

REVIEW

Sorrows of a single life

Theatre

Dona Roista the Splnster  
Almeida, N1

THIS IS Lorca's little-known tragedy of a young Spanish lady holding out for her fiancé, who never comes back, idealising her memories. Rosita is trapped in the past in turn-of-the-century Granada (the playwright's home town). She cloisters herself in the walled garden of her aunt's villa, and her lusty spirit withers like her uncle's precious red rose, which, symbolically, blossoms but pales to frosty white in one day.

This play gets an airing about as often as its heroine, unlike Lorca's more powerful peasant tragedies *Blood Wedding*, *Yerma* and *The House of Bernarda Alba*, which were also written in the mid-1930s and portray frustrated and mewed-up women. Brought to our attention by director Phyllida Lloyd, *Dona Rosita* did — in flashes — strike me as worth reviving. There is strong strain of bleakness in Lorca's portrait of obsessive devotion and prolonged grief, a way of life Rosita (Phoebe Nicholls) shares with her aunt (Eleanor Bron) who mourns long after she is widowed.

Though Lorca inclines heavily towards lamenting the wintriness of single life, he provides hints that other ladies might be enjoying the freedom and perceptive glimpses into the nature of lengthy partnerships. Before his death, Rosita's uncle (Clive Swift, obsessively tending his flowers) drily observes that marital arguments are desperate attempts to inject life into wilted relationships. Celia Imrie's irascible, mouthy housekeeper is also highly entertaining.

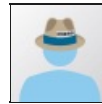
Then there are Lorca's radically weird stylistic shifts into full-blown lyricism. Peter Oswald's translation is fine work, but this piece as a whole is theatrically awkward. Lloyd's ladies might be amusingly surreal launching into a song-and-dance number in the midst of a stiff social gathering, but as half the cast (not least Nicholls) have feeble voices it is exasperating.

Designer Anthony Ward's dilapidated plant house is serene, with potted roses and petunias stacked up the high brick walls. It is also quietly atmospheric with the tinkling of the fountain and chirping of crickets (sound by John A Leonard) and the light (by Paul Pyant) shifting from hot noon sun to weaker shafts and finally encroaching darkness. But Lorca's domestic scene is tinged with sentimentality and the cast lack real fire.

Tickets: 0171 259 1404

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