialise my wife?'

The professor gives Calogero a glinting silver box. If he opens it, the husband will find his wife or lose her forever. He is still fretting over this dilemma four years later. Howard dominates these last scenes with a compelling display of testy, darting neurosis. Cribbins aspires to Richardsonian dottiness but is much better at the truthful downside of his persona, a failed Lancastrian-accented has-been with a shrill wife (shrill Alison Fiske), a

giant-size cageful of doves and a couple of dodgy Scouse sidekicks (George Ralstrick and Christopher Ryan) who cry up his act among the hotel clientele.

I never saw Giorgio Strehler's allegedly momentous production of this play, but can imagine it behind the near-miss, throat-grabbing sensuality of Eyre's, and designer Anthony Ward's, lavish, no-expenses-spared staging. The basic humour, squabbles and anxieties work best, not so much the high-flown stuff about third eyes and atavistic memory. All caution is thrown to the winds with David Ross's unforgivably funny Lancashire policeman, cavorting cheaply while Cribbins bides his time in a suspended state of either disbelief or disapproval.

Even better than this valiant and diverting evening is Anthony Sher's South African **Titus Andronicus**, which played in the West Yorkshire Playhouse last week, and is in the RNT's Cottesloe this week. A magnificent, barbaric pantomime follows an election and precedes a new era. Gregory Doran's production for the Market

## Coveney on Magia

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ianharris

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