

# Savage parade falls out

**Theatre**  
**Michael Coveney**  
**sees the Renaissance**  
**riotously reinvented.**

NO PRODUCTION of John Webster's *The White Devil* ever corresponds to the great expectations aroused by Hadjit, Lamb and T. S. Elliot. But no production in my experience has come closer than Philip Prowse's breathtaking version at the Royal National Theatre, his fourth brush with this uncut masterpiece, and the most thoroughly achieved.

The National under Richard Byre has done two Jacobean masterpieces before this one: *The Boy Who Sailed A Horse* and *The Changing*. The first was decent and dull, rather like the English rep production in Michael Blakemore's novel, *Next Season*; the second was somehow on loan from a gallery, overtly reeking of Goya.

Prowse is neither a stick-in-the-mud nor a quater of painters. He takes elements of baroque and Renaissance art and reinvents his own landscape. Actors are not then pinned on to fit the white principle is geared to the revelation of the actor in a revitalised context appropriate to the play.

The vast Olivier stage may suggest the architectural map-hem surrounding the lengthy building of St Peter's in Rome. But the scene has its own imaginative, and fully inhabited, dynamism. Broken black tombs surround the arena, a dissected baroque chapel stands above two altars. The beautiful costumes — you will see none better this year — are of black and gold silks, with a dash of ecclesiastical scarlet, the whole savage parade exquisitely lit by Prowse's regular collaborator, Gerry Jenkinson.

The husband Lodovico (Rupert Fraser, visited in a procession of black-cowled

sacristans) is literally propelled to revenge. Canales enrages the false brick wall which both reflects and absorbs the Olivier's dimensions. A huge golden globe hangs threateningly above and bells toll solemnly in the distance; actors wall intricately like penitential sinners and bark and whoop like untrained dogs.

The Renaissance ascendancy is represented by Denis Quillley's swaggering Brachiano, Eleanor Brun's elegantly wronged Isabella, and the devilously alien Cardinal of Trieste Jellinek (bravely replacing Robert Edlison at the last gasp). This smug conspiracy is jolted from within by a brazen black underclass, rosters of the mongrel masses.

The trigger is Brachiano's lust for Vittoria, whose casual, leonine sensuality is the hallmark of Josette Simon's powerful and ravishing performance. The shuffling intelligencer, T. P. McKenna's acid-voiced, blantly ruthless Duke of Florence, bridges and exploits both communities.

By casting Vittoria Corombona and her family as black, Prowse is both clarifying the social collisions of the play and suggesting alternative cultural, sexual and moral imperatives.

The agent of lust, employed by the Duke, is Vittoria's own brother Flaminio: the extraordinary Dhobi Oparsi, as tall and floppy-limbed as a Harlem Globetrotter, and accused by some of muffling the character's bite and bark, is surely embodying an instinct for evil different from that of the stock stage Machiavel.

His mother, Cornelia (superbly played by Claire Bennet), expresses disapproval very well: "Because we are poor shall we be vicious?" Prowse and his cast avoid Grand Guignol and make Webster's horror theatrically real. The visions and dumb shows are elided with the public events of Vittoria's arraignment, the election of a

Pope, the murders and the obsequies. The interval is taken only after the fourth act; this pleasingly emphasises the shape of the play, rising to the Cardinal's installation in the Vatican and Vittoria's escape from the prison of whores and convertite nuns.

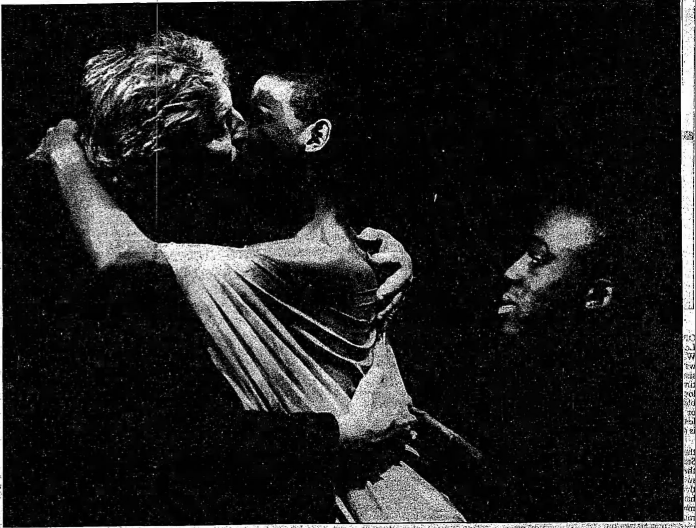
Prowse and Simon convey relish in exploring not only the many ambiguities of liberation in the play, but also its complex misogyny; Simon's proud Vittoria dodges none of these difficulties. She paints a compelling, languorously tragic portrait in a consummately intelligent and manfully rewarding production. Ignore all health warnings: I advise you to risk seeing it.

Since Donald Piessence played Davies the Welsh tramp in Harold Pinter's second major play, *The Caretaker* (revived in production by the author at the Comedy Theatre), I have seen London reincarnations with Leonard Rossiter, Warren Mitchell, Norman Boston and Timothy West.

Piessence reclaims the role from these dically contrasting essays in forceful eccentricity by playing Davies quietly, very frightened, with a vigorously recurring middle-finger gesture.

Pinter said that he saw three men in a room. Others have seen the shade of Tony Hancock, a visitor from beyond the grave, Christian symbolism, and/or Beckett, Everyman. At the Comedy we see a series of riveting, impeccably paced duets between the alternating six-foot brothers — exceedingly well played by Colin Firth (the once-lobotomized Aston) and Peter Hower (the brother, more worldly Mich) — and the dependent old intruder, cast adrift from his belongings and identity. Davies's tobacco tin ass knocked off on the Great West Road; the bastard monk in Laton failed to come up with new shoes; a Scotch git might be after him; his papers are in sidrap.

Piessence purrs like a Celtic *Walter Fabiani*, his entire geno-



Evil instinct: Dhobi Oparsi (right, as Flaminio) unites Denis Quillley (Brachiano) and Josette Simon (powerful and ravishing Vittoria) / Photographs: Frank Herrmann

Bryan tries to jolly things along. The Irish actor Frank Grimes has written about an American experience in *The Fishing Trip* at the Croydon Warehouse and his director Lindsay Anderson has lovingly confused the well-structured but repetitious and control, but cannot disguise the hopeless implausibility of it all, and the thinness of debate.

A reminder that the RSC sessions at the Barbican is now swollen by two palpable hits from last summer's Stratford season: *The Comedy of Errors* (on the

## An Englishman abroad

A progress report on David William, our new man in Ontario.

...link of champagne glasses and ... the setting of two of the credit- ... scenes in a male sauna and ... Yorkshire Dales from Brian Bedford; a routine revival of ... message parlour.

## Coveney on White Devil

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