

Death is the maiden

FOR the first time in more than half a century the Royal Shakespeare Company launches its new season in the depths of autumn instead of spring — with rather more productions to be premiered through the winter months than in spring and summer. This new idea leaves me coolish. And the choice of the anonymous 16th century morality play, *Everyman*, presented in the RSC's Stratford studio, ushers in the new dispensation with rather more of a whimper than a bang.

It's true the production is directed with notable theatrical flair and imagination by two of Théâtre de Complicité actors — Kathryn Hunter and Marcello Magni. But *Everyman* is a severely didactic and not very dramatic allegory, which warns errant mankind in an age when the pleasure-principle was beginning to be eagerly grasped, that worldly joys and riches are worthless vanities. Death, according to the grim message of *Everyman*, would come to man like a bolt out of the blue, reminding him that, like an Edwardian boy scout, he should always be prepared.

The play's anti-materialist

Everyman
The Other Place, Stratford
NICHOLAS DE JONGH

message, with its condemnation of the hypocritical, fairweather friends who leave *Everyman* in the dying lurch, suits our own times. Accordingly the directors go for a modern-dress, surreal approach. Designer Rosa Maggiora stages the play in some alluring, Italianate limbo, with a honey-coloured stone floor, where the sounds of cicadas and churchbells are heard.

Joseph Mydell's *Everyman*, in a premonition of his dying moments, lies naked in a tin-bath before joining in the day's wedding and dancing festivities. And it's in the midst of very high spirits that Josette Bushell-Mingo, presenting Death as a fashionable femme fatale, interrupts him with news of his imminent demise. This much is thanks to the production's ingenious talent for modern interpolations.

But when Mydell's doleful and insufficiently fearful *Everyman* begins his terminal journey, and finds his friends — Fellowship, Goods and Kindred — all unwilling to support him, the acting style is



Wrestling with pleasure: Joseph Mydell and Josette Bushell-Mingo

too light-hearted and flippant to make a deep impression. Myra McFadyen plays the friend who sees *Everyman* through to his serene ending — a state of mind which seems imposed by the author, not achieved by the character. And she

alone exudes a fine religious fervour.

● RSC Box office: 01789 295623.

Ratings: No stars — adequate
★ good, ★★ very good
★★★ outstanding, ✖ poor

De Jongh Standard *Everyman*



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