

Theatre

# History, the mini-series

## Battle Royal

Lyttelton Theatre, London

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A princess, having married the heir to the throne and given birth, is brutally ignored by her faithless husband, attracts popular sympathy while becoming a rallying point for radical dissenters and dies prematurely, leaving the monarchy discredited.

Sounds familiar? It should do, for this is the story of Caroline of Brunswick, who married the Prince of Wales — the future George IV — and whose fate has often been compared to that of Diana, Princess of Wales. Such parallels are also clearly at the back of Nick Stafford's *Battle Royal* at the National. But the play is so bum-numbingly long, underwritten and over-directed that it dispels any political pungency it might have. And it makes one question artistic director Trevor Nunn's judgment when it comes to new plays.

This is narrative historical drama of the kind that starts at the beginning and ploughs on remorselessly till it reaches the end. So we see poor Caroline arriving at court in 1795 to be disdainfully inspected by her future husband, already secretly married to the Catholic Mrs Fitzherbert, and grudgingly accepted as a bride in order to clear his debts and furnish an heir. After the marriage, she is treated as a domestic prisoner and eventually retreats to Italy.

Returning to England in 1820 on the death of George III, she is tried by the House of Lords for her presumed adultery, barred from her husband's coronation and dies soon after.

There is an interesting story here, not least because Caroline's predicament fomented the possibility of popular revolution. But Stafford largely keeps the commoners out of the action. He is also keen to take Caroline's side, down-playing her promiscuity and ignoring her political ineptitude. The real downfall of this play is that the writing has the functional flatness of a TV mini-series.

The actors do all they can. Zoë Wanamaker invests Caroline with a nice mixture of mischief, truculence and independence of spirit. Simon Russell Beale engages one's interest in the boorish George by heightening his vanity so that even the news of his public caricature produces a smirk of self-satisfaction. Gemma Jones as a stately Lady Jersey, Brendan Coyle as a shadowy spymaster and Matthew Macfadyen as the forensically skilful Brougham lend first-rate support. But Howard Davies's production, set on Rob Howell's tirelessly revolving inner and outer stages, vainly substitutes perpetual motion for dramatic dynamism. For all its implied contemporary parallels, the result is an animated history lesson that belongs to the theatrical past.

**Michael Billington**

*Until March. Box office: 0171-452 3000*

★★★★ Unmissable  
★★★★ Recommended  
★★★ Enjoyable  
★★ Mediocre ★ Terrible