



Eleanor Bron as the clock-stopped spinster in Lorca's 'Doña Rosita' Photo: Geraint Lewis

THEATRE Doña Rosita The Almeida, London

You pity the poor soul who has to water the set at the Almeida at the moment. For Phyllida Lloyd's production of *Doña Rosita, The Spinster*, the stage has been spectacularly transformed into a garden courtyard in Granada, all terracotta tiles and wrought-iron furniture and, against the brickwall at the back, shelf upon shelf groaning with greenery and multifarious potted plants. This secluded paradise becomes a self-imposed prison for the heroine of Lorca's rarely performed play.

Doña Rosita has certain affinities with Dickens's Miss Havesham, who, jilted on what was to have been her wedding day, psychologically stops the clock and withers and grows warped in her bridal dress. A poignant rather than grotesque figure, Lorca's heroine is, none the less, a parallel case of someone who cannot adjust to changed facts. An orphan brought up by a dotting aunt and uncle, she becomes engaged to her cousin, who is then called back to his father's farm in South America, vowing to return and marry her. Over the passage of 25 years, we see her put her life on hold in progressively more futile expectations.

It's a play of tricky tonal shifts,

in which heightened poetry and song and dance alternate with passages of almost draconian tragi-comic realism. Some of the stylised movement in Lloyd's production is hard to watch with a straight face - there is a scene where the women indulge in a spot of synchronised needlework, grinning fondly at each other, that looks as if it's going to turn into a Victoria Wood sketch, particularly when the group is reinforced with a further batch of beaming sewers. The fan-wirling tableaux and attempts at evoking Hispanic home-entertainment only serve to advertise the incorrigible Englishness of the cast.

But what is moving and well-judged about this staging far outweighs the irritation. Particularly fine is the way Eleanor Bron and a Scots-accented Celia Imrie depict the relationship between the refined aunt and her earthy, forthright housekeeper. "From too much living together, the air between the two of you has grown thorns" is how the uncle describes this in Peter Oswald's excellent translation, but humorously and touchingly Bron and Imrie bring out the affection underlying this prickliness. You see that they'd be lost if they didn't have one another to argue with. Indeed, for

all the ostensible focus on the yearning for the fiancé, this is actually an excellent play about love between women and about the strains on women without men. As a hard-up widow obsessed with maintaining the position in swanky society of herself and her daughters, even if it means going without food rather than glamorous mourning attire, Kathryn Hunter hilariously exemplifies the latter group. Shovelling fistfuls of canapés into her handbag when nobody is looking, she's a jumpy mass of furtive avidity.

The play hits you over the head rather too often with its central symbol, the *Rosa Mutabile*, which, with obvious relevance to the heroine and her fate, blooms, withers and dies in the one day. Phoebe Nicholls's *Doña Rosita* changes curiously little in looks over the quarter of a century covered but in a way it's the painful restiveness of this thin, fragile-looking figure with the boyish bob that makes her so moving. The performance has great dignity and, under Lloyd's direction, the final scene fully lives up to those comparisons with the last act of *The Cherry Orchard*.
To 7 June. Booking: 0171-359 4404
Paul Taylor

Paul Taylor Indy Dona Rosita



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Mon, Sep 19,
2022