

Kidman makes jaws drop ● French kissing at the Royal Ballet ● Revived: the Thatcher years' best play

Eyes wide open

Arts diary

We've had some stirring performances on the London stage of late from Hollywood's finest — Juliette Binoche, Kevin Spacey et al. — but none have quite given of themselves like Nicole Kidman in *The Blue Room*.

Stability is never easy — especially for a redhead — but in the course of the evening Kidman, who plays all the female characters, has sex five times with Iain Glen. And all for the Equity minimum wage of £16 a show. Now that's charity for you.

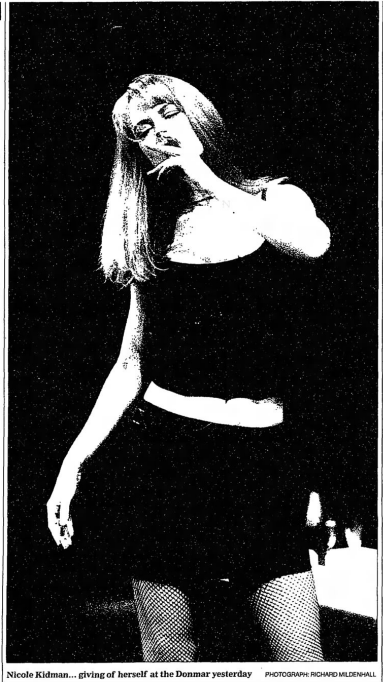
Being an imaginative little so-and-so, David Hare — who adapted the play from Schmitz's *La Ronde* for the Donmar — decreed that they do it five different ways lest the audience get bored and wander off into Soho during the interval. This includes a jaw-dropping scene in which Glen goes in for a bit of no-hands gymnastics.

Even for the audience, it can sometimes be a discomfiling experience. "You're afraid to blink," one of the lucky few to get a preview ticket told us, "you blush until you can blush no longer. It's quite an experience."

But think what it must be like for Kidman's lubby Tom Cruise, who is babysitting their children Isabella, six, and Connor, four. Tom, we hear, hasn't actually seen a full performance yet, although film star buddies Sandra Bullock and Matthew McConaughey came, saw and needed a stiff drink.

Needless to say, despite the chill outside, the Donmar has not yet felt the need to put the heating on. Security, though, is tight with everyone searched for cameras before they are allowed in. Thirty have already been found. So is Kidman any good? "She's truly magnificent," our mole tells us. "She really is a great actress. And my God, what a body!" One gobsmacked thesp, a knight of the realm no less, was heard to whisper on leaving: "It's nearly enough to turn one heterosexual. Heaven forbid."

Passion is also proving to be a problem at the Royal



Nicole Kidman... giving of herself at the Donmar yesterday PHOTOGRAPH: RICHARD MILNER/REX

This week he deplored the "film star behaviour" of Brits in Hollywood like Minnie Driver, who he said "would go to the opening of an envelope squeezed into one of those silly little dresses" if it would get her into the papers. You wouldn't find him doing that. No, no, no. So it must have been another Ewan McGregor who was spotted discussing quantum mechanics with Anna Friel backstage at the Reading Festival. Thought so.

It is McGregor's proud boast that he has shown his monarch of the gym in every film he has made. Indeed, he thinks it is the star of the upcoming *Velvet Goldmine*. Well, now he has competition. Follow.

Trainingpotting star Peter Mullan trampled with his own film, *Orphan*, at the Venice Film Festival at the weekend. Despite being discarded by those same geniuses at Channel 4 who cold-shouldered *The Fall* Monty, it won three subsidiary awards.

"Show us your prize!" "Show us someone in the audience at the ceremony." Quick as a flash, Mullan lifted his kilt and an awed silence fell over the auditorium.

Meanwhile, hell-raising director Abel Ferrara, of *The Funeral* and that old family favourite *Driller, Killer*, was inspiring awe of another kind. Like how can he consume so much drink and drugs and still be alive? Ferrara turned up at Venice with his entourage of the living dead to push his movie *New Rose Hotel*, but managed to miss one raft of interviews and then a dinner thrown in his honour. His embarrassed producer, Ed Pressman, apologized to guests saying, "Mr Ferrara is sleeping. We're trying to wake him. They failed."

When he surfaced the next day, one hack asked him if it was true that he'd kicked drugs. "The hell I have," replied Ferrara in his best John Wayne.

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Crooks' tour of England

Thomas Kenally's *The Placemaker* and the historical fact that George Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer* was performed by a group of convicts at Sydney Cove in 1789 — the first recorded piece of theatre in Australia. With text and sympathy, Werthenbaker shows how the convicts are imaginatively transported by putting on Farquhar's play and the process of imprisonment.

Having been brutally condemned as "vice-ridden vermin", they acquire dignity, purpose and an enhanced sense of individual and collective identity through the alchemy of acting. One female convict about to be hanged, is encouraged to break her self-incriminating vow of silence

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Prisoner, Call Block A... David Beames (left) and Stephen Beesford in *Our Country's Good* convicts

and the whole group is spiritually liberated by occupying the "small republic" of theatre. Seeing the play again, I was struck by its structural similarities to Kenally's earlier piece of dramatisation, *Schindler's Ark*. In both works a persecuted group is offered temporary salvation by an act of individual initiative. But what made an even greater impression was the obsession of Werthenbaker, educated in France and America, with the nature of Englishness.

The conflict between ordinary punishment and enlightened redemption is one our judicial system is still trying to resolve. And the prisoners themselves are precociously ambivalent about their native land. "I hate England. But I think English," says the matron, Liz Merden, as she swears hanging. Even the title acquires a punning ring as a Jewish convict pens a prologue proclaiming: "We left our country for our country's good."

As in *Three Birds Alighting On A Field*, Werthenbaker seems to be tussling with her divided feelings about England — in particular, its mix of cruelty and creativity. But the play also works because of the intelligence of Stafford-Clark's production, in which 10 actors play 24 roles. The doubling is very much part of the point, since it shows how officers and convicts are locked together in the "profitable prison" of a penal settlement.

Stephen Beesford as the second lieutenant who turns play-director, Jonathan Cullum as both the enlightened governor and an aspiring convict-writer, Sally Rogers as the defiant Liz and Sarah Walton as a former thief also give sharply defined performances in one of the most uplifting plays to have emerged from the wrecked Thatcher eighties.

At the Young Vic, London SE1 (0171-928 6883), till October 24, then touring.

Mahler for the parlour

idea, but distortion and crackle from the Albert Hall's speaker system rendered most of the words inaudible. Plugging the auditorium into darkness for the songs left many in the audience peering through the ploom in an attempt to follow the programme. And the sequel of a mobile phone added its irritating voice to the symphony's funeral slow movement.

Gatti's Mahler is essentially post-Romantic — big, rich and sweet. Most of the songs show off the RPO strings to perfection. There are, as always with this conductor, important insights and flashes of genius: the slow movement's extraordinary transition from carbonic drags to a brief vision of infinite peace, for example, was ravishly handled. The choice of Wunderhorn songs, however, struck me as perverse. The First Symphony thematically evokes material from the Lieder. Rinsar Farrendon Geullien, which makes

Blue Room & Our Country's Good Guardian Billington



Clipped By: ianlharris Mon, Sep 25, 2023