

brates callow youth

BEARE COMPANY

ful young guns

(Barry Farrimond), is all the more poignant in the actors' callowness.

This extra charge was missing in the RNT's 1974 version which had not-so-young actors ageing down. Importantly, Supple's mothers, Frau Gabor (nothing like her namesake Zsa-Zsa, darling) and Frau Bergman, excellently played by Sara-Mair Thomas and Ruth Mitchell, are themselves young enough to be wasted victims of the emotional tyranny and euphemistic double-talk they preach and practise.

The Man in the Mask usually appears only to moderate in the final farewells of a boy on the brink of embracing Nature and his friend who went under; here, Mike Burnside, white-faced and sinister, appears throughout as an emcee-like monster, both fatalistic and avuncular, in a tinfoil, simply wooded and beautifully lit (by Paul Constable) interior world. Young Wendla Bergman, whom Melchior beats, at her invitation, and later rapes, in a helpless rage, is given a performance of amazing grace and assurance by Ellie Beaven, a new (very) young actress to watch.

Supple and Hughes give full rein to the bursting lushness, humour and peculiarity of Wedekind. The visiting 'grown-up' girl, Ilse (Catherine Bailey), carries an aura of brothels and artists' studios in her very gait; here is Wedekind's Lulu a few years before her time.

The action is underpinned with surging Romantic music; the headless boy is a clever ghost trick that really works; the stuffy educational committee expels Melchior then slides to the cemetery in a processional dance of death; the heart-stopping young love scene in the vineyard on a golden day, the last they may know, is supervised by the Masked Man operating a bunch of grapes on a stick. Terrific.

Nick Dear's **Zenobia** is a stilted

though enjoyable gloss on the tale of the third-century Queen of Palmyra who conquered Egypt in 269 and, in 272, the year of this play, was besieged and captured by the Emperor Aurelian. As a shadow Cleopatra, Dear's Zenobia, played with enormous punch and gritiness by Penny Downie, claims Ptolemaic antecedence and stands out against the West.

The episodes are staged by Crazy For You director Mike Ockrent on an open arena setting by Tim Goodchild dominated by a Corinthian column on top of which sits an architectural model of Zenobia's civilised city of learning and liberality. That ideal is eventually smashed by Rome, but not before a truce is sought while Zenobia's son, Wahballat (James Frain), develops a sexual/philosophical relationship with an androgynous chemist called Porphyry (Emily Raymond).

The play does not rise to this narrative innovation, nor does it explain that glitch in the mythical story where Zenobia, a supposedly enlightened warrior queen, betrays her colleagues to ensure a life of ease in Roman hospitality after her capture. The fatuous opening scene, in which her husband is poisoned, is an insufficient indictment; the character never really adds up.

Dear elaborates the Cleopatra connection by providing her with a big fat eunuch (the entirely welcome Clive Rowe) who approximates to Shakespeare's Mardian. But the event smacks of automatic writing, as opposed to the burning urgency that informed Dear's fine plays about Hogarth and Don Juan.



Coveney on Zenobia

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