

SUNDAY 17 APRIL 1983

OBSERVER REVIEW/ARTS

National Bath-night

THE stage of the Olivier is now wholly occupied by John Gurr's cityscapes. Surpassing his Florence ('Lorenzaccio') and almost equalling his New York ('Guys and Dolls') is his Bath. Even today the town looks like a set for *The Rivals*; Mr Gurr has reproduced it so faithfully, but so imaginatively, that to enter the theatre is to feel as though you have just got off the train from Paddington.

Black and white crescents turn into black and white drawing-rooms and coffee houses, incidentally marking out a semi-circular acting area that is spacious but comfortable. Robert Bryan's lighting takes us meticulously through the single day of the play's action, and lays on a particularly ravishing sunset. Peter Wood directs with his usual accumulation of wit, clarity and showmanship; also with the modicum of restructuring and rewriting he usually affords to old comedies. There are *double-entendres* that cannot be found in the standard editions.

Some of the jokes have been spruced up. Mrs Malaprop being allowed ('ah, Sir Anthony, men are all Bavarians') a final malapropism. If ever a performance deserved to go out with a bang, it is Geraldine McEwan's as a *premiere* a little unsure of her own pretensions. Suspicion is one of this actress's natural modes; eyelids flapping, body turned three-quarters towards an opponent in a posture of aggressive defence, she constantly smiffs the possibility of mockery. Somebody, somewhere, is putting something over; and if it is nobody else, it must be herself.

Each of her verbal coinages is delivered with faultless bravado (the number of laughs extracted by author and actress from what is essentially the same joke is amazing), but each is surrounded by an apparatus of doubt. Am I going to get this right? Is that what I meant? *Dider!* I do well? Miss McEwan finds a whole subtext in a verbal tic.

Nothing could better her delicious confusion—eyes modestly sealed, then opened amorously wide—when finally confronted by her supposed lover. 'Oh, the breathes, he will perforce my mystery.' Sheridan did not

THEATRE ROBERT CUSHMAN on 'The Rivals,' two Shakespeare productions and a musical.

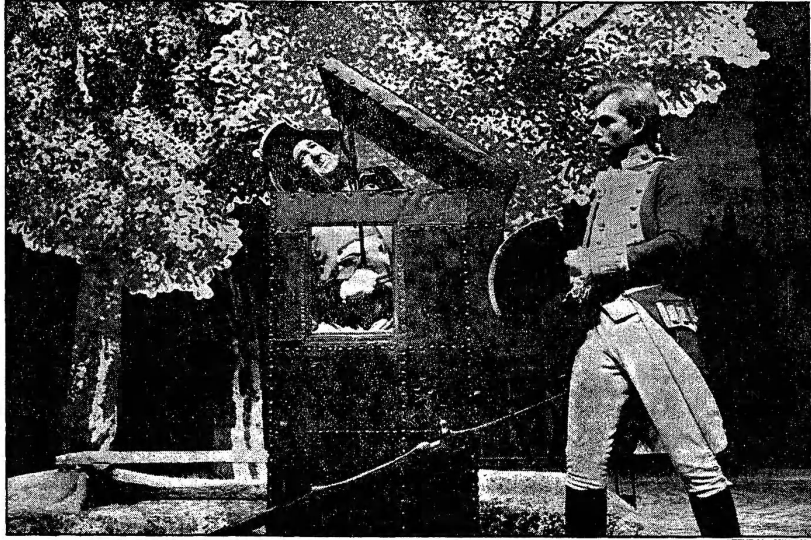
write that line, not exactly, but somewhere he must be wishing he did.

On with Miss McEwan comes Michael Hordern as Sir Anthony Absolute. Where she radiates apprehension, he radiates old-fashioned lust, inspired mainly by a passing maid-servant's backside. He develops this theme when describing, over his breakfast-boiled egg, the charms of his son's intended, climaxing in a lecherous gulp, timed with sublime unsexedness.

On the first night Mr Hordern—I beg his pardon and send my felicitations, Sir Michael—lacked some of the gusto for the baronet's rages, but every detail of his tyranny was endearingly in place. Other attractions include Niall Buggy, who as Sir Lucius O'Tigger sores with every line he utters, and Tim Curry, whose Bob Acres is a cavalcade of beastliness.

And then the lovers. Jack Absolute is a juvenile lead with a sense of humour and with the responsibility of knitting the play together; Patrick Rycart discharges both obligations. As Lydia, Anne Louise Lambert languishes wittily. Edward Petherbridge plays Faulkland as a Scottish man of sentiment, mocking the character's masochism while establishing it as a dark fact in the play. Fiona Shaw's Julia, overripe but genuine, supplies just the right balance. I suppose nothing is definitive, but I cannot see this production being improved upon. It ends with a bewitching show of Chinese lanterns.

A *Midsommer Night's Dream*, transferred from the Cottesloe to the Lyttelton, ends well too; in the last scene Bill Bryden's production moulds a folk-play of all moods and all periods, the mortal and fairy worlds, thoroughly interesting. The mechanics' play is far funnier than before. Derek Newark's Bottom having slipped the leash with no loss of dignity. Robert Stephens's Oberon is more arrogant, less mellifluous, than Paul Scofield's; Susan Fleetwood is a superb Titania, whose impact on the seasons is thoroughly believable. There is some careless verse speaking on the way through; though less than in the RSC's *Antony and Cleopatra* (Fit), which has some small-part playing of school-play standard. Adrian Noble's production has surprisingly little spark; characters stand on a featureless upper-level gazing determinedly into space. There is intelligent detail, though: an intimate, sycophantic atmosphere to the Egyptian court, and a final implicit clash between the ruthless Caesar and compassionate Dolabella; maybe what Mrs Malaprop meant by an allegory



Sheridan at the Olivier: Michael Hordern as Sir Anthony Absolute (left), with Patrick Rycart as his son Jack.

STEVE MACMILLAN

every proves his downfall? Who said 'Carouse!'? These days that plot belongs to *Blood Brothers* (Lyric), and it follows on a lot of other melodramas. A Liverpool working-class matriarch gives birth to twins and is persuaded to give one of them up to the barren middle-class lady whose house she cleans. Despite all endeavour, the two boys meet and grow up friends, but are sundered by fate and/or economics.

As an omnipresent narrator puts it, in speech that takes English dramatic verse back to before the days of 'Gorboduc,' 'Do we blame superstition for what came to pass/could it be what we, the English, have come to know as class.' Willy Russell's music starts out ominously well, as do his lyrics if you're not fussy about rhyme, but both run out of steam very quickly.

The only reasons for having the songs are that they lubricate

aproving action, and that they provide a pretext for getting Barbara Dickson back on stage. She acts the natural mother with great sympathy, though she has little to do but suffer; her opposite number is a monster who finally provokes catastrophe by an action so motiveless that Mr Russell has to keep it off stage. There remains his domestic

prose, which still has the stuff, and which enables some good acting to get done. George Cootigan and Andrew C. Wadsworth as the boys are finely contrasted studies in gaucherie; though the time spent on the lore and language of school children, engaging in itself, throws the structure even further out of whack.

Gandhi to Kean

by VICTORIA RADIN

BEN KINGSLEY is apparently capable of impersonating anyone from an ascetic Indian politician and sage of the twentieth century to a lecherous London actor and paranoid of the early nineteenth.

In Edmund Kean (Lyric, Hammermith) the introduction of a loush curly wig, a flowing black cape and a shirt split to the waist (revealing a mass of chest hair which the makers of Gandhi removed) gives him a surprising likeness to the huge-eyed, mag-

Rivals Cushman Observer



Clipped By:
ianlharris
Sat, Oct 7, 2023