

Rupert Everett – what a drag

Theatre

The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore
Lyric, Hammersmith

THE PROSPECT of that hot Hollywood actor Rupert Everett starring in a rarely performed play by Tennessee Williams sounds intriguing. When you learn that the lovely Rupe will also be appearing in drag, it sounds irresistible.

Unfortunately this turns out to be a night of tiresome campy and alarming pretentiousness, and delight quickly curdles into irritation and embarrassment.

Tennessee Williams is the most uneven of major playwrights. At his best few can beat him for bruising emotional candour and genuinely poetic, full-blooded drama. At his worst, and especially in the latter part of his career, he goes so far over the top that he appears merely ridiculous.

The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore (1962) finds the playwright at his most floridly overblown and Philip Prowse's production seems determined to emphasise all its shrill stridency.

The action is set in a villa overlooking the Bay of Naples, where Flora Goforth, a once beautiful but now raddled vaudeville star who made a series of wealthy marriages, is writing her memoirs, recklessly popping pills and approaching death.

A mysterious stranger arrives, who, it gradually emerges, has a vocation for helping old women make their final journey. He reminds Miss Goforth of the most handsome of her husbands, but she isn't exactly over the moon when she learns of his reputation as an "angel of death".

In the past Flora Goforth has been played by Hermione Baddeley, Tallulah Bankhead and (on film) Elizabeth Taylor. Now it is Everett's turn. You can see the logic of the casting. Most of Williams's anguished heroines, thrashing around at the end of their tether, are to some extent self-portraits, and the casting of a male in the role makes explicit the homoerotic subtext of so much of his work.

Unfortunately it also emphasises the hysteria and hothouse artificiality. With his black and pink frock, caked blue eye make-up and blood red nails, Everett looks like a bizarre mixture of panto dame, Cruella de Ville and David Bowie as Ziggy Stardust.

He's a sight to behold. He seems less happy, however,

delivering his yards of pseudo-poetic dialogue, often stumbling over the text and never quite deciding whether he is going for cheap laughs or real emotion.

There are a few passages that capture the genuine desperation of Williams's vision, most notably when Goforth coughs up blood and contemplates her imminent end, but there is much more that seems strained and trite.

Prowse, a director who always seems half in love with wilful perversity, heightens this feeling by adding canned laughter whenever Everett delivers a line that verges on the epigrammatic. It merely emphasises how little the real-life audience is responding.

When it comes to campy David Foxxe offers better value as a hilariously malign old queen called the Witch of Capri, but many of the other supporting performances are scrappy and unfocused.

Prowse, as always, designs his own show. With its fake snow and *Playschool*-like papier-mâché mountain, the whole set seems fake — like the production and, I fear, the play.

This review appeared in some editions yesterday. Tickets: 0181 741 2311

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