

Devil with both feet in the grave

Michael Billington argues the National's dull *White Devil* wastes good actors

PHILIP Prowse handles the stage with the freedom of a painter. But his new production of *The White Devil* at the Olivier, though better than his last one at Greenwich in 1984, is still a pretty dismal affair: one in which the actors seem dwarfed by the monumental setting and one which surrenders totally to the old, tired Eliotesque notion of Webster as a poet "much possessed by death."

Mr Prowse transforms the Olivier stage into a vast, encircling brick mausoleum dominated by a demolition ball and chain. Black catafalques, doubling as altars, define the acting-space. Characters emerge from watery, sunken pits. Hooded figures, looking like members of the Roman chapter of the Ku Klux Klan, process across a gleaming marble floor. If you froze the action at any single point you would have a stunning picture. But it remains a fundamentally static piece of design that shrieks at us "Death and decay", not so much expressing the text as pre-empting it.

Obviously Webster was fascinated by mortality, but death is only meaningful if accompanied by a strong sense of life; and that is precisely what is missing from Mr Prowse's vision. The starting-point for Webster's cynical study of fake worldly glory is the mutual lust of the murderous Brachiano and Vittoria but this production is about as sexy as a eunuch's tea-party. Denis Quilley's Brachiano seems more like a grizzled bank president than a figure of insatiable lechery and even Josette Simon's imposing, swan-necked Vittoria lacks the defiant sensuality she brought to *After The Fall*. The only hint of sex in the whole evening comes when Lodovico finally stabs the heroine; but it is surely perverse, even by Webster's standards, to suggest that death is the only way of achieving multiple orgasm.

Mr Prowse's most striking innovation is to present the white devil and her family as black: as a persistent advocate of integrated casting, it is a decision I applaud. But the gesture is nullified by Mr Prowse's refusal to mine and explore Webster's prose which, in Agate's phrase, "ripples like the muscles in a statue of Rodin". Dhobi Oparei brings to Flamineo a gaunt, sinister presence and a nice touch for comedy in the scene where he

dissembles death from a bullet; but it is typical of the production's profound insensitivity to language that his real death-speech is delivered with a strangulated hoarseness. Going against the directorial grain only Claire Benedict's Cornelia brings real resonance to the language in her distracted dirge over her murdered son.

That it is possible to combine death, eroticism and felt emotion is proved by David Pountney's masterly production of *Lady Macbeth Of Mtsensk at the Coliseum*. In contrast, Prowse takes a play that is partly about the gulf between show and substance and swathes it in external effects. A case in point is the Papal coronation of Cardinal Monticelso (played, at the last minute, by Tristram Jellinek with a nice dry irony) here symbolised by a

hooded super dragging a crucifix across the stage in a parody of Christ's agony. It looks good but it strikes me as purely rhetorical and the gesture is rendered absurd when the actor has to negotiate the cross off-stage like a Pickford's removal man.

And, while on the subject of absurdity, what is the point of playing Brachiano's son, Giovanni, whose lines bespeak boyish pathos ("What do the dead do, uncle?") as a strapping lad well past puberty?

Mr Prowse, as we know from his work at Glasgow, is expert at handling Wilde, Coward and O'Neill. But his *White Devil* at the National wastes good actors and is marked by a strenuous dullness that comes from treating Webster's sinewy text as if it were simply a set of captions to illustrate tableaux of death.



Billington on *White Devil*

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Thu, Mar 4, 2021