

## ARTS



'Amazing Grace': Romola Garai is excellent as feisty redhead Barbara Spooner, but Ioan Gruffudd's William Wilberforce is overly sensitive and hopeless

## A tale of goodies and baddies



Amazing Grace  
PO CERT, 118 MINS

The Slave Trade Act received royal assent on March 25, 1807, 200 years ago almost to the day. It is odd to think how recent this was—the trade in humans was rife just as Jane Austen was writing her civilised stories, and Coleridge and Wordsworth their delicate lines. And this was only the abolition of the trade—slaves were not emancipated across the Empire until 1833, and the Americans carried on owning people right until the 1860s.

It is also odd to think that the transatlantic slave trade was really the perverse revival of an ancient practice. Slavery was a standard feature of all the ancient civilisations—Egyptian, Greek, Roman, Ottoman—but it fizzled out with the arrival of Christianity. Between 500 AD and 1500 buying and selling people wasn't really the done thing. Only with the exploration of Africa and the West Indies, and the growing economic importance of the sugar plantations, did Europeans start

enthusiastically capturing people once again.

So it is absolutely right to remember this anniversary, and the campaign of William Wilberforce and his fellow-abolitionists should be perfect movie material. *Amazing Grace*, however, Michael Apted's biography of Wilberforce, is enjoyable but never profound. For a subject with such clear-cut goodies and baddies, muddying the waters would have been a better strategy for a sophisticated treatment than exaggerating the distinction. As it is, the ending party of the Wilberforce gang gives the whole project a whiff of the BBC's *Children's Hour*.

The script centres on the devout, eccentric religiosity of William Wilberforce and the so-called "Clapham set". Right from the opening scene, when a young Wilber responds to an offer to gamble for a "nigger" by inexplicably singing "Amazing Grace" atop a bridge table at Brooks's, it is clear that he has a naive sincerity.

There is no doubt that Wilberforce and his cause had a somewhat wacky reputation, but the film takes this reputation too far. His friendship with William Pitt the Younger is cheery beyond belief, and was apparently formed by running around gardens together as full-grown men, laughing and embracing; his light theological discussions with his wise servant, "Have you found God, Sir?" "Unfortunately, he has found me" seem like something out of a Roman comedy, and the decision to use a late romance with feisty redhead Barbara Spooner (an

excellent, intriguing Romola Garai) as a vehicle to relay the second half of the story via flashback further sets the hero in a comic, domestic role.

Nor does Ioan Gruffudd, I'm afraid, quite carry off his role as Wilberforce. He was clearly led by the naivety of the script, but he remains so sensitive and hopeless, so wide-eyed and boyish that we never get an impression either of his famed skill as an orator (Gruffudd's noisy speeches have the feeling of throwing toys out of the pram) or of the reasons why he chose to dedicate his

*His friendship with Pitt the Younger was formed by running around gardens, laughing and embracing*

life to the anti-slavery cause. Even his addiction to opium becomes the sweet foible of a saint, as we catch him talking in the logs he is cutting on the ground: "Africa—smash—your sufferings have been a theme—smash—that has entrapped my heart," and so on. Gruffudd's weakness is further shown up by the outstanding performances around him, from Benedict Cumberbatch as Pitt the Younger to Michael Gambon as Lord Charles Fox and Albert Finney as the evangelical preacher John Newton.

The message that is best handled is the idea of a call to action. The abolitionists' campaign in the 1780s and

1790s is sometimes considered the first grassroots campaign in British political history. Thomas Clarkson, brilliantly portrayed by Rufus Sewell as a somewhat goopy Quaker, travelled around the country collecting signatures and organising rallies; Wedgewood made porcelain anti-slave trade buttons made for ladies' lapels; people started buying "non-slave" sugar products.

The campaign presents the evangelical Wilberforce with a personal choice between religious and political devotion. He chooses to take the advice of his Clapham set friends: "We hear you are having trouble deciding whether to do the work of God or that of a political activist—we humbly suggest you can do both." The audience is left with an abiding sense of the importance of virtuous men taking up worldly roles.

But this respectable, occasionally childish film could have been a lot better. Instead of enhancing the hero's virtue it would have been more interesting to see the contrariness of the man. As well as founding the RSPCA, William Wilberforce was archly conservative: he opposed the idea of boycotting slave-made sugar as too rebellious; he formed the Society against Vice and Immorality, which at one point succeeded in sending a book-seller to jail who had published Paine's *The Age of Reason*; and he wrote of "the submissive, obedient demeanor which certainly should distinguish the wife towards her husband". He was a strange mix of contradictions, and this movie would have been better served by admitting it.

## Pushing Prospero to the edge of madness



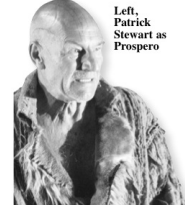
The Tempest  
NOVELLO THEATRE, LONDON

A decade or so ago, if you wanted to see Patrick Stewart onstage in London you would have had to buy tickets to a Star Trek convention. But the former Captain Picard now has a more traditional enterprise: leading the RSC's London season. And as Prospero in Rupert Goold's frost-bitten and imaginative *Tempest*, he boldly goes into unfamiliar territory.

*The Tempest* opens with a shipwreck but Goold begins it with the shipping forecast, re-locating Prospero's island to the Arctic Circle. It's a nice shift: the 20th-century polar expedition combines romance and savagery, just as the Mediterranean voyage did for Shakespeare's audience.

The staging also provides spectacular support for Goold's interpretation of the play. Productions can be wrecked on the paradox of Prospero: the marooned ex-Duke speaks Shakespeare's sublime farewell to art, but spends most of his stage time bullying his magical servants, browbeating his daughter and ranting about his enemies. Goold's scenery paints a truly atmospheric picture of his potential madness: a swirling white blizzard is projected on to a moving black curtain between the scenes, suggesting snowflakes, stars, water, flames or onscreen static—elemental forces which Prospero visibly struggles to command.

Stewart gives a detailed portrayal of a man who hears the call of the wild too loudly after 15 years' rearing his daughter without human assistance. When we first see him the look of a storm to shipwreck the enemies who left Prospero and his daughter for dead he faces offstage. He wears a shaman's bear pelt—



Left, Patrick Stewart as Prospero

eight feet tall with outspread arms, its dead eyes glare out of the back of his head. He is posed like a totem and retains the qualities of a beast: even after he throws off his "magic robe" his movements are sudden and cunning, and when he bares his teeth in rage or flicks out his tongue to taste the air, his face freezes momentarily like an animal mask.

Father and daughter each have the look of people who are rarely looked at. Miranda (Mariah Gale) clumps obediently round their cabin in boots and duffle coat, like an imit Little Red Riding Hood. She's totally unselfconscious and also half wild: her actions have the trustful simplicity of a young animal who has never learned to fear humans. Whenever her father clicks his fingers she collapses into sleep, becoming disturbingly doll-like in his power. But this is a production where everybody—Ariel, John Bright's disappointingly brutish Caliban, the miserable and treacherous conspirators, even Prospero himself—are dangerously within the grip of Prospero's mind. Goold makes his point with hallucinogenic menace: just after Prospero blesses the union of his daughter and shipwrecked Prince Ferdinand, and tells them (in the play's most quoted lines) "we are such stuff as dreams are made on", there is an unscripted invasion of the stage and Prospero's fears (in the form of all the other actors) pour into his cabin, as swift and violent as paranoid thoughts.

Goold emphasises Prospero's distance from civilisation by making the shipwrecked desperado a motley crew of jaded sophisticates. Prospero's serene enemies (his usurping brother Antonio, and Ferdinand's murderous uncle) are classy villains: they attractively sustain their jazz-age insouciance against the cold and the unmaking of their villainy.

However, the keynote of this production is Julian Bleach's Ariel, who appears to have been dragged full fathom five out of the play's wild too loudly after 15 years' rearing his daughter without human assistance. When we first see him the look of a storm to shipwreck the enemies who left Prospero and his daughter for dead he faces offstage. He wears a shaman's bear pelt—

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## Making Billie Piper cry

**THEATRE REVIEW**  
**Treats**  
GARRICK THEATRE, LONDON

*Treats* is a so-so 30-year-old play by Christopher Hampton, apparently chosen by three very attractive and talented young actors as a calling card for West End producers. Ann (Billie Piper) is living with ineffectual but reliable Patrick (Laurence Fox) when her old boyfriend, the volatile journalist Dave (Kris Marshall), breaks through the window of their flat (off-stage) and, walking into the sitting room while Patrick is listening to Bruckner, punches him on the nose.

Thereafter, we should be interested in which of the two men Ann will choose, for the play is about the formal language that lovers use to mask their true emotions, both negative and positive, and the hesitancy experienced when forced to say what one truly feels. After the violence of the opening scene, Ann seems irritated and impatient rather than shocked, and stands apart from the two men. Equally passive, Patrick is the very essence of non-violence, while the mercenary Dave exudes aggression and soon delivers the first of many cutting one-liners. But within a short time they are all sitting on the corner of the

settee discussing the rationale of Dave's actions, like chatters in a Primrose Hill maisonette.

Director Laurence Boswell keeps everyone significantly apart, but the result creates an indifference to the characters' fate that only intensifies as the evening progresses. A strong sense of impatience comes from a play that never shows its author's hand, especially with a director who wants to keep the actors' motives enigmatic. Even when the second act of violence occurs, we can fathom little about its impact, apart from that it makes Billie Piper cry. It could leave the audience very cold, this sort of thing. Long before Ann makes up her mind I had passed caring. Instead, I enjoyed the actors' company and speculated on what roles producers would choose for them in the future.

What makes *Treats* worth the price of a £45 stalls ticket is the star quality of the players. Even within the play's wordy flim-flam Piper, Marshall and Fox do very well indeed. Piper is believable as the young woman who needs only the right impulse to decide with whom she wishes to live. It is not very important, in the presence of such a good performance, that I did not understand, or care enough, about the impulse itself. She looks as if she knows her way around, and although her role seems to make her

self-conscious at times, she is a clever actor and as sharp as a pin, with considerable stage presence.

Laurence Fox is touching Patrick. He makes the very best of at least two bits of stage business: beautifully timed control as uncertainty as the flat, and a marvellously sensitive moment with a keying that makes him seem adorable and Ann heartless. They reveal what a fine actor he is already, and the imagination of any producer should be working overtime. Kris Marshall as Dave has so many of the clever lines that there is a danger he could unbalance the evening. However, Marshall knows how to control his comedy, and his ambiguous presence livens up the action without hogging the spotlight. He tends to be declamatory, and is hyperactive too frequently, but his scenes with Billie Piper are a convincing mixture of suppressed passion, weariness and aggression. This works well in the immediate context of their scenes together, if not in the wider framework of the play where the lack of resolve is irritating until it gives way to melodrama. We will see greater things from these three actors when producers have the confidence, encouraged by these fine performances, to cast Piper, Fox and Marshall in something more substantial and less cautious.

**Peter Shaw**



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