

ROYAL COURT

Michael Billington

Saved

EDWARD BOND'S *Saved* returns to the Royal Court in a very fine production by Danny Boyle that brings out more clearly than previous versions the play's savage humour and tenuous optimism. Nineteen years ago, critics and audiences were understandably poleaxed by the notorious scene of baby-stoning violence. But while that remains as stomach-turning as ever, it is by no means exploitative, or Bond's final statement on the human condition.

It is fascinating to see *Saved* in conjunction with *The Pope's Wedding*. In the earlier play, the hero withdraws from a meaningless life and tries to change personalities with an Essex hermit. In *Saved*, Len also cuts himself off from a world of brutish camaraderie and becomes almost parasitically dependent on a mutely vengeful married couple, Harry and Mary, who have 23 hate-filled years to look back on.

The key difference is that the earlier play ends with Scoopie killing the hermit. *Saved* ends with Len painstakingly trying to mend a broken chair. It is virtually the first constructive human gesture one has seen in the whole play and, in the context, it carries enormous emotional weight.

But what Mr Boyle's production brings out, apart from the faint thread of hope, in Bond's bitingly comic vision of lives stunted and warped by the idea of sexual revenge. Harry (beautifully played by Tony Rohr as a slumped misanthrope) endures a poisonous hell in order to leave his wife when she gets her pension: Mary (June Watson, very good in a scene of calculated teasing) treats marriage like a medieval siege that has to be sat out.

By shifting much of the attention to this grotesquely obsessive relationship, Mr Boyle underscores Bond's theme of the reduction of life to a series of petty victories. He also firmly establishes a bedrock of hate that makes Len's final gesture all the more remarkable.

Mr Boyle does not, however, minimise Bond's stark vision of a world in which people are brutalised by an inhuman society. Indeed that vision is all the more chilling because the pram-bashing youths are not a set of palpably murderous yobs, but people you might take for junior salesmen; and Len and his adopted family live out their lives in a pin-bright, cream-walled semi. Bond is dealing with blunted sensibilities rather than straightforward poverty; and that theme is underlined by impeccable performances from Joanne Whalley as Pam, whose beautiful mask-like features are barely dented even by the death of her child, and from Peter-Hugo Daly, whose Len combines a thickest sluggishness with a dim, slowly-dawning apprehension there has to be some alternative to hate.



Adrian Dunbar, Gary Oldman and Gerard Horan: *Royal Court*. Picture by Douglas Jeffery

DINGWALLS

Robin Denselow

Smiley Culture

AT FIRST glance, it may seem that very little has happened in the reggae world this year, apart from the continued success of Jamaican DJs, toasters, and rhythmic talk-over artists like Yellowman and Eek A Mouse. But lurking just outside the best-sellers this week there's a single that gives a hint of a whole new British reggae scene that has flourished over the past year.

The record is called *Police Officer*, it's by a South Londoner called Emmanuel Brown, far better known as Smiley Culture, and although it's made for a small label and has had only a tiny promotion budget, it has probably sold as many copies now as many singles by famous bands that reach the Top Ten. What Smiley, and his colleagues like Asher Senetor have done is take the Jamaican DJ style and apply it to London life, with wonderful effect.

At Dingwalls, Smiley was accompanied just by backing tapes, often distorted, or played at the wrong volume, and over them he declaimed his rhythmic, often break-neck, stream of patter as he strode back and forth across the stage, announcing confidently that "my mind is full of lyrics." What was remarkable was the way he turned a West Indian style into a performance that was as typically London-based as East End music-hall, and managed to be both very funny and very pointed.

Police Officer is about harassment, but with a light, witty approach and

some brilliant changes of accent that re-appeared in his best piece, *Cockney Translation*. This is an extraordinary work, recommended to sociologists and linguists, in which he rapidly translates between black London slang and cockney.

SEDGWICK CENTRE

Desmond Christy

Eastend Theatre

THERE are people who think that the Marx brothers didn't make enough movies and if you are one of them you might enjoy the Eastend Theatre Company's first production at the Sedgwick Centre, Whitechapel. *A Day At The Opera*, *A Night At The Races*, by Mike Schirn has almost everything fans of Groucho, Harpo, and Chico could wish for: the moustache, the wigs, the car horn, the one-liners, the awful puns, the rich dowager, silly foreigners, funny accents, a feeble plot... But it hasn't got the brothers Marx.

Instead we are treated to the imitations of Glyn Morrow (Groucho), Jim Kirby (Chico) and Stephen Coke (Harpo). They are often funny and managed to capture the voices (in Harpo's case the horn, but not the harp), the gestures and the zany spirit of anarchy that takes nothing seriously. Mike Schirn's script — play is not the right word — is also a marvellous imitation of the real thing. Groucho has lots of good awful lines ("Would you like help from somebody who helps old ladies half-way across the road?"), and he doesn't waste them.

Yet when you have stopped admiring the actors for their skill at re-creating the Marx Brothers on stage,

you start wondering why they are doing it at all. Nothing is gained by putting the stars of Paramount on to a stage (surely Groucho would have sent up all the theatrical conventions if he had trod the boards himself) and a good deal is lost. But then again would you take the advice of a critic who persuades people half way to the theatre?

ST JOHN'S

Michael John White

Christ Church Choir

THE quaintly ungrammatical but busy concert series "Music at Oxford" moved to Smith Square, for this semi-seasonal programme by the Christ Church Choir with the Philip Jones Brass Ensemble.

Billed as *A Christmas Tapestry* it wasn't loaded with festivity to the degree that I remember in past Christ Church visits to London at this time of year. Instead we had a discreet compounding of motets by Weekes, Brahms, and a block of Schutz psalm settings — with, as a curiosity centrepiece, a collection of madrigals and rounds by Henry VIII transcribed for brass.

The reworking was by Elgar Howarth whose facility for this kind of adaptation — thinking particularly of pieces like his *Pictures At An Exhibition* arrangement — has understandably turned into standard repertoire. The Henry VIII set is just as endearing and no less skilful in the balancing of quite thick sonorities and the illusion of delicacy Howarth conjures up from solid instrumental scoring.

Philip Jones players were ideal interpreters, their crisp, clean execution given body

by a fulsome response to the St John's acoustic. In that respect at least they had the advantage over the choir whose sound, although not so hard-edged as it used to be under Simon Preston, is still a product of the performing conditions that obtain in Christ Church Cathedral.

Wonderful though, to hear trebles who can handle the high register of Tudor church music so proficiently; and to hear adults respond so directly (but without coyness) to the vocal innocence of the Brahms.

SEVEN DIALS

John Fordham

District 6

THAT raucous, dancing, affirmative style of music that constitutes South African jazz is always a surefire success at the box office if the skill of the musicians is equal to combining the authentically singing instrumental style, contrapuntal warmth and generally inviting confidence that the genre demands. Since the earliest influx of African influence into British contemporary jazz — which arrived with the brilliant South African refugees who came to London in the middle 60s — the stock of the local music scene has benefited immeasurably. District Six has a softer and less compellingly manic style, but nevertheless a highly entertaining example of the same phenomenon.

At the Seven Dials, District Six — a sextet of mixed local and African performers — played the kind of accessible and attractive repertoire that has engendered its present following and made its performance at the Bracknell Festival last summer such a hit.

Harrison Smith, a powerful, gravely tenor player, represented the ~~reed~~ section on