



James Laurenson: basking in phlegmatic maturity as the General

The fatal treachery

THERE'S no missing the theatrical allure of Richard Nelson's new play, which charts the process by which Benedict Arnold, one of the great military heroes of America's War of Independence ended up in exile and disgrace. Arnold's crime was to attempt defection to the British enemy, then occupying New York, for which treachery he expected the princely sum of £10,000. And Nelson, who according to a vague programme note based his play on "true events", duly ensures the action crackles with tension and anxiety as Arnold launches his campaign to surrender.

The very theatricality of the writing and of Howard Davies's astutely atmospheric production, played out against designer William Dudley's heraldic back-panels and Iona Sekacz's crepuscular music, leave Arnold's motives and intentions shrouded in doubt. The General never quite forfeits the status of an enigma. For Nelson is not greatly concerned about the assumptions and beliefs which spurred the General to his momentous decision. Of any sustained conflict between patriotism and pragmatism, Arnold shows few signs. When the play opens in 1779, the General, at 38, enjoys a reputation as a head-strong, disobedient and controversial warrior — qualities which James Laurenson, basking in phlegmatic maturity scarcely suggests. The General

The General from America
The Swan, Stratford-on-Avon

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has also already communicated by letter with the English enemy, implying he may be ready to defect. So the play avoids dramatic debate, and instead concentrates upon showing how Arnold's plan leads remorselessly to suspicion, exposure and down-fall.

Nelson also never makes it clear whether he regards the General as a wartime profiteer, or unfairly impoverished by war and falsely indicted for political reasons by Corin Redgrave's genial George Washington. But there's an interesting, insistent implication that plans for Arnold's defection were needlessly botched: entrusted to a theatre-mad young Major (Adam Godley in real comic form) by whom John Woodvine's Sir Henry, a convincingly supercilious English Commander is smitten. But Davies oddly underplays this sexual aspect.

It's in the fraught denouement, with Jay MacInnes's piercing sense of desolation and hysteria as Arnold's wife, that the play's suspenseful rather than cerebral qualities take hold.

● In repertory. Box office: 01789 295 623.

General de Jongh Standard



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