

Catch the pidgin with quixotic Ken

Theatre

Pidgin Macbeth
Piccadilly Theatre

NO ONE but Ken Campbell could have come up with a show like this, and I'm not sure whether that is a matter for sorrow or profound relief.

At its best, it is both informative and outrageously funny, but there are also long stretches which offer a mixture of boredom, incomprehension and increasing uneasiness about the whole nature of the enterprise.

Campbell has always been a mixture of visionary and buffoon, and his latest project is perhaps his most quixotic to date. He wants to teach the world pidgin English, also known as Bislama, the official language of many of the South Pacific islands.

"We could have a world language by Thursday if I was in charge," is his proud boast, and with the aim of achieving Wol Wantok (World One Talk) he has gathered a company of young actors, all of whom have learned *Macbeth* in pidgin, and perform chunks of it in the course of the evening.

Campbell is at his best when discussing the history and nature of pidgin, in that distinctive Essex rasp. The language was established as recently as the mid-19th century, by indentured labour brought from the Pacific islands to work in the sugar plantations of Queensland, Australia.

The islanders were treated little better than slaves and cruelly isolated from speakers of their own tribal languages. Pidgin was the



Ken Campbell: mixture of visionary and buffoon

simple, surprisingly eloquent lingua franca they developed by eavesdropping on their English-speaking guards.

Campbell reckons that anyone can learn pidgin in a couple of days, the secret being that there is virtually no grammar and you can get by on a vocabulary of a couple of hundred words. There are no genders, no definite articles, no tenses — you just stick in the word "bin" to signify the past and "bambae" (by and by) to indicate the future. "They looked into the subjunctive, but decided it hadn't brought anyone any happiness."

Campbell takes us through the "tomorrow and tomorrow" speech in *Macbeth*, and it is fascinating to see how so simple a language ingeniously copes

with Shakespeare's complexity. "Creeps in this petty pace from day to day", for instance, becomes "Wokabaot snel spid [snail-speed] dei long dei long", while "full of sound and fury signifying nothing" becomes "Fulap mekanois saenem nating".

The evening becomes frankly dull, however, when Campbell's evidently adoring students perform long passages of the play in pidgin, with the sage of the Walthamstow Marshes leaping out of his seat every other minute to explain linguistic cruxes. This mixture of coarse acting and pedantic explanation grotesquely outstays its welcome.

It is also hard to escape the uncomfortable feeling that this is a show that patronises the South Pacific islanders. The cast on stage are all white, and with their war paint and comic codpieces, we don't seem to have strayed that far from the world of the Black and White Minstrels.

And though the show is often genuinely informative about pidgin, and Campbell seems sincere in his desire to spread the Wol Wantok message, his whole tone is essentially comic. Again and again one finds oneself wondering whether *Pidgin Macbeth* offers anything more than a clever, post-modernish way of laughing at the cute and endearing ways of the simple-minded fuzzy-wuzzies.

It is an unpleasant thought with which to leave the theatre, and one that refuses to go away.

Tickets: 0171 369 1734

CHARLES SPENCER

Spencer Telegraph Pidgin



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ianlharris

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