

## Ibsen in a sauna

### Theatre

Hedda Gabler  
RICHMOND THEATRE

**THIS** is a production that only just survives some exceptionally perverse casting, and unfortunately it is impossible to write about it without appearing ungallant.

In his stage directions, Ibsen leaves no doubt about Hedda Gabler's age — she is 29. What's more she is a young 29, a spoilt, overgrown schoolgirl who has been indulged for far too long by her father, the General, and a woman who has never come to terms with her sexuality.

She may exploit her sex appeal like a lethal weapon, but Hedda is a frigid tease. Physical contact makes her flinch and she so loathes the fact that she is pregnant that she can scarcely admit it to herself, still less anyone else.

To cast Francesca Annis in this role is bonkers. The actress is in her fifties and, though she is both beautiful and amazingly well preserved, she is much more the matron than the vixen. What's more, she exudes a luminous glow of mature contentment rather than Hedda's itchy dissatisfaction.

There are other weird casting choices. Robert Bathurst is a tall, handsome ironist, and absolutely wrong for the plump, childlike Tesman, though he has a brave stab at playing Hedda's harassed, second-rate husband. His glassily desperate smiles are particularly well caught.

Most absurd of all, though, is the casting of Brendan O'Hea as Eilert Lovborg, the wild, dissolute genius whom Hedda really fancies. With his diminutive stature, luxuriantly bushy beard and mad, staring eyes, O'Hea looks like the proud winner of an impersonate the Garden Gnome competition. It is hard to imagine him as a visionary writer, harder still to think that Hedda could fancy him.

Having got most of the casting so spectacularly wrong, director Annie Castledine then proceeds to give the play, in a new and somewhat lumpy version by Frank McGuinness, a disengaged production. There is almost no sense of a directorial vision. Nor is the evening helped by Tom Piper's bland pine-plank design, which gives the cast no end of trouble and makes it look as though the drama is taking place inside a large sauna. You half expect the actors to start beating themselves with twigs.

Yet for all these faults, the play still grips, though a planned West End transfer strikes me as inadvisable. The brilliance of Ibsen's plotting and the daring of his psychological insight ensure complete attention. You can readily understand why the play so upset its first critics. There is still something shocking about Hedda, with her mixture of wanton destruction and intense inner pain, and though Annis hardly gives a blazing performance, there is a hint of masochism here, especially in Hedda's acknowledgement of her own cowardice, that is disturbingly erotic.

The evening boasts one outstanding success in Peter Bowles's superb Judge Brack. Naturally he captures the clubman's suavity of the character to a T, but this underrated actor is capable of dark depths. The insidious, not to say perverse, sexuality of his conversations with Hedda and the devilishly deployed blackmail at the end make the flesh creep, and for once Hedda's suicide makes sense. Facing a hellish life sentence under this sadist's thumb, shooting herself seems a logical way out.

*Tickets: 0181 940 0088; next week Brighton Theatre Royal 01273 328488.*

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