

THEATRE

GREAT BATH NIGHT

FRANCIS KING

STYLE, as distinct from a style, is so rare in the modern theatre that, when one encounters it, as in Peter Wood's enchanting production of Sheridan's *The Rivals* (Olivier), it deserves a loud hurrah.

After some undistinguished period sets on this stage—Fanya Moisewitch's for "The Double Dealer" was a notable exception—the National Theatre has found in John Cunter a designer who is able not merely to exploit its dimensions but to do so with dazzling virtuosity.

The two words in the programme "Scene: Bath" say it all. Here, whether in grand perspectives of streets or elegant interiors of houses and shops, is Bath as Sheridan knew it. One marvels at its charm; and one also marvels, inevitably, at the absurdity, in a theatre so modern, of men, not machines, moving houses forward and turning them round to reveal their contents.

There are two performances as good as any I have ever seen in this masterpiece. One is the Malaprop of Geraldine McEwan, a comedienne who can raise a laugh with an angry pursing of the lips, a discomforted glare or a fretful twitch of a shoulder. She produces each "nice derangement of epithets" as though it were an involuntary nervous tic and not, like many actresses, as though from studied eccentricity. Her only disadvantage is that, even with unflattering make-up, she is not much less attractive than the marmoreal Lydia (Anne Louise Lambert) and the mature Julia (Fiona Shaw).

The other outstanding performance is a Sir Anthony Absolute to whose testy self-will Michael Hordern brings

the autumnal melancholy of the one-time plunderer's "I would if I could." Just as, in "The Importance of Being Earnest," we should feel that Cecily will grow into another Lady Bracknell, so we should feel that Jack will grow into another Sir Anthony. Patrick Rycart adroitly suggests this.

Faulkland, with his pathological jealousy, seems to belong to another, far more serious drama—who can ever suppose that he will be happy with his Julia except in his unhappiness? Edward Petherbridge, making the character into a straight-backed, bony Scot, gives a performance of a subtlety that would be more effective in a smaller auditorium. There is a hilariously bucolic Acres from Tim Curry, who seems to have fattened himself up for the part to look like a well-stuffed goose.

* * *

THE STORY of siblings brought up in ignorance of each other and accidentally coming together is familiar from fairy tale and melodrama. Appropriately, therefore, it is an amalgam of these two genres that Willy Russell has concocted in his Liverpool musical *Blood Brothers* (Lyric).

Deserted by her husband, Mrs Johnstone finds herself so poor when she gives birth to twins—clearly she has never heard of family allowances—that she is persuaded to give one of them away to rich, childless, neurotic Mrs Lyons, for whom she chafes. The pact between them stipulates that the boys should never meet; but, inevitably, they do so, swearing blood-brotherhood without realising that there is already a tie of blood between them.

When, subsequently, their boyhood friendship degenerates

into adult hostility and they cause each other's deaths, the author draws the moral that class has been to blame. This would be more convincing if the two had fallen out, not over a woman, but over some such difference as a productivity bonus or whether to say toilet or loo.

The scenes between the boy from the posh end of the town and the one from its slums have a warm, homespun charm; but as the drama becomes increasingly hectic and homiletic, so it slackens its hold. Mr Russell's lyrics are neat and sharp. As a ladder-out of musical molasses, he made me feel as if I were about to succumb to cultural diabetes.

The best of the performers is Barbara Dickson as the working-class mum. She has the big-boned handsomeness and the strong, accurate voice of a modern Gracie Fields.

Whether she also has Gracie Fields's robust, self-mocking gaiety, a role so uniformly sombre does not allow her to demonstrate.

* * *

INWARD-LOOKING, the English theatre rarely spares a glance for dramatists at work abroad. The foundation of Theatre International at the Polish Cultural Centre in Hammersmith is therefore to be welcomed.

The first production (in Eng-

RALPH RICHARDSON is on stage again on June 16 in "Inner Voices," a new "mystery black comedy" by Eduardo de Filippo. Set in post-war Naples, it has more serious political undertones than the usual domestic exuberance of his characters in "Saturday, Sunday, Monday," "Filomena" and "Ducking Out." "Sir Ralph and Michael



Photograph: Morris Newcombe

Geraldine McEwan as Mrs Malaprop and Michael Hordern as Sir Anthony Absolute in "The Rivals" at the National.

lish), *On Foot* by Slawomir Mrozek, a well-known Polish writer at present in exile in France, is on one level an account of people waiting in war-devastated Poland for a train which never comes and on another an allegory of dreams neither realised nor abandoned

in that tragic country. A complex, ambitious work is courageously, if sometimes imperfectly, presented under Helena Kaut-Howson's direction, with a particularly moving performance from Woytek Piekarski as the young boy who represents Mrozek's hopes for the future.

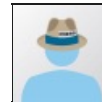
Show talk ROSEMARY SAY

Porrack," she chortled. "When the loudspeaker simply calls Miss Cusack there is a concerted rush." Let's hope the RSC theatre announcer reads this guide note.

she told me, "I've had some tempting offers but this is such a smashing play."

MILES ANDERSON, who played Peter Pan in the Royal Shakespeare Company's Christmas sea-

Rivals King Sunday Telegraph



Clipped By:
ianlharris
Sat, Oct 7, 2023