

It's the end of the world at the Royal Court ●Thunderbirds are go... again ●Girl power

Theatre

Far Away

Royal Court, London

★★★★☆

A new Caryl Churchill play is an event. So too is a production by Stephen Daldry. Put them together and you are bound to get something remarkable. But, although this 50-minute play about a descent into the dark ages shocks and surprises, it moves from real to surreal in ways I found less than convincing.

The first scene, however, is a model of dramatic writing: one in which Churchill ratchets up the tension line by line. We are in the countryside: to judge by Ian MacNeill's front-cloth, with its soft undulations, one assumes it to be England. But it is night and a young girl, Joan, is questioning an aunt with whom she is staying. Joan, it seems, has heard a shriek. The aunt tries to provide explanations. She says the cry came from an owl only for Joan to retort: "It was more like a person screaming." Gradually, we realise that the child has witnessed an act of horror involving lorries, blood, the battering of children.

Imagine The Secret Garden rewritten by Pinter and you get some idea of the power of this first scene. It has much to do with the young girl's remorseless interrogation; also with the fear that children, as well as being victims of violence, are corrupted by implication in it. Annabelle Seymour-Julen's remarkably level gaze as Joan, Linda Bassett's stonewalling defensiveness as the aunt and Daldry's use of something as simple as a light switched off and on add to the sense of unease.

Thereafter the tension falls slightly. We watch the older Joan and a male colleague making hats in a tyrannised factory: not, we discover for a fashion show but for a grisly parade. And we end up with a vision of a planet consumed by conflict in which not merely every country is enlisted but also every species of animal. It is apocalyptic and unnerving but the journey from the reality of the first scene to the cosmic chaos of the last is too swift to be dramatically convincing: it reminds me, if anything, of Sarah Kane's *Blasted* which I know Churchill admired but which strikes me as a questionable prototype.

Churchill's best effects are achieved through the sudden injection of shock words which set off seismic disturbances. Daldry's production and McNeill's design also typically achieve epic effects in a tiny space: not least when a small army of manacled prisoners is paraded across the stage. In the hat-making scene, Katherine Tozer as the older Joan and Kevin McKidd as her partner marvellously counterpoint growing emotion with the physical action of stretching and pressing milliners' cloth.

The evening continues astoundingly. But, while I am prepared to accept Churchill's



Hats for a hellish parade ... Katherine Tozer and Kevin McKidd in *Far Away* at the Royal Court Photograph: Donald Cooper

thesis that we are sliding into barbarism, I would prefer the case to be argued rather than presented as a dramatic given.

Michael Billington

Until December 22. Box office: 020-7565 5000.

Theatre

Thunderbirds FAB

Playhouse, London

★★★★☆

After a nail-biting delay of the kind that International Rescue would surely never countenance, and just when it looked as if the mission might be aborted, Andrew Dawson and Gavin Robertson flew into the West End in another daring attempt to cash in on the current *Thunderbirds* revival.

The duo's show began almost 20 years as a small-scale Scottish tour of obscure arts centres but quickly became a cult hit, and it has been in and out of the West End since 1989. This revival offers the opportunity to watch at least three generations of small boys, both on the stage and in the audience, enjoying themselves while wearing silly hats.

The evening begins with *Space Panorama*, a tabletop recreation of the 1969 lunar landing. Robertson provides a commentary that is an enter-

taining mix of the portentous and the ironic, while Dawson's hands play all the characters as well as rockets, clouds, moon and so on. Dawson's hands would pass an audition for Rada without the rest of him attached, and part of the pleasure of this piece is watching his inventiveness and technical brilliance.

Yet the 25-minute piece, more rewarding when seen in an intimate setting, is clearly only a filler to extend the evening to a standard West End length and allow for a profitable interval that lasts longer than the first half of the performance. Then it is down to the main event. Except that it never feels like a main event. *Thunderbirds FAB* is an affectionate, good-natured show with really funny moments, but it seems like the sort of thing you'd have caught in an arts centre 20 years ago. That's even allowing for Graham Johnston's nifty, low-key design and Jon Linstrum's clever lighting, which give the show a bit of a gloss.

Otherwise this is basically a comedy of recognition and nostalgia that gets its laughs from Dawson's ability to recreate a marionette walk and the immobile features of Gerry Anderson's original creations, what with Lady Penelope as a guy in drag and Captain Scarlet a drag in red.

It is all enjoyable enough,

but who it is really for? The humour is surely too unsophisticated and the send-up too underplayed to really appeal to adults, while the five-year-old fans of the current TV reruns seem to take it deadly seriously and haven't heard of irony. If your hopes of getting Tracy Island for Christmas are doomed, a ticket to this is unlikely to bring solace.

Lyn Gardner

Booking to January 21. Box office: 020 7316 4747.

Classical

Munich Philharmonic/Levine

Barbican Hall, London

★★★★☆

James Levine took over as music director of the Munich Philharmonic at the beginning of the 1999-2000 season. It was a surprising career move by a conductor who, as artistic director of the Metropolitan Opera in New York, already occupied one of the most powerful positions in the musical world, for the Munich Philharmonic would never feature in a list of Europe's leading orchestras. Their appearance together at the Barbican confirmed their status as more of a promotion

contender from the Nationwide First Division than a Premier League band in their own right.

Whether Levine will be able to give the orchestra the time needed to ensure that promotion remains to be seen. At present there are some fine features to their playing – especially the characterful wind, very central European in its sound, and the tonal depth of the strings in sustained passages – but also some worrying insecurities, which were revealed in Berg's *Three Orchestral Pieces* more than the Mozart and Tchaikovsky symphonies that flanked them in the programme.

Levine's Mozart, though, is not to everyone's taste. Using an orchestra with five double basses and 14 first violins, this was a brazenly conservative account of the *E Flat Symphony* No 39, the kind of interpretative anachronism one thought had collapsed under the weight of its own absurdity years ago. Themes in the first movement were presented with Brahmsian monumentality, the Andante was full of slithering, over-manicured phrasing, the rhythms of the finale galumphed where they should have danced. All perfectly horrid, but at least the concert could only improve from that deeply unpromising start.

It did to a certain extent in

the Berg, for Levine inhabits that expressionist world very securely. But the lines were never teased out with the clarity they need, and uncertainties in some of the playing, especially in the final March, took the edge off an internal drama that really should grab the audience by the throat. Only in Tchaikovsky's *Pathétique Symphony* did the Munich Philharmonic really begin to show their true worth. The sound was often magnificent – rich and gleaming, the woodwind and brass contributions incisive – but there was still something rather stolid about it all: rhythms that remained earthbound, phrases that were sculpted when they should have been sung; not inventive, inspirational music-making at all.

Andrew Clements

Pop

Le Tigre

Garage, London

★★★★☆

The room is packed with teen girls and young women, all squealing and seething with sexual desire. The object of their giddy affections isn't a ditzzy male heart-throb such as Craig David or Robbie Williams, however, but a sharp, opinionated, fervent punk activist called Kathleen Hanna. In the early 1990s,