

Theatre

Symbols of southern discomfort

Orpheus Descending

Donmar Warehouse, London

★★★

Anyone who still doubts that Tennessee Williams was a deeply political writer should see *Orpheus Descending*. This is a portrait of the American South as hell, a place beset with racism, bigotry and violence. The pity of it is that Williams's undeniable passion is almost buried under the deafening sound of clashing symbols.

Myths are clearly in the air. We are in a southern dry goods store ruled over by the Sicilian, Lady Torrance. Her husband, Jabe, is a dying relic whom we discover was involved in the burning of her father's wine garden on the grounds that he sold liquor to black customers.

Enter Val Xavier, an itinerant guitar player in a snakeskin jacket who takes a job in the store, offers Lady the southern comfort she has been sorely missing, and excites the anger of the local rednecks who are baying for blood in the bayou.

Nowhere else does Williams offer such a vicious portrait of the American south. Against this he sets his ageing Eurydice, the Orpheus-like visitor who sympathises with the desperate cries of a chain-gang fugitive and a wayward local beauty who laments the loss of "a wild sort of sweetness" in a land that is sick with neon.

As so often with Williams, the free-spirited confront a

world of brute materialism and go down fighting. At its best, in the tender encounters between Lady and Val, the play has a singing poetry. But the exposition is laborious in the extreme and the symbolism becomes top heavy. Val turns into a mixture of Orpheus and Christ. And both the burned-down wine garden and Lady's planned confectionery are repeatedly used to evoke a world of Dionysiac ecstasy.

Written in 1957, and based on an earlier work, the play offers a curious mix of Williams at his best and worst.

But Nicholas Hytner's coolly intelligent production is worth seeing for the acting alone. Helen Mirren's Lady Torrance is an exemplary study of an immigrant woman who has acquired a patina of resilient toughness but who slowly acknowledges her sensuality: she catches perfectly the contradictory emotions of one who is wary of the stranger but who longs for his healing touch.

Stuart Townsend, lean, hollow-cheeked and capable of a poised stillness, is no less compelling and avoids all the clichés of the drifting Don Juan. Saskia Reeves as the fragile, isolated local temptress, Richard Durden as Lady's death stricken husband, and William Hootkins as the burly, vindictive sheriff add to the sense that we are encountering a genuine community.

Some productions swathe the play in atmosphere. But Hytner has uncovered it and revealed a work that, for all its imperfections, is filled with Williams's fervent hatred of all forms of oppression.

Michael Billington
Until August 19. Box office: 020-7369 1732.



Helen Mirren and Stuart Townsend in *Orpheus Descending* at the Donmar Warehouse, London Photograph: Henrietta Butler

Pop

Gripped by a storyteller

Richard Thompson

Fairfield Halls, Croydon

★★★★

According to Richard Thompson, he loves having Sandy Dillon on tour with him because she "makes me sound cheerful". Dillon is strange, to say the least. With her straight dark hair, pharaoh make-up and thin, elongated body, she looks as if she haunts grave-

yards at the witching hour, looking for buried inspiration. Her songs are dark and heavy, not least *Too Rough*, a cacophony of random noise and ironic rock'n'roll postures. When she sings, her voice swoops unnervingly between Betty Boop and John Lee Hooker.

Despite his veteran status, Richard Thompson can still surprise and unsettle too. Armed only with his acoustic guitar, with a fetishistic Vincent Black Lightning motorcycle parked onstage beside him for dramatic effect, he ripped through a potent selection from his bottomless back catalogue.

Dressed in a baggy dark suit and black beret, Thompson bantered matily with the audience, mocking his own meagre record sales and joking facetiously about his lack of superstar status. But when he sings, a deeper, stranger Thompson emerges. His guitar playing is deft and decisive, whether he's piling on the powerchord-strum of *Feel So Good* or fingerpicking his way with bleak precision through *Cold Kisses*. Where his speaking voice is diffident and throwaway, he sings with a stridency and power which make you wonder why he ever felt he needed

a backing band. In *I Misunderstood*, he managed to sound both wounded and vengeful; in *Shoot Out the Lights*, the force of his performance made him seem two feet taller.

He has always stuck fast to his roots in classic folk music, and he has become a gripping storyteller. He apologised for adding new biker-friendly verses to his Vincent Black Lightning saga, a classic tale of love, death and loyalty. In *God Loves a Drunk*, a dirge in 3/4 time, he shone a redemptive light on the squalid details of his tale. And if that's not enough, Thompson is the

Orpheus Billington Guardian

Clipped By:
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29 Nov 2025