



Geraldine McEwan and Michael Horden in Sheridan's "The Rivals" which opened at the National (Olivier) Theatre last night.

THEATRE

Mrs Malaprop finds a new exit line

By JOHN BARBER

THERE IS so little to censure and so much to praise in the new production of "The Rivals" at the Olivier, it must come high among the National's recent successes.

John Gunter has designed an elaborate and graceful simulacrum of Bath's elegantly mannered terraces. It suits well the poses, postures and pretences of Sheridan's wonderful characters.

These are all absurd. Yet they must not be mocked but played with conviction. They must walk the knife-edge between the artificiality of the plot and that approximation to credibility which the audience should expect.

The director, Peter Wood, has achieved this. The mischievous comedy of love at cross-purposes, written by a brilliant boy of 25, never descends into farce, however nearly it teeters towards it.

So silly young Lydia, dreaming of eloping with a dashing ensign, is properly confounded when her lover turns out to be, in disguise, the dull respectable fellow her aunt has chosen for her.

Several performances are outstanding because they add some delicious extra to the people as conceived. Michael Horden gives us all the cholera in the pompous Sir Anthony Absolute but he is the funnier because he is also a dispeptic gourmand.

Tim Curry gives us the humpkin in Bob Acres, the booby squire but adds a coy bashfulness which makes him endearing.

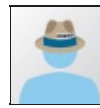
Above all, Geraldine McEwan as the queen of the dictionary Mrs Malaprop, has embellished her role with care and loving detail. With needling eye, snarling pout and shaking head, this quintessential harridan pauses

thoughtfully before selecting each precise wrong word. With this goes a stupefying complacency, and even some new Malapropisms: her exit line is now "Men are all Bavarians!"

I did not fall in love with the interludes, with unwanted music, when supernumeraries fussily set up salon or parlour upon the streets of Bath. And some of the speaking, or the microphoning, was unfortunate.

But the comedy remains hugely enjoyable, with a good hoity-toity Lydia from Anne Louise Lambert, a handsome Jack from Patrick Rycart, and a capital Fag from Barry James. Only the admirable Edward Petherbridge disappointed as the over-sensitive Faulkland, who cannot see his mistress laugh without deploring her indelicate levity. No doubt this subdued performance will grow, in a production which should achieve a long life.

Rivals barber Telegraph



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