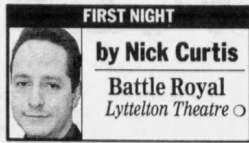


Battle Royal fails after opening salvo



FIRST NIGHT

by Nick Curtis

Battle Royal
Lyttelton Theatre ○

IN THIS ponderous, oddly bloodless play, Nick Stafford does for George IV what Alan Bennett did for George III, holding up a troubled king and queen for comparison with today's royals. But sequels, intentional or not, are rarely equals, and Stafford lacks Bennett's compassion, his originality, and especially his brevity.

Battle Royal covers the acrimonious, 26-year marriage of Simon Russell Beale's venal Prince of Wales and Zoe Wanamaker's shrewish Caroline of Brunswick, and it sometimes feels as if we're experiencing every minute of it. The script is witty enough, but excruciatingly overlong.

Howard Davies's production is strong on pomp but short on passion, given that the play deals with turbulent affairs of the heart, and of a state petrified that the French Revolution might cross the channel.

Picture this: a youngish princess, locked in a loveless marriage, who embarrassed the Establishment, manipulated the media, became a popular icon,



Real troupers:
Zoe Wanamaker and Simon Russell Beale in **Battle Royal**

and died young. That's right, it's Germanic Caroline, a proto-Diana who married George in 1795, unaware of his illicit earlier wedding to a Catholic. Although spurned and treated shamefully, she spent years in compliant exile, only returning to England to fight George's seedy divorce bid, and to try and elbow her way into his Coronation.

Part of the problem with Stafford's play is that it has no heroes. Russell Beale's George is a spoiled and craven child. Wanamaker's Caroline is a brat, and in her own way just as self-

interested. The Tory party is portrayed as the lickspittle servant of the status quo (so no change there), while the radical Whigs adopt Caroline, absurdly, for their own republican ends (and no change there, either). George accuses his Catholic "wife" of always playing the wounded party: but in Battle Royal, everybody plays it.

Another problem is the casting. The lead roles could have been written for Russell Beale and Wanamaker. Therefore, they offer up collections of their greatest stage moments rather

than proper performances. Russell Beale does his supercilious, unctuous routine. Wanamaker does her skittish, obstinate number and suffers three — count 'em — sudden attacks of the vapours. Hugh Ross is silky as Lord Malmesbury, Gemma Jones typically glassy as the socialite whom George has seduced and who Caroline suborns. Only Brendan Coyle strikes a novel note, exuding quiet menace as George's fixer, McMahon. These characters are dwarfed, and often obscured at crucial

moments, by Rob Howell's set: concentric rings of circling columns decked with drapes. This reflects Stafford's preoccupation with institutions and events rather than personalities. Throughout, sundry characters fill us in on the situation of 19th-century England. The marital arguments are needlessly reviewed, twice, in imagined meetings between George and Caroline. Director Howard Davies takes every opportunity to punch up the wry satirical content of the play, but he can do nothing with Stafford's crude attempts to inject feeling. The dance between Caroline and her Latin lover that ends Act II is a grossly sentimental bid for the audience's sympathy, and Wanamaker greets death at the denouement as if she's suffering a minor head-cold.

Nick Stafford's play is drily witty but emotionally barren, overlong and under-rehearsed. Some fine actors go through their motions in a superficially clever script, aided by blandly fine designs and able direction. But Alan Bennett's *The Madness of George III* casts a long and shaming shadow over *Battle Royal*, just as George III did over George IV.

Nicholas de Jongh is away

Ratings: ○ adequate ★ good,
★★ very good, ★★★ outstanding,
✗ poor

Battle Curtis Standard

Clipped By:
ianlharris
1 Dec 2024