

Tricksy Hamlet saved by a thrilling prince

Picture: ALASTAIR MUIR

CERTAIN Shakespeare plays are like London buses. You wait for months for one to turn up, then along come five at once.

This season we have already seen Mark Rylance's neurotic, night-shirted Dane at the Globe, and Angela Winkler offering a female version of the part in Edinburgh. Richard McCabe is soon to open as Hamlet in Birmingham, while Adrian Lester is working on the role with Peter Brook in Paris.

Simon Russell Beale's performance at the National's Lyttelton Theatre, though, is certainly the longest — and, for my money, the most eagerly — awaited of them all.

Sam Mendes first suggested directing Beale as Hamlet 10 years ago when they did *Richard III* together. Unfortunately the pair, without doubt two of the most original theatrical talents in Britain, never found an opportunity for *Hamlet*, and with Mendes's career taking off in Hollywood, Beale has evidently decided that at 40 he had better get a move on.

Watching John Caird's production at the National, I have to confess that there were moments when I heartily wished that Mendes were at the helm.

When Beale is on stage one is utterly transfixed. This engagingly stout but mesmeric actor may look an unusual sweet prince — though he is one who can deliver "O! that this too too solid flesh would melt" with rare authority — but he goes right to the heart of the role. There is an intelligence, humanity, humour and depth of feeling in this performance

Theatre

Hamlet
NATIONAL THEATRE

that I have never seen bettered.

During the great soliloquies you can follow every twist and turn of Hamlet's agile mind, and it is a thrilling experience. Even "To be, or not to be" seems freshly minted in its combination of hard thought and deep feeling.

Sadly, Caird has come up with a reductive and irritatingly tricksy production of the play that entirely cuts the political element involving Fortinbras and the war with Norway.

He turns *Hamlet* instead into a drama about a family in trauma, which would be fair enough if the production itself were continually compelling. But whenever Beale is off-stage, most of the pressure seems to go out of the performance.

Caird also never lets you forget that you are watching a play. The cast make a mass entrance, more like a company of actors arriving for a performance than a royal court, and the stage is covered throughout with chests and trunks that are constantly and tiresomely being rearranged as improvised scenery.

Ornate lamps filled with candles are distractingly raised and lowered, and quite what is going on in the deeply confusing final moments, when the dead seem to reawaken and Hamlet is reunited with his real father, I have no idea.

I have a horrible feeling that Caird, whose approach



to the play veers on the sentimental, might be suggesting that everything is all right really because everyone goes to heaven in the end. He certainly stresses

the play's Christian imagery throughout, and a great white cross appears at the back of the stage in the final moments. But, as so often when a director has "bright"

ideas, the effect is actually to muddle the text rather than illuminate it.

There is no doubt, though, that Beale redeems the evening. There have been madder Hamlets than

Beale's, and darker, wilder ones too, but what this superb actor constantly and movingly captures is the Prince's warmth and emotional neediness. The play becomes a sharply observed study of depression, bereavement and sexual confusion, and the scenes with his mother, powerfully played by a wired and neurotic Sara Kestelman, and Ophelia, played as a touchingly loyal

and ordinary girl-next-door type by Cathryn Bradshaw, combine power with rare intimacy. There is also a beautiful sense of hard-won calm in this Hamlet's final acceptance of death.

Peter McNery captures the guilt, if not the menace, of Claudius, and Denis Quilley is a wonderfully funny and unusually affectionate Polonius. It's just a shame that the play seems to have been diminished rather than liberated by its director.

Tickets: 020 7452 3000. This review appeared in some editions yesterday

Charles Spencer

Funny bone: Denis Quilley, left, as Polonius, and Simon Russell Beale as Hamlet in John Caird's production at the National Theatre

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