

First night

Local angle on the moral maze

Michael Billington

The Herbal Bed
The Other Place, Stratford

NOT since Edward Bond's *Bingo* has Stratford staged such a local play as Peter Whelan's *The Herbal Bed*: most of the action takes place round the corner from the theatre at Hall's Croft. But, although the plot revolves around an action for slander brought by Shakespeare's daughter, Susanna, in 1613, the real fascination of this gripping play lies in a much larger issue: the conflict between sexual passion and puritan conscience.

The bare facts are that Susanna took a laddish local gent to the consistory court at Worcester Cathedral for claiming that she had "the running of the reins and had been naught with Rafe Smith at John Palmer"; in other words, that she had gonorrhoea and had committed adultery at a private house in Stratford.

Out of this Whelan weaves an intriguing piece of historical speculation. His Susanna, chafing at the restrictions of her marriage to a dedicated physician, John Hall, is genuinely drawn to a local haberdasher, Rafe Smith: the two of them are caught on the verge of coition in Hall's herb garden by a servant. But when Jack Lane, who has been sacked as Hall's apprentice, embroiders the story and puts it about in a local pub, the three parties involved brazen the matter out and take him to court, resulting in a trial scene reminiscent of *The Crucible*.

Whelan does much more than deck out a piece of titivating historical gossip. Su-

sanna, who has her father's gift for dissembling, represents the conflict between passion and survival. Hall and Smith, both religious puritans, show how conscience can be trimmed by expediency: the former for the sake of his medical practice and the latter to save Susanna. The one character of fixed principle is the Vicar-General who carries out the ruthless court interrogation.

Whelan's great strength is that he sees the vices and virtues of all parties: at one extreme, Susanna's belief in self-fulfilment drives her to implicate a servant in lies, and at the other, her interrogator's devotion to truth hints at the zealotry that would eventually lead to the closing of the theatres.

Even though the language sometimes veers uneasily between ancient and modern (with the court official talking of wanting to "wrap it up"), Whelan's play offers an engrossing moral conundrum. Michael Attenborough's production, played against a Robert Jones set that is a mixture of wattle and medical workshop, is also vehemently acted. Teresa Banham's Susanna is a very English blend of outward propriety and inner fire and Liam Cunningham and Joseph Fiennes, as respectively husband and lover, reveal the cost of tight-lipped self-preservation.

But for me the performance of the evening comes from Stephen Boxer, who as the Vicar-General brilliantly displays an implacable certainty that suggests convictions are both prisons and a source of moral strength.

At The Other Place (01789-295623).

Herbal Bed Billington Guardian



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