

**MICHAEL BILLINGTON  
 marvels at Richard Eyre's  
 production of Ibsen's  
 John Gabriel Borkman**

# Irony in the soul

**O**n paper, it looked inviting on the stage, it is sensational. Richard Eyre's production of Ibsen's penultimate play, John Gabriel Borkman, at the National Theatre, combines emotional intensity with rare wit: we are constantly reminded that behind Ibsen's forbidding, bewhiskered exterior there lurked a master ironist.

Irony, in fact, is the key to this haunting masterpiece in that dreams are constantly subverted by reality. Borkman, the would-be Napoleon of capitalism, dreamer of having "power over power itself" and harnessing the energies of sea and land, instead he was imprisoned for embezzlement and for eight years has paced the great hall of his echoing mansion in demoralised, vampire solitude.

But Ibsen's ironic vision extends to all the characters. Borkman's ambitious, cold, calculating wife, Gunhild, and her twin sister, Ella, fight tooth and claw for emotional and physical possession of the former's son, Erhart, only to lose him to a seductive widow.

But Erhart, in his bid for freedom, becomes the toy-boy of Mrs Wilton who will hand him on when she is gone and ready to bank clerk's daughter. And even Faldal, the bank clerk and aspiring tragic writer, finds that he is run over by a sleight containing his fugitive daughter: a sign of Ibsen's black humour.

But Ibsen's greatness lies in his combination of Olympian irony and autobiographical pain. He himself guiltily sacrificed his life to art, and Borkman's cardinal sin is that he once traded Ella's love to become chairman of the bank. As Ella says in Nicholas Wright's admirable new version, "You murdered my soul and yours", and Ibsen's later plays, from *The Master Builder* onwards, strike me as withering self-indictments in which cold heartedness is, as it were, the ultimate crime.

Eyre's production strikes the perfect balance between Ibsenite irony and self-revelation: these characters are both

faintly absurd and infinitely tragic. You see all this in Paul Scofield's magnificent performance as Borkman: his finest since *King Lear*. With his frock-coat, grey spots and cockatoo-like crest of white hair, Scofield presents us with a man who is a legend in his own mind. Confronted by visitations, he still plays the role of the great tycoon. He stands with legs firmly astride, witheringly dismisses Faldal as if he were still in his employ and, when Ella announces she has come to take his son, he grandly announces: "You've a cast-iron claim", even emotions are described in the debased language of commerce.

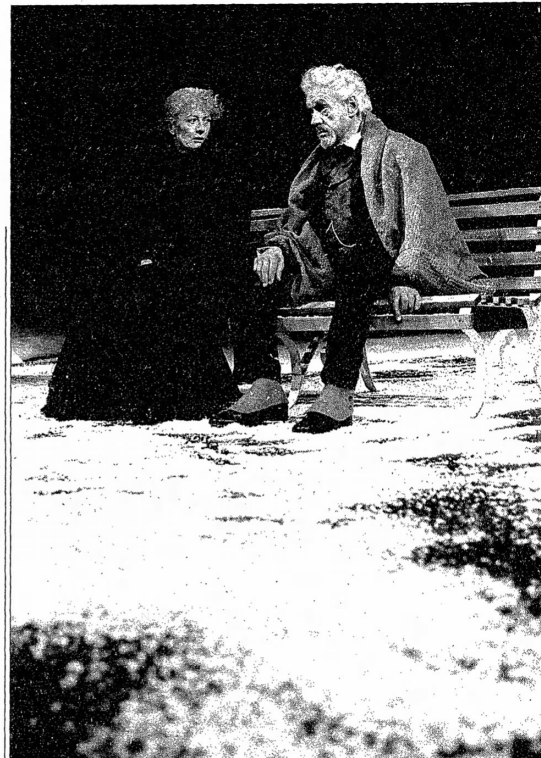
Scofield's greatness lies in the way he reveals the private turmoil behind the posturing facade. Left to himself, he emits fierce guttural growls and apostrophises the walls of his self-imposed cage. And when, in the last act, he wanders out into the snow-bound forest and imagines the veins of iron beneath the earth, his hands flicker in the air describing the contours of their ravens and turps. Scofield embodies Borkman's tragedy and, by implication, by implication, the capitalist tycoon: that dreams of ultimate power are a form of madness.

We see Borkman both objectively and subjectively, but that is true of all the characters in the production. Edoen Atkins is breathtaking as Mrs Borkman: a woman no less trapped than her husband. She describes how he grows up and down in his cape like a sick wolf and then unconsciously echoes his own movements. But Atkins presents us with much more than a hard-hearted Gunhild. She has both a caustic humour and a quasi-innocuous fusion with her son that drives her, when confronted by his loss to another woman, to fall to her knees clutching her face in a Munch-like silent scream. This is acting with the gloves off.

The same is true of Vanessa Redgrave's mackerel emotional Ella. She endures clutching a glass of water and popping pills, reminding us the character is terminally sick. Everything in Eyre's pro-

duction is perfectly pitched: not least Michael Bryant's Faldal who is not some cringing lackey but a man as encased in a fantasy—that of being a tragic dramatist—every bit as potent as Borkman's.

Ibsen's point seems to be that we all live in a world poised between reality and dream. And Anthony Ward's design confirms the point in that the Borkmans inhabit a house whose narrow, arrow-



Paul Scofield and Vanessa Redgrave... the perfect balance between Ibsenite irony and self-revelation

shaped rooms hover between the actual and the surreal. Coming in the same week as Bryden's Chichester Uncle Vanya, this production also nails one of the great myths about British acting: that it is somehow more physically constrained and emotionally cordoned than that of our European neighbors. Watching Jacobs and McCowen trading childlike blows in Vanya and Atkins and Redgrave squaring up to each other over Erhart's body in John Gabriel Borkman, one realises British acting long ago shed its inhibitions. We can do irony, but as our treatment of Ibsen and Chekhov shows we can also do the rage and volatility that lie beneath in a way that makes these great classic plays live in the present.

John Gabriel Borkman in rep at the Lyttelton (0171-928 2252)

## Billington on Borkman

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