

ARTS

The Holy Spirit lost in gloom



FILM REVIEW
Freddie Sayers
Babel

15 CERT. 142 MINS

And the Lord said, 'Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do; and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do. Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech.' (Gen 11:6-7)

The Tower of Babel is a strikingly Old Testament story, seeming to explain the divisions and wars of mankind as the deliberate effect of a restrictive God, jealous of Man's awesome potential. Like so many biblical themes, however, it is somehow healed and made good by the New Testament – in this case the Book of Acts, and the pentecostal flame: 'a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language... Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another: 'What does this mean?' (Acts 2:6-12)

Babel, the new award-winning film by Mexican director Alejandro González Iñárritu, chooses the tragedy of mankind's polyglot as its theme. Weaving together stories from around the world, it aims to show how conflict and misery often stem from misunderstanding, how differences in culture and perspective pit otherwise similar people against each other, with disastrous consequences.

Incredibly ambitious, poetically shot,



Rinko Kikuchi plays a deaf-mute girl in the brilliant but gloomy 'Babel'

surprising, beautiful, moving – *Babel* is all of these. What upset me, though, was how decidedly Old Testament it seems. Obviously I am not suggesting the different characters should all be united by a Pentecostal rapture and live happily ever after – simply that it would have been nice to have a sense of how the variousness of folk can be wonderful. *Babel* never lets up in its harshness, never offers a hint of that joyful mystery when people from totally different worlds manage to forge a connection despite everything.

It all starts when two Moroccan farm boys, playing with a hunting rifle, take aim at a tour bus from 3km away in the desert and accidentally shoot an American at the rear of the bus. She is one half of a glamorous couple (Brad Pitt and Cate Blanchett) who are holidaying in Morocco, and it sparks an international incident in which the American government (surprise, surprise) is quick to claim terrorist involvement. Meanwhile, the couple's two children at home are taken by their Mexican nanny (Adriana Barraza) to her son's wedding over the border in Mexico with disastrous results, and the original Japanese

owner of the offending rifle has to contend with his deaf-mute daughter (masterfully threaded together), the theme of miscommunication is evident everywhere. The Mexican nanny talks Spanish to her American charges, unable to explain her honourable intentions to the American border patrol, the mutual fear between western tourists and Moroccan villagers; the fear between the Japanese deaf-mute girl and her "normal" peers; the Arabic Coke can; the final shot of the Tokyo high-rise, a modern tower of Babel.

In this disparate bunch of plots, masterfully threaded together, the theme of miscommunication is evident everywhere. The Mexican nanny talks Spanish to her American charges, unable to explain her honourable intentions to the American border patrol, the mutual fear between western tourists and Moroccan villagers; the fear between the Japanese deaf-mute girl and her "normal" peers; the Arabic Coke can; the final shot of the Tokyo high-rise, a modern tower of Babel.

This is not to say that there are not unifying human elements – the strength of family relationships is presented as the key to the film's emotional resonance. This involves a parent and a child, and that love is the nearest the film gets to a unifying pentecostal flame; but difference always seems to win over togetherness here: even the relationship between the American tourist and the Moroccan villager who housed his injured wife, exchanging photographs of their children as they wait for help to come, ends sourly as the American offers him cash and she is rejected.

The power of this film comes from the subtlety of the shots, the authenticity of the production, the use of a single director or look to tell us a whole story. It is finely written, immaculately acted and skilfully directed. And it is moving – and the cinema was weeping when the young boy turns himself in to the Moroccan gendarmes.

But couldn't it have been a little less gloomy? Couldn't the Japanese girl have found a moment of love, and the Mexican nanny have been saved from the authorities? You are left with a crushing sense of us all being locked in tragic circles of misunderstanding, cruelly pitted against each other by a system of means, really, which there have been just a hint of the Holy Spirit?

MEDIA MATTER

The Beeb's flash of Lefty petulance

Last week's biggest media story, alas, involved a foreign actress allegedly finding herself the target of racist bullying on bottom-market television, and in a moment I shall get on to the reasons why I couldn't care less.

But first let's give due attention to another example of institutionalised prejudice that really did get my goat. On Monday and Tuesday Radio 4's *The World at One* led with stories generated by articles in the *Daily Telegraph*; the first was "by" David Cameron (though it must be highly likely that several hands were involved, including that of Danny Kruger, until recently a *Telegraph* Comment backer), in which the Conservative leader appeared a trifle desperate in his efforts to reassure the faithful that he is a solid Thatcherite at heart. The radio feature was good, neatly stuff, including interviews with staunch Tories who are publicly flouting with UKIP, and with William Hague, who was characteristically unflinched and trenchant on his party's behalf.

The following day it was Lord Wilson, the former Cabinet Secretary, who made the running with a finely argued piece addressing the crisis in the relationship between ministers and civil servants. So too in a row for the *Telegraph*, and its editor, Will Lewis, should have been well pleased, except that on Tuesday's programme his newspaper didn't get a mention. Wilson had merely written "a newspaper article", presumably because either Brian Hanrahan or his editor couldn't stomach phoning their principal quality daily two days in succession.

And, giving listeners Right, Shilpa Shetty

the idea that such a solidly Conservative paper might be worth reading on a regular basis. If the *Times* or the *Guardian* had managed such consistency of comment pages would they have been similarly snubbed? I doubt it.

But of course if anyone noticed this caricature flash of Lefty petulance from the Beeb, it was soon forgotten as one politician after another jumped on the bandwagon to denounce *Celebrity Big Brother*, and the treatment suffered on set by Shilpa Shetty, the Indian film star. I suppose we can wait out for ourselves what she was doing there in the first place; for her, taking part in this high-profile British show might not be the career suicide it would be for an English starlet, and doubtless its producers expected a ratings boost from British Asian viewers. But it is disingenuous of them to pretend that they could not predict the result of cooping up a glamorous young Asian woman with a bunch of fervourous. Late in the week both Shetty and her main tormentor, Jade Goody, decided that the latter's boorish taunts had not been racist in motivation, just to keep the row in the headlines a little longer. They're probably right; Shetty was being bullied because she's beautiful in a refined, poised way that shows up BB's normal chorus line of dyed and silted corned tarts for the gutter scum they are, and so was bound to cause resentment. Her housemates are unlikely to be well versed in eugenic theory or colonial history, whereas chronic hostility to their betters comes naturally to them. It's not illegal, either. The BBC, of course, did not refer just to "a reality television show", having no qualms about advertising *Celebrity Big Brother* several days on the trot. But it did consistently use the term "Bollywood", which actually is racist, being a dismissive pun coined to belittle Third World uppiness, and derived, moreover, from the British imperial name for what we are now obliged to call "Mumbai". Doubtless Director general Mark Thompson will issue a stiff memo to all his staff on Monday.

Nick Thomas

No plot, no play, but a glorious piece of theatre



THEATRE REVIEW
Anna Arco

Described once as a book that gives the reader a feeling of being deaf, Virginia Woolf's novel *The Waves* is the last work of fiction I ever expected to see dramatised. And yet Kate Mitchell's production at the National Theatre, based on the seminal 1931 novel, has done the impossible: taken the essence of Woolf's un-performable book and turned it into a glorious piece of performance art.

Mitchell, who directed a controversial production of Chekhov's play *The Seagull* last summer, solves the problem of dramatising Woolf's internal narrative by creat-

ing a complex multi-media experience which echoes the structure of the novel and transforms its impressionistic nature into an audible and visible form.

It is theatre in its most basic sense, but it is not a play. For one, there is no plot to follow. *The Waves* involves the joint experiences of six childhood friends, recounted through their individual impressions. One by one each character experiences the same moment, but separately. Jimmy (Liz Kettle), Bernard (Michael Gould), Louis (Sean Jackson), Susan (Kate Duchêne), Rhoda (Anastasia Hille) and Neville (Paul Reilly) are united by the same factual experiences, but perceive them wholly differently. For those who are unfamiliar with the novel, the production is probably impenetrable and bizarre, because Mitchell experiments as much with theatrical norms as Woolf experimented with the form of the novel in her day.

The dark stage looks like a sound or film studio. A long table with microphones and bending lamps stands at the centre, and boxes of gravel, grass and water stand alongside more microphones

at the front. On the sides there are shelves filled with strange props. The actors are dressed as stage hands in simple black clothes. The production begins like a radio play: we hear the crunching of gravel, the patter of children's feet, the sound of water running and potatoes being peeled in the kitchen.

In the dim light we can see the actors standing in front of the microphones, making the noises with unlikely objects. When the lights go up Mitchell has the actors reading the individual narratives, taken almost directly from the novel, over the background noises of daily life. Some of these sounds are heightened as they reflect the consciousness of the character whose experience we are supposed to inhabit. The novel's imagery is given importance by being acted, filmed and projected on screens by the actors while the reading continues.

The production, like the novel, is an experience not only in form but in consciousness. The mechanics are clearly visible – for example, we see the image of Susan in period clothes sitting by a dark,

rain-stained window projected on a screen at the same time as we can see Kate Duchêne being filmed wearing a period blouse over her black clothes, and half the cinema was weeping when being sprayed with water. We simultaneously see another member of the company reproducing the sound of rain in front of one of the microphones while yet another actress reads the text.

Some critics have accused Mitchell of employing notorious sleight of hand and cheap tricks, yet it is precisely this sleight of hand which gives the production such relevance. We, the audience, are subject to so many of the levels of action that we begin to understand the limitations of individual consciousness, because our own consciousness is continually challenged.

The Waves is not a production for those with short attention spans, nor will it appeal to those who wish to see a linear story unfold. But it is a beautifully executed and revolutionary piece of theatre, as well as a fascinating interpretation of Virginia Woolf. I, for one, have already bought my ticket to see it again.



Right, Shilpa Shetty

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Sugar-crazed comedy

THEATRE REVIEW
MARK GREAVES

The all-male theatre company Propeller has approached the text of *The Taming of the Shrew* with the same mad-eyed, sugar-crazed enthusiasm that a child might experience after discovering an exciting toy.

The production, showing at the Old Vic until February 17 alongside Propeller's version of *Twelfth Night*, transforms one of Shakespeare's worst plays into a poignant and gloriously ridiculous spectacle.

Director Edward Hall has not been afraid to tinker with the text. Like a malevolently creative infant, he has twisted off his new victim's arms and legs and fitted his own inventions into the empty slots. A wedding has been added; the awkward Christopher Sly sub-plot has been reimagined; the play's ending is now tragic rather than comic. Lots of extra comedy, mainly of the slapstick variety, has been squeezed into the text.

Propeller Shakespeare is not reverent Shakespeare: it is Shakespeare with thongs, vomit, fighting and falling over (lots of falling over, in a variety of amusing ways). The cast storms through the play with boundless energy and a manic comic glee. Characters leave and re-join the action through two magic wands, a device which keeps up the pace of the production and removes the need for any cod-Shakespeare rushing on and off stage.

The Taming of the Shrew is a difficult play to do, mainly because of its misogyny. Much of the second half is devoted to Petruchio's attempts to subdue his unfortunate new wife Katherine (to "tame the shrew"), and the play ends with a long, horrible speech which triumphantly asserts the value of wifely subservience.

In Propeller's interpretation, Petruchio is given no redeeming qualities. As the play progresses he evolves from comic brute to frightening bully, and the audience watches uncomfortably as he drags a struggling Katherine across the stage and clutches her viciously by the face. The moment when Katherine finally succumbs to the will of her husband has the full forces of tragedy, and the final speech is delivered in a hollow, automaton-like style.

One of the effects of men acting the parts of female characters is that it lends itself to a mockery of feminine behaviour. The much-praised modesty of Katherine's sister Bianca is transformed into simpering obedience, and Katherine – who acts like an ADHD-suffering teenager – becomes less deplorable by comparison. While normally Bianca would be played as a genteel creature tormented by her nasty older sister, in this produc-

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