

Fame game manipulated by Stephenson ● Scottish Opera's Butterfly in full flight ● S

Theatre

Ancient Lights

Hampstead Theatre, London

★★★★☆

Shelagh Stephenson's new play is a frontal attack on what Robert Hughes has called "the psychotic cult of celebrity". Fostered in America, it has now become an organised religion in Britain. And, even if Stephenson's social comedy is a shade too schematic, it reminds us that the empty bubble of fame offers no protection against the grim reality of death.

Stephenson's setting is a Northumbrian house where Tom, a visiting Hollywood star, is re-united over Christmas with two old college friends. One of them, Bea, is now a PR wheeler-dealer living with a media-shy Irish novelist; the other, Kitty, is a guilt-ridden TV presenter who has been relegated from hard news to voyeuristic programmes about accidents. A fraught Yule get-together is completed by Tom's companion, Iona, who is making a cine verite documentary about his life and Bea's daughter, Joni, who lusts after recognition.

You can almost hear Stephenson mentally ticking off her themes one by one. Her key idea is the insane delusion that fame validates our existence. But she also attacks the voracious media appetite for celebrity, the hucksterish promotion of literature through personality and the modern need to invent a public self. Like Milton in *Lycidas* she also reminds us that, while fame may be the spur, in the end blind Fury comes "and slits the thin-spun life".

All the lives in Stephenson's play are thin spun. But, while I agree with everything she has to say, I feel she manipulates her characters to suit her argument. There is a scene, for instance, where the Celtic novelist reveals to his lover that his whole persona is a fake: it raises interesting questions about literary authenticity but there seems no inherent necessity for the confessional urge.

But, as in *The Memory of Water*, Stephenson reveals a compensatory gift for comedy. Even when you know you are being got at, she constantly makes you laugh. I particularly liked the paralysing inhibition that overcomes the Christmas party once everyone knows they are being scrutinised by the camcorder. And the Richard Nelson style sense of cultural misunderstanding is neatly caught when the visiting star gazes round the wintry house and solemnly announces: "It's great being in the place where Christmas actually began."

Ian Brown's production faithfully captures the accumulating tensions of the festive season and boasts the usual socially accurate Hampstead performances. Dermot Crowley is all hangdog melancholy as the fictional Irishman,



I want to be like you ... Don McManus (Tom) and Sheridan Smith (Joni) in *Ancient Lights*, at Hampstead Theatre Photograph: Tristram Kenton

Joanne Pearce has the right nervy bounce as his PR lover and, in relatively small roles, Sheridan Smith shines as the self-promoting daughter clearly destined for breakfast television and Ruth Gemmell subtly reveals the way the hand-held camera acts as a shield against social engagement. Whatever its flaws, it is a timely moral comedy that reminds us of the sickness of a society where celebrity bestows on the elect a brief, unhappy sanctity.

Michael Billington
Until January 4. Box office: 020-7722 9301

Opera

Madama Butterfly

Theatre Royal, Glasgow
★★★★☆

Productions of *Madama Butterfly* should be built to last. A core repertory piece such as this can expect frequent revivals, so what any opera company needs is a staging that doesn't date too fast and doesn't make elaborate technical demands. That is precisely what David

McVicar has provided for Scottish Opera. In taking a straightforward approach, however, McVicar has not stinted on specifics, nor on the careful delineation of every emotional current running through the work; the power that is remorselessly built up through the second half testifies to that.

Yannis Kavakis provides the designs — *Butterfly*'s house, all sliding translucent panels, is seen from the outside in the first act, and from within in the second; and extra touches of japonaiserie are kept to a minimum — and everything is lit with unfailing elegance by Paule Constable.

It is in the detail, though, that the production exerts its real fascination. Every performance is finely grained, each gesture is made to count. As portrayed by Ian Storey, this Lieutenant Pinkerton — bourbon-swilling, physically dominating and aggressive enough actually to push *Butterfly*'s uncle, the Bonze, away from the house when he renounces her — is not just unthinkingly impulsive and finally callous, but also cruelly cynical. Before his marriage to *Butterfly* he not only tells Sharpless (Jason

Howard) that he will eventually take an American wife, but also shows him a picture, presumably of the woman he is already committed to. And when *Butterfly*'s family gather for the wedding, half of them arrive in western clothes, indicating that she is not the first among them to become embroiled with American culture.

The emotional ratchet is given further turns in the second act. Natalia Dercho's tiny, fragile *Butterfly* waits for Pinkerton's return in Miss Havisham style, wearing the dress he gave her on their wedding day. And as she drives out Goro the marriage broker, her son, astonishingly well played by Sam Aschavir, also attacks him — with his teddy bear. Goro himself (Peter Van Hulle) takes on a more usually sinister dimension; he even reappears with Pinkerton and his new American wife in the final scene, looking for yet another financial cut of the action.

Musically, it is just as enthralling. Guido Ajmone-Marsan's conducting is robust, never over-sweet; an occasional rough patch apart, the orchestral playing is fervent. Both Dercho and Storey are

first rate — she with seemingly boundless reserves of compelling, well-focused tone, he matching his burly physicality with singing of equal forcefulness — while Jane Irwin's Suzuki is beautifully modulated. All hard to fault.

Andrew Clements

At the Theatre Royal, Glasgow (0141-332 9000) until December 30; at the Edinburgh Festival Theatre (0131-529 6000) on December 12, 14 and 16.

Jazz

Nelson Rangell

Pizza Express Jazz Club, London

★★★★☆

Jazz-funk sax playing can have an aspect of sound and fury signifying sweet FA. Since the groove is everything in that idiom, horn players often reduce their contribution to punching home the accents. And there's a widely-shared repertoire of low-note honks, squalling high dissonances and an automatic-fire of staccato repeated notes to make sure nobody misses it. Nelson Rangell, the Denver-

born multi-instrumentalist, sails close to these treacherous waters but is saved by a superb technique that gives every sound an extra resonance and grace. He has a broad, soulful tone on both alto and tenor (the sensuous sound of David Sanborn and Ronnie Laws are audible in Rangell's playing), and a luxuriously rounded sound on flute, with none of the flimsiness the instrument often exhibits in jazz settings.

For his London stopover, Rangell had regular accompanists Phil Mulford (bass guitar) and Chris Dagley (drums), with local pianist Steve Hamilton fitting in seamlessly. He delivered a roaring alto solo over a fast groove on *Far Away Days*, from his new CD, to kick off, following with a grittily tender tenor-sax soliloquy on a piece with strong echoes of Ronnie Laws's *Always There*. Over a Latin-tinged and melodically-devious Chuck Loeb tune called *Starstream*, Rangell then displayed the rich tone and affecting delicate quiver he adopts on flute, and got into a vigorously riffing conversation with Dagley's drums on its finale.

I Will, I Do began with a poetic slow electric bass over-