



Picture: ALASTAIR MUIR

Princely performance: Simon Russell Beale and Gemma Jones in *Battle Royal*, the story of a doomed 'crowded' marriage from history

# Historical play exposes parallel lives

**Battle Royal, Lyttelton Theatre**

**Y**OU wait all year for a decent new play and then two turn up at once. After the big success of Alan Bennett's *The Lady in the Van* in the West End comes Nick Stafford's *Battle Royal* at the National.

Intriguingly, Stafford's play might almost be a companion piece to Bennett's own *The Madness of George III*, a hit at the NT in 1991.

Stafford, though, concentrates on George III's eldest son, who became first Prince Regent and subsequently George IV, and whose disastrous marriage to Caroline of Brunswick

stirred up no end of trouble for the monarchy.

All good historical plays are also plays about the present and this one is no exception.

Historians have been familiar since Plutarch's day with the concept of parallel lives, and watching the doomed fate of the marriage of the Prince of Wales in 1795 it is impossible not to be reminded of the doomed fate of the marriage of a subsequent Prince of Wales in 1981.

Indeed the similarities are almost eerie. In the famous words of our own Diana, Princess of Wales, the



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marriage of George and Caroline was also "a bit crowded" since George had previously engaged in an illicit marriage with the Catholic Maria Fitzherbert, to whom he remained devoted.

As in our own more recent royal divorce, the press played a big part in fanning the flames of discontent, and Caroline, while still alive, like Diana after her death, became a focus for anti-monarchist sentiment.

Neither Stafford, nor the Howard Davies, the director, labour these similarities but there is no doubt that they add greatly to the play's resonance.

Until now Stafford has been best known as a fringe writer but he takes a big step forward here, with a big scale drama that moves confidently between comedy, high drama and real pathos.

Like too much work at the National, though, *Battle Royal* is excessively long-winded at more than three hours, and the energy level dips disastrously in the second of the three acts. Davies, usually so assured a director, also makes absurdly excessive use of stage revolves, so the cast often seems to be performing on a roundabout.

Yet, where it matters, the play works, especially thanks to cracking performances from Zoe Wanamaker as Caroline and Simon Russell Beale as George.

Wanamaker, with her clumsy, hyperactive manner, thick Germanic accent, and her rather engaging sense of

humour leaves little doubt as to why the fastidious George should find her so deeply off-putting, but there is a moving sense of vulnerability here too, combined with a touching determination to get her just deserts. You can see why the British, with their traditional love of the underdog, took her side.

Russell Beale is superb as the Prince of Wales. The corpulence, the arrogance and the sneering disdain are all superbly caught, but so too is a sense of emotional neediness that makes him much more interesting than a mere royal rake. He also delivers the funniest lines to comic perfection.

The play could do with cutting, but the delicious comic embarrassment of the couple's wedding night and the high drama of the climactic trial scene leave no doubt that the National has discovered an impressive new talent.

**VALUE**