ARTS

Arts Editor: Mark Greaves
Tel: 020 7448 3603
Fax: 020 7256 9728
E-mail: mark@catholicherald.co.uk

Rosalind (Bryce Dallas Howard) and Orlando (David Oyelowo) in Kenneth Branagh's Japanese-flavoured 'As You Like It'. There is sumo wrestling and ninjas

Sumo can't ruin Shakespeare

FILM REVIEW
Freddie Sayers

As You Like It

12A CERT, 127 MINS

Yes, Kenneth Branagh has done another one. You have got to admire the way he has managed to carve out a special niche for himself – not as a great director exactly, but as one who is permitted quietly to work his way through the Shakespeare canon. He's had moments of genius (*Henry V*, 1989) and moments of disaster (the musical *Love's Labour's Lost*, 2000); he never makes anyone much money but always seems to be given a budget, however low.

Up this time is *As You Like It*. Apparently, ever since he first visited Japan 15 years ago Branagh thought it would make a good setting for this unfashionable comedy – now, finally, he's done it. The court of Duke Frederick becomes the Japanese "court" of a 19th-century English businessman; the Forest of Ardenne, to which he has banished his brother Duke Senior, is the Japanese forest nearby. It is a racial smorgasbord – Oliver and Orlando are black, Rosalind and Celia are white and a smattering of the wood nymphs are Japanese.

The conceit is far from perfect. *As You Like It* is a comedy, and quite a wacky one, but you still need to be invested in the dangers and drama – the Japanese setting adds an extra layer of silliness that occasionally obscures these altogether. First, the overthrow of Duke Senior's court by his brother Frederick – totally understandable in the context of medieval power play – becomes a Quentin Tarantino-style martial arts attack, but on a budget: fewer black-clad ninjas, less cool fighting, and more than a bit of absurdity.

Worse, the wrestling match in which young Orlando takes on the mighty court wrestler becomes a sumo match. This is a sport which, even if I understood it, I am sure I would still find ridiculous, and poor Orlando (David Oyelowo) has to wear an altitudinously wedged nappy while fighting "the sinewy Charles" who, as an authentic sumo, is about as sinewy as a blancmange.

As for the Japanese woods element, the idea is excellent; there is something otherworldly and magical about all of Shakespeare's forests, and to have the wild colours and fruits of an exotic garden would have been fantastic.

Unfortunately, the budget didn't allow for Japan, so the forest location is Wakehurst Place in Sussex, and the result, visually, is distinctly drab: it looks like an English forest in the autumn, because it is an English forest in the autumn. With all the emphasis on court versus the country in this play, shouldn't the Japanese comparison have been Tokyo versus Kyoto? More *Memoirs of a Geisha*, less *Countryfile*?

This lack of a sumptuous backdrop has the effect of dragging down some of the performances. Kevin Kline, the only Hollywood name, fails to make an impact as Jaques the sad philosopher, partly because he just looks like everyone's dad walking around the forest and grumbling. "All the world's a stage", his famous speech, is a real

A magical Japanese forest would have been perfect, but the budget only allowed for Sussex

let down, filmed in one shot while his face is obscured by leafless branches. Brian Blessed, usually such a larger than life personality, as both Duke Senior and the evil Duke Frederick, is deflated by having to perch awkwardly on tree stumps. The whole thing needed more money spent on it.

The saving grace comes from the girls. Romola Garai as Celia strikes just the right note of slight over-the-top-ness, and Bryce Dallas Howard as Rosalind dominates and rescues the movie – fresh, pretty, confident in herself, she gives a definitive, absorbing performance. The scenes with the two girls are as vivid and girly and convincing as if they were written today, and that is a credit to them.

Their love interests, Orlando and his wicked brother Oliver, were rather less convincing. More than occasionally the olfactory sense was assaulted by whiffs of what T S Eliot calls the "Shakespeherian" – the earnest, grand thespian mode that actors keep up their sleeve for their big soliloquy.

But say what you like, it is impossible to keep Shakespeare under wraps. Despite all its weaknesses, there are moments in this film when the sheer brilliance of the lines sent shivers down my spine. For example, the quiet sadness when Old Adam (Richard Briers), family servant of Orlando, embarks on an adventure he has little hope of surviving: "At 17 many their fortunes seek / But at four-score it is too late a week." Or the incredibly soft defusing of Orlando's panic and anger by the Duke when Orlando bursts into their meal: "What would you have? Your gentleness shall force / More than your force move us to gentleness."

And then there are the insights, sometimes harsh, such as when Rosalind advises the shepherdess Phoebe to give in to Sylvius's affections ("Sell when you can, you are not for all markets"), or the other times which are absolutely, politically incorrectly, spot on – "Do you not know, I am a woman," cries Rosalind to Celia, "when I think I must speak!" This is what tips the balance. This is why Branagh must be allowed to go on trotting through the canon. This is what makes it all worthwhile.

Who left Rolf Harris in charge of the ears?

ART REVIEW
Igor Toronyi

The First Emperor

BRITISH MUSEUM, UNTIL APRIL 6

There was something more than a little creepy about this much-hyped exhibition. It was not the terracotta army itself, the small visiting sortie of 20 unbroken figures, two broken torsos and two severed heads, nor their moody display in the British Library Reading Room that was the source of my unease. That lay with a far shorter, stouter, female figurine, who was, informally, fielding questions from journalists in the foyer.

Dame Jessica Rawson is a Sinologist, Oxford's Professor of Chinese Art and Archaeology and the intellectual mastermind behind the exhibition. You'd expect her to like China. She does.

The problem is she doesn't just like China, she doesn't just admire its culture and respect its history; she believes in its superiority to the point of self-parody. Like the deluded patriotism of the Indian grandmother in the sketch show *Goodness Gracious Me*, she really does think the Chinese are responsible for Western civilisation. As a result, we were given some tall tales.

First we were informed that the Chinese had industrialised us. Then we were told that the First Emperor, Ying Zheng (259-210 BC), was the greatest administrator and general in history. And that his Qin Empire was more important than both the Greek and Roman empires combined.

She was quite certain of this even though she admitted we knew diddly-squat about Ying Zheng's life and little more about his über-empire.

How could a Pro-Vice Chancellor of Oxford get away with such guff? No one would be allowed to be so boastful and rose-tinted about Western empires – a caveat would always be supplied.

At this exhibition there was no caveat. No mention of the First Emperor's brutality; no mention of his alleged book-burning; no mention of his empire's spectacular break-up soon after his death.

The blurb told us that this exhibition was about understanding China's present and future through its past. The First Emperor's alleged tyranny, repression and cultural desecration obviously did not fit into Professor Dame Rawson's halcyon picture of the present regime. We were to be taught a very different lesson about China. A positive lesson about the First Emperor's "great achievements and vision". His terracotta world in Xi'an – an attempt to fashion an eternal empire underground, using slave-labour and prisoners, one with mercury-filled rivers, starry ceilings, a replica imperial palace, terracotta courtiers, bureaucrats, horses, chariots and an army of 7,000 terracotta men – was to be marvelled at.

And I would have done the marvelling if there had been something there truly to marvel at. But there wasn't. The quality of these sculptures was simply OK. Nothing more, nothing less.

The detail on each soldier's face was not, as some have said, "incredible"; the individual attention to each sculpture not that amazing. These pieces are neat and simple and, if you were going to be generous, you might mention that the armour was rather accomplished.

The manner of construction – each part of the body and accoutrements were made independently on an assembly line – obviously militated against a consistent quality or individuality. The outcome is necessarily hit and miss.

Budding Donatellos appear to have concentrated on the upper faces, the noses, the armour, and the soles of the shoes – the kneeling archer reveals two distinct types of indentation, for extra eternal grip no doubt. But these hotshots were left out of discussions on proportions; on the moulding of muscles; on rendering clavicles, necks, hands, legs, forearms, feet and chests. And who exactly was in charge of ears? Rolf Harris?

Of course, to mimic life, sculpture needs more than just realism; it requires the semblance of movement. This key quality was absent in all but two pieces: an acrobat boy and the reins of a charioteer. Both stood out like a sore thumb.

Still, the exhibition was not dull. But it was interesting for the wrong reasons.

The physiognomy was fascinating. All of the 20 men were tall and lanky with heavy, rotund shoulders, concave chests, small teardrop bellies, ladies' hands and cantilevered noses. They had the bodies of Nicholas Lyndhurst or Olive Oyl. This army was not made up of any Chinese person – or soldier – you might have ever seen.

Of course, whenever I remembered the dates, my initial qualitative stamp of "OK" became a muted "ooh". The 8,000 figures had been constructed between 246 BC and 208 BC. Now that was impressive. Or was it?

Leave the Reading Room and walk to the Greek, Minoan and Lycian sculptures; find the lithe Bronze bull and Acrobat from 1450 BC, or the soft Marble Head of a Woman from 500 BC, or the poignant Aberdeen Head made in 300 BC, and your pulse may quicken.

The terracotta won't do that.

BRES
AUTUMN LECTURE

Speaker: Fr. Gerald O'Collins SJ, A.C.

Professor of Systematic & Fundamental Theology at The Gregorian University in Rome.

TOPIC: "Who is Jesus? Does our answer matter?"

DATE: *4th October 2007*
TIME: 7.30pm – 9.30pm
VENUE: Cathedral House Conference Centre

Cost: £5 waged, £3 unwaged.

Reply Slip

RE: BRES Autumn Lecture – 4th October 2007 ~ Fr Gerald O'Collins, SJ

Name.....

Address.....

.....

.....Cheque encl.....

Please return to BRES Cathedral House, Ingrave Road, Brentwood CM15 8AT

Making tragedy fun

THEATRE REVIEW

Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat

ADELPHI THEATRE

The musical, which began its life 40 years ago as a 15-minute cantata sung by junior school children, is a smash hit all over again thanks to Andrew Lloyd Webber's clever wheeze of auditioning the leading role on television. It was always obvious that Lee Mead was going to win since he had the maturity and the stage experience which his 19-year-old rivals did not have. Joseph may be the star and look cute in a loincloth, but it is the actors playing the brothers, singing a variety of musical parodies, who have to do all the hard work. It would be difficult not to enjoy the witty kitsch which is staged with tremendous verve by choreographer Anthony Van Laast. The finale, which seems to go on for ever, has the audience on its feet. The show is first-class family entertainment.

The Bacchae

LYRIC HAMMERSMITH

The last of the great Greek tragedies, written by Euripides when he was over 70 and living in exile, was first produced by his son in 405 BC, a year after his death. King Pentheus of Thebes not only dares to question the divine paternity of Dionysus but he also attempts to stamp out his cult, a popular mixture of religious hysteria and eroticism. Dionysus, piqued, arrives on earth in human form to exact a terrible revenge. He persuades the king to go to the mountains disguised as a woman and spy on his mother, Agave, and her companions. The play, a psychological battle between restraint and excess, reason and instinct, frigidity and passion, is one of the great horror stories. Barbarism triumphs over civilisation.

John Tiffany's production for the National Theatre of Scotland is good fun. Whether it should be quite so much fun is a moot point; it will undoubtedly annoy traditionalists. Dionysus (Alan Cumming) is a camp god with a Scottish accent. He makes a dramatic entrance from the flies – upside down with his bottom bare – and wears a curly wig and a gold lamé dress. Cumming enjoys himself hugely, setting Thebes ablaze and dazzling the audience with his divinity. He taunts Pentheus (Tony Curran), knowing that underneath the puritanical front there is a transvestite who can't wait to come out of the closet – and into a gown and tiara. Paola Dionisotti, who acts Agave in the traditional tragic manner, is a bonus for purists. The all-black, all-female chorus are gospel singers.

The Years Between

ORANGE TREE, RICHMOND

Daphne du Maurier's middle-class drama shows England as ill-prepared for peace in 1945 as she was for war in 1939. Written while the war was still on, the play is partly autobiographical. A soldier, thought to be dead for three years, returns to find everything has changed and that he and his wife are no longer in tune. He wants her and England to be as they were. Everything used to revolve around him. She, who had no life of her own, has found a new independence and taken his place in Parliament, sitting on health and educational committees, appealing to women to offer "duty, service and obedience". She has also fallen in love with a nice farmer and had been about to marry him. There is no doubt which man she loves most. But where does her duty lie? Caroline Smith's production gets the tone exactly right. Mark Tandy as the bitter and twisted soldier is a formidable, gaunt and unlovable presence.

Satisfaction

APOLLO THEATRE

Peter Schaufuss's energetic but uninspired choreography to 23 songs by the Rolling Stones will give no satisfaction whatsoever to those who go for the dancing.

Robert Tanitch

Printed for office.catholic_herald from The Catholic Herald (21 September 2007) at www.exacteditions.com. Copyright © 2008.