

## ARTS

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Humourless waxworks: Jessica Biel and Edward Norton, as Eisenheim and Sophie von Teschen, fail to entrance the audience in 'The Illusionist'

## CGI spoils the magic show



**The Illusionist**  
PG CERT, 110 MINS

side from his stick-on, strong-man moustache, there is something particularly dislikeable about Rufus Sewell's Prince Leopold in Neil Burger's new Edwardian melodrama, *The Illusionist*. Feeling threatened by Eisenheim (Edward Norton), a magician who has 19th-century Vienna (and Leopold's lover Sophie) in raptures, the prince invites him to do a private performance at the palace. After each trick he stops the performance and inspects Eisenheim's person, forcing him to shake his sleeves and turn around, desperate to "bust" his magic trick. He fails.

No one has ever liked spoilsports. But what struck me was how the prince's aggressive suspicion of Eisenheim seemed so modern and how much more obvious it was because of that reminiscence – like someone from our own time sent to

ruin the magical atmosphere of the olden days.

This might be taking it a bit far, but as the second film on the trot (since *The Prestige* before Christmas) about grand Victorian magicians, might we not take *The Illusionist* as a sign of growing nostalgia towards mystery? We are surrounded by Prince Leopold-types these days, know-alls, reveal-alls, servants at the altar of "transparency". Might it be that people feel more comfortable with a little obscurity?

The strength of *The Illusionist* is its atmosphere (hence its Oscar nomination for art direction). Gothic spires, Victorian cloaks and canes, noisy horse-drawn carriages, gas lamps – all this is a crucial backdrop, but what really dates it are the naive, credulous faces of the magician's audience. Entranced by Eisenheim's illusions, these are crowds you would never see today. Someone would have hollered, or cynically suggested how the tricks might have worked – nowadays we know magic isn't true, and, strangely, we are the poorer for it.

I don't think I am calling for a return to the dark ages of superstition and ignorance; nor exactly to the repressed hypocrisy of the Victorian era. But in *The Illusionist* (and its evident popularity) I sense a nostalgia for a less clear-cut world. Wouldn't it be nice, just occasionally, to be duped again? Personally, I

would feel safer and happier in a world where children are allowed to believe in fairy tales, where the Government has powers that we don't even know about, where religion is governed by mystics rather than fundamentalists and where art is about expression rather than business and special effects.

In the end, our own modernity is the ruin of this movie. In theory, the plot is about the powerful crown prince and his loyal police inspector (Paul Giamatti) competing

**Magic tricks don't work on film, silly. We know they've been added by a boffin on an Apple Mac**

with the poor but ingenious Eisenheim for the affections of the beautiful Duchess von Teschen (Jessica Biel). But it is all very tepid; Rufus Sewell glowers well enough, and Giamatti has some small moments of animation, but it is not enough to compensate for the totally humourless waxworks of Norton and Biel in the lead roles. No, the only surviving point of the film to make us part of the enraptured audience; and – you've got it – we are too modern to be enraptured. We enjoy the atmosphere, but the awe is absent. Oh, how I wanted to gasp when

Eisenheim throws his handkerchief into the auditorium and watches it sprout wings and fly off as a dove; how I wanted to be moved when an orange tree grows out of his bucket in seconds, or when he summons the spirits of the dead. But all I kept thinking, over and over like a hellish mantra, was "CGI, CGI, CGI". Magic tricks don't work on film, silly? We know they've been added a few months ago by some boffin on an Apple Mac in Los Angeles. Apparently Edward Norton learnt a large number of the tricks himself to spare them having to be added in post-production, but frankly why did he bother? We don't even know which ones were "real". At one point, a sudden and unexpected tear rolls down the Duchess's face – I bet that was CGI too.

The whole plot of the film itself works, in the manner of *A Beautiful Mind* or *The Usual Suspects*, with the audience being duped by an overall trick that only the final denouement reveals. It's so with the prince and the lover, and I won't tell you the details. Suffice to say that, miss, I guessed it really early. I know how he did it. I was never really taken in. I wanted to feel part of that world of mystery and possibility, but I knew too much.

Depressingly, I am just another Prince Leopold, the modern know-it-all, this time without the stick-on moustache.

## Bringing sensuality to garden flowers

**ART REVIEW**  
Christopher Lloyd

### Renoir Landscapes

NATIONAL GALLERY, UNTIL MAY 20

An exhibition devoted to an Impressionist artist is a welcome antidote to the sag end of winter. *Renoir Landscapes 1865-1883* is timed to perfection as thoughts turn to spring and plans are made for summer. As ever, Pierre-Auguste Renoir's canvases exude an atmosphere of warmth, sunlight, colour and relaxation that creates a sense of reverie.

The Impressionists found many of their subjects in the suburbs of Paris. The expansion of the capital, the development of transport, the dynamic between the city and the country and the need for recreation and relaxation provided new, more modern and challenging subject-matter for artists. Mythological or historical figures made way for strolling bourgeois couples, picnicking shop assistants and swarthy oarsmen. The banks of the Seine at Saint-Cloud, Asnières, Argenteuil and Bougival became equated with restaurants, boating, swimming, and weekend outings.

Although some of these locations had associations with the ancien régime, now they were places of easy access where the class of strolling bourgeois couples, picnicking shop assistants and swarthy oarsmen. The banks of the Seine at Saint-Cloud, Asnières, Argenteuil and Bougival became equated with restaurants, boating, swimming, and weekend outings.

There have been prodigious advances made in the scholarship of Impressionism in recent years, but Renoir's role has never been easy to assess. Having served an apprenticeship as a painter on porcelain he always retained a sympathy for the 18th century and for traditional techniques, just as, rather perversely, he preferred the old Paris to the improvements

made by Baron Haussmann during the Second Empire. Renoir's interest in modern subjects came about through his alliance with Monet, Pissarro and Sisley and together they undertook new stylistic developments. Throughout Renoir's long life (he died in 1919) there remained a dichotomy between the old and the new. He sought a balance between his reverence for the past and the challenges of the avant-garde. Similarly, he preferred the security of the Paris Salon as an outlet for his work to the uncertainties of the night Impressionist exhibitions held between 1874 and 1886. He was determined to be accepted as a portrait painter because this is what he felt the public wanted. Landscape, by contrast, was open to wider interpretation and had become tainted with revolutionary tendencies. This dilemma was not to be solved until the later part of Renoir's career, well beyond the range of this exhibition and in works that are not well liked today.

The purpose of the present exhibition is to emphasise Renoir's interest in landscape during his formative years when it gave him plenty of scope for technical experimentation. The term "landscape" in the title is loosely used. Apart from Paris and its environs, the selection includes scenes of Normandy, Algeria, Italy, Provence and Guernsey. Renoir acts like a tourist view painter in Venice and Naples; he becomes absorbed by the exotic in north Africa; and he relishes the lush beauty of Normandy and the drama of its coastline in contrast with the rocky clefts of L'Estaque in the south.

Renoir's art is subtle and this exhibition requires time and careful looking. The paintings are remarkably varied in technique and finish, extending from carefully composed compositions such as *Harvest at Berneval*, *The Seine at Chateau*, *The Railway Bridge at Chateau* to exercises in virtual abstraction (*Landscape at Wargemont*, *The Jardin d'Essai in Algiers*). Two pictures entitled *The Wave* rival J.M.W. Turner and anticipate Abstract Expressionism.

Renoir's paintings exude beauty and nowhere is this more apparent than in his depictions of gardens, firstly Monet's at Argenteuil and secondly those surrounding his studio in Montmartre. The range of colour and touch in the rendering of the different blooms has a sensuality that Renoir also brought to his paintings of the female nude, much in the same way as Matisse was to do. Many of the pictures here do not, at first sight, have great impact. Some are blatantly experimental and others are outright failures, but all are thoughtful evocations by an artist who revelled in the pulchritudinous plenitude of nature.

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## Beautiful nonsense

### THEATRE REVIEW

Equus

GIELGUD THEATRE

There were two major topics of conversation at the interval of *Equus*. Many in the audience undoubtedly discussed the play's combination of psychological realism and expressionistic theatre; the more serious critics, however, pondered the imminent prospect of seeing Harry Potter's naked bottom.

The hysteria over Daniel Radcliffe (star of the *Harry Potter* films) appearing nude in the West End had been mounting horribly for several weeks.

It all started with a prurient piece in the *Daily Mirror* that gushed at Radcliffe's transformation from "boy to man". The mania reached its climax last week when a mob of teenage fans outside the theatre forced portly co-star Richard Griffiths to escape through a window.

But Radcliffe could not have chosen a better play to cast off the shackles of Potter stardom. *Equus*, written by Peter Shaffer in the early 1970s, is almost a caricature of risqué, avant-garde theatre. Radcliffe plays Alan Strang, a troubled 17-year-old boy who is sent to a psychiatrist after blinding several horses with a metal spike.

But as Dysart, the psychiatrist, begins to uncover

Strang's erotic and quasi-religious fixation with horses, he is faced with his own doubts about the value of "curing" children who are mentally ill.

Of course, with Radcliffe appearing nude every night in a play as "serious" as *Equus*, it would have been dreadfully embarrassing if his performance had been awful, and so it was to the relief of every mildly good-natured theatregoer that the reviews last week praised him unanimously.

But the critics were not so kind to Peter Shaffer's play, and quite rightly. Its central concern is over the moral rightness of returning mentally disturbed children to a state that society deems to be "normal". Dysart, the doubting psychiatrist, has a recurring dream in which he slices open children's intestines as a sacrifice to pagan gods. By curing his patients of illness, Dysart explains, he reduces them to dull, passionless automata. He even compares his own placid, demoralised life unfavourably with the ecstasy and fervour of Alan Strang's religion.

*Equus* is now a popular choice for English teachers at secondary schools and sixth-form colleges. But I wonder how anyone could ever have taken its 1970s gobbledegoo seriously. Surely the task for people who work in the mental health sphere of medicine is not to suppress what is abnormal but to help people who are in a lot of pain. A boy who maims

horses and whacks himself with a whip on each night is clearly not a happy chap.

The play also has quite a sinister appeal to religion. On the one hand, there is envy of religion in a primitive form, as passionate devotees are entirely separated from reason. On the other, there is Alan Strang's Christian mother, whose sexual morality is supposed to be the cause of her son's erotic interest in horses.

Despite the play's cod-philosophy, it is rather difficult to get bored during Thea Sharrock's production at the Gielgud Theatre. The horses, played by actors with gleaming metal cages on their heads, are utterly compelling. Their jerking and stamping as Alan lurks in the shadows are brilliantly the intensity of Alan's relationship with them.

Richard Griffiths is wonderfully understated as Dysart. His tone is wry and self-mocking rather than melodramatic, which is absolutely right in a play already blighted with a sense of its own weightiness.

The language of *Equus* deserves a final mention. The sentiment may be silly but Shaffer's poetry is often haunting and beautiful, and it is impossible not to be moved when Dysart talks of Alan left to "rot on his metal pony tamely through the concrete evening".

Mark Greaves

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