

Melodrama in sharp focus

Review: Hedda Gabler, Plymouth Theatre Royal

HEDDA Gabler is a rich, powerful play. All too often for audiences it can feel like a worthy walk through treacle.

Not so with this new production premiered at Plymouth's Theatre Royal. In the wonderfully safe hands of director Annie Castledine it is given a crystal clear interpretation that manages to weave a firm, direct line through the moral maze of Ibsen's finest writing.

This is an uncompromising play and the frequently insurmountable melodramatic qualities are met head on with the successful depiction of the suffocating, claustrophobic atmosphere of small town life.

This Hedda is firmly her father's daughter, the daughter of General Gabler, whose portrait dominates the up stage wall. Unable to escape her past, she is attracted to freedom but is terrified to take the decisive leap. Instead she ruthlessly manipulates the lives of others, with tragic consequences.

Looking magnificent, Francesca Annis as Hedda moves through the drama with a controlled intensity, taking careful steps in her own danse macabre. Self-absorbed, she is both aloof and hugely involved as a destructive force determined to shape the destiny of others.

This is a finely tuned, intelligent performance where every movement mirrors the complexity of emotions she feels. This is a Hedda you have to watch.

Peter Bowles as the smarmy Judge Brack provides excellent support. With his familiar to the manor born looks and smile, he manages to make the flesh creep by using his easy, oily charm to sinister effect. He is determined to obtain Hedda for himself.

Another fine performance is Robert Bathurst as Hedda's unfortunate husband Tesman. Good looking, but always dressed for cloudy, he is the boring academic who cosseted by his Aunt Julie (a deliciously observed portrait from Nyree Dawn Porter) is still capable of throwing childish tantrums when frustrated.

Less convincing is Brendan O'Hea as Lovborg, the dissolute writer of genius who fascinates Hedda. Played as a debauched Dylan Thomas figure the actor fails, as yet, to show the qualities of strength or sex appeal that would entrap the likes of Hedda Gabler.

But all in all a stunning production not to be missed. Hedda Gabler is at the Theatre Royal, Plymouth until Saturday November 27.

Leon Winston