

Diana returns to haunt Royal Family from the stage

PRINCE WILLIAM is reportedly "devastated" and no wonder. First *The Express*, in a classic case of the unreadable in pursuit of the unspeakable, has let loose the dogs of indignation, claiming that, by joining the fox-hunting pack, he is dishonouring his mother's memory.

Then Diana, Princess of Wales, turns up at the Liverpool Tate as a statue of the Virgin Mary, which by the logic of the iconography should leave him on the point of having to perform his first public miracle.

And now, in the Lyttelton, the National Theatre has premiered *Battle Royal*, a new play by Nick Stafford in which Diana is resurrected as the 18th-century Princess Caroline of Brunswick, whose fate weirdly anticipated hers. The wife of the future George IV, this Princess of Wales had also been married as a convenience by a prince who not only possessed a Camilla Parker Bowles figure behind the scenes, but had wed her beforehand, making himself a bigamist.

Caroline, too, became *persona non grata* with the royal family, went abroad, took a foreign lover and met a premature end. But she survived long enough to create trouble when George assumed the throne and, manipulated by politicians, returned to England as the Queen of People's Hearts to star in a scandalous divorce trial before being spectacularly barred from the coronation.

Stafford's play goes back to the past to speculate on what

FIRST NIGHT

BATTLE ROYAL
LYTTELTON THEATRE
LONDON

might have been had Diana lived. True, Howard Davies's production boasts some fine performances (from Zoe Wanamaker who, as the clown-faced, gutturally Germanic princess floods the stage with her oddball, strongly poignant presence, and from Simon Russell Beale as the damaged, compensatingly self-pampering prince).

But the play itself fails virtually every test as drama. For a start, it is too plodding to have any interest independent of its contemporary parallels. It never grabs its historical material by the scruff of the neck to turn it into metaphor.

The unflattering comparison is with Alan Bennett's *The Madness of George III*, which also included a portrait of this prince and also played in this theatre. But in examining that monarch's malady, it was an extended thought-provoking pun on the different meanings of the word "constitution", the body personal a microcosm of the body politic.

There is nothing remotely as resonant as that in this badly edited piece. Diana is destined to continue cropping up in our drama. One hopes the next time she will arrange to reappear in a less parasitic and plodding affair than *Battle Royal*.

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