

Theatre

Michael Coveney enjoys Naples at the National and Parma at the RSC.

EDUARDO DE FILIPPO (1900-1964) and his own company in Napoli Millionaria, a dark wartime comedy, at the World Theatre Season of 1972. The British theatre has sporadically attempted to repay the compliment by translating the dramas of Italy's leading popular dramatist (until Dario Fo) into our own damp and resistant climate.

Richard Eyre's handsome production in the Lyttelton at the Royal National Theatre adopts the compromise approach of Neapolitan realism in design (by Anthony Ward) and an idiomatic Liverpudlian translation (by Peter Timinibwood). The two worlds almost coalesce over prayers, meals and family rows.

Napoli *Affluenza* ('Affluent Naples') opened Filippo's own theatre in 1945. The play is set during the air raids of 1942 and after the Allied landing in 1944. Gennaro (Filippo's role, here taken by Ian McKellen) returns after the first act from rough captivity to find his house done up in pink and green, his wife in cahoots with the local taxi-driver on the black-market racket, his daughter about to elope with an American soldier, and his son shadily involved in the second-hand car business. It is a bit like *Bread* in the sunshine.

When the local sergeant (Peter Jeffrey) calls by, McKellen, head bandaged and face blanched, plays 'dead' on the double bed to divert attention from a mattress heaving with black-market goodies. This situation escalates hilariously with the onset of an ear-splitting air raid, plaster crashing to the floor while neighbours and nuns in drag flee in agitation and McKellen calmly continues his impersonation of a stiff white rabbit.

McKellen, in his most delightful vaudevillian element, plays a ghost for real when he returns from 'humping stones' (echoes of *Bent*) and hiding out in ditches, falling at first to recognise his wife, Annalia. The play revolves around this hard-hearted businesswoman, dispensing coffee to the community and reducing a creditor (Richard Bremner) to utter penny in the ironic melodrama of the third act, a sickly child needs medicine which only the creditor can supply.

Clare Higgins's performance as Annalia is a remarkable achievement by an actress who is now fully established in the front rank: blisteringly executed, it combines elements of mother-hen instinct, snobbery, profiteering and sexual appetite, and sheer temperamental excess.

The community also includes Geraldine Fitzgerald as an incipient spinster (with one brilliant monologue of laughter, giggles and tears), Antonis Famberton as a bustling, noisy neighbour, and Mark Strong as the sharp-suited taxi-driver Errico who steps into Gennaro's shoes and bed. Many of these actors have been on the Eyre/McKellen RNT work-tours; they are becoming an identifiable top-class ensemble.

Italy is on the move this week. Parma has been relocated nearer to Naples than Bologna in the RSC's new version of John Ford's compelling documentary tragedy *The Play She's A Whore* (Swan, Stratford-upon-Avon). David Leveaux's production, designed by Kenneth Miller, has a post-modern Sicilian feel to its black baggy suits, scuffed shoes, rosary beads, patches of dark music. The direct, functional poetry, if barely presented on a bare stage, with a trucked-on platform to double as bed and banquet table.

The central incurious passion of Giovanni and his sister Annabella is more noisomely persistent than surgically sexual Jonathan Cullen is energetically careful and wide-eyed. Sarah Reeves a good deep-kisser but fatally grubby and one-dimensional. The destructive properties of sexual jealousy are more vividly outlined by Celia Gregory as the rampageously wronged Hippolyta, and by the object of her wrath, Soranzo.

Tim McNerny, as the latter, is a devoutly satiric presence, fully inhabiting the world, and tone of the play and well supported by Jonathan Hyde's unrelatable sommelier, the sepulchral Wagner. Another fine double act orbiting round Annabella is that of Richard Bonneville as the inane Bergetto and Guy Henry as his watchfully deadpan servant, Poggio.

The final carnage, with Annabella's heart brandished on a dagger like a medium rare steak (no garnish, chips optional), is a superbly staged confection of black mirth and visceral horror. The RSC's record on Ford is quite good, but Leveaux's production is the first to relate the chamber qualities of unspeakable domestic turmoil to the contemporary tragedies which seem to multiply in every day's newspapers.

London is blessed with two invaluable initiatives which go some way to plugging the gaps in public funding: the Barclays New Stages Festival, which is concentrated this year at the Royal Court; and the London International Festival of Theatre, LIFT (which does receive some Arts Council support), celebrating throughout July, its tenth anniversary and its fifth biennial programme.

LIFT '91 was launched in a travelling tent on Highbury Fields by Forthburn, the erstwhile Cornish collective now based and funded in France. Their version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (today at 4pm, Tuesday and Wednesday) is appallingly spoken, dull and conventional, in spite of the Chinese gongs, the Irish fiddles and the tacked-on Kathakali processions and masks.

Tiania and donkey-headed Bottom disappear inside a vulva-like artichoke plant, and the depleted mechanicals perform their play as a punch mime that raises no laughter.

Barclays and the Court had more luck with Graceme Miller's *A Girl Skipping*, a pulverising variation on childhood themes

Coveney on Napoli

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ianlharris
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