

ARTS

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'On Danse', at the Playhouse Theatre, provides a life-affirming and nonsensical blend of film and live dance. Styles range from ballet to hip-hop

Breathtaking comic nonsense



On Danse, Damascus, L'Orfeo
PLAYHOUSE THEATRE, TRAVERSE THEATRE

The Edinburgh International Festival – the largest arts event of its type in the world – comes of age this year, celebrating its 60th birthday with a particularly strong, eclectic mix of dance, drama, opera and music, as well as a new director in the shape of Jonathan Mills. In his first year Mills has placed an emphasis on the importance of mythology and allegory, and of how these are shared between cultures and centuries and how they resonate into the future.

The defining image on the cover of the festival brochure shows two individuals conveying an elephant through the clouds. This wildly surreal scene gives you a flavour of the Compagnie Montalvo-Hervieu's visually stunning show *On Danse* (Playhouse Theatre). This colourful, exuberant blend of film and live performance was inspired by key moments in France's history – the spirit of the revolution, the joyful music of 18th-century composer Jean-Philippe Rameau, and the tales of

writer La Fontaine. Figures walk, jump and dance on the backscree while live performers do likewise on stage with zest and remarkable athleticism. One moment the formal gardens of Versailles are transformed into a strange zoo with giant, fluffy chicks and a tiger swimming in a goldfish bowl; in the next various figures – some naked, others in period costume – are seen bouncing on clouds.

Dance styles, ranging from ballet to hip-hop, belly dance to burlesque, blend with digital trickery as horses gallop across the stage and statues morph into human form and back again. Choreographers José Montalvo and Dominique Hervieu have created a knowing, lighthearted world, animated by a comedy of nonsense and liberated by the freedom and expressiveness of dance. Above all, this breathtaking original extravaganza brings the feel-good factor back into dance and, in doing so, provides a wonderful affirmation of life.

Stories from the Bible may seem archaic to a modern sensibility. But dig beneath the surface and you will find tales that are shocking even by the standards of today's tabloids – from seduction and torture to infanticide and rape.

In her one-hour solo show entitled *Believe* (Traverse Theatre), actress Linda Marlowe provides an exploration of war and religion from a woman's perspective, taking four female characters in the Old Testament, Rahab, Bathsheba, Judith and Hannah, and vividly bringing their stories to life –

and bang up to date. In re-enacting these four women's tales of wartime with passion and conviction, Marlowe leaves us with the question: what does it mean to have faith in today's world?

The culture clash between East and West is the theme of David Greig's ambitious new play *Damascus*, the second Traverse production of some merit. The drama focuses on Paul, a middle-aged Scotsman who has come to Damascus to sell English-language textbooks, but who'd rather be at home with his wife. He begins negotiations

The Versailles gardens are transformed into a zoo with giant chicks and a tiger swimming in a bowl

with his Syrian contact, Muna. Can he seal the deal? Misunderstandings multiply until their presumptions about one another fall away and new possibilities emerge. And, as his flight home is delayed by a bomb at Beirut airport, he begins to wonder: will he ever leave? Director Philip Howard manages to give this very drama a strong sense of authenticity, thanks to an evocative set and fine performance with

Undoubtedly the highlight of the official festival is Gilbert Deleof's sumptuously staged production of Monteverdi's baroque masterpiece *L'Orfeo* (Edinburgh Festival Theatre), marking its 400th anniversary.

Audiences were invited to step back in time – to the 17th century and a ravishing Arcadian paradise – for highly theatrical entertainment in classical style, using modern stage technology to recreate the spectacle of the very first opera. Indeed, Monteverdi's work helped invent the genre of opera itself: it was radical for its time and changed the face of musical theatre forever.

The story, based mainly on the Orpheus myth, is simple: Orpheus is in love with Euridice, but, just before their wedding, Euridice gets bitten by a snake and dies. Determined to recover his beloved, Orfeo journeys to the underworld to persuade Pluto to let her return to the land of the living.

Deleof skilfully brings out the contrast between the joy of the first half and the melancholy of the second. Conductor and music director Jordi Savall and his Catalonian army of musicians and chorists, the latter suitably dressed in Renaissance attire, rose to the occasion. But it is Monteverdi's serene, supremely beautiful music, here superbly sung by La Capella Reial de Catalunya and gloriously played by Le Concert des Nations, that most enchants, while Alessandro Striggio's libretto is truly lyrical.

Furio Zanasi displayed strong vocal and dramatic abilities in the title role and was ably supported by a first-rate cast, of whom Arianna Savall as Euridice and Daniele Carnovich as Pluto in particular shone. The director wisely realised that heavenly bliss and augurs well for the rest of the festival.

How Lady C sent me into hysterics

FILM REVIEW
Freddie Sayers

Lady Chatterley

18 CERT, 168 MINS

‘What?’ I hear you cry, ‘a film of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, in French, with French actors? What nonsense. Half the Madame Chatterleys from the Midi to the Loire are at lovers of their groundmen – how can the French possibly understand the peculiarly English awkwardness which D H Lawrence made his subject that novel?’

Although I wouldn't have put it in those terms, that's what I thought when I heard about the new film from director Pascale Ferran. But steering myself with the thought that occasionally – such as Grigori Kozintzev's 1964 *Hamlet* in Russian – these weird ideas turn into masterpieces, I decided to give it a try.

The first thing I can tell you is that it is French. Other than the retention of the names of the characters and the Englishness of the piece has been roundly dispensed with. *Lady Chatterley* – forgive me, *Ledde Shtatterlay* – lives in a “chateau” called “Rhabglic” and calls her paraplegic husband “Sihir Chifford”. Every sincere, mutely passionate minute of this piece is distinctly south of the Channel.

The second thing I can tell you is that it is very long, and very slow, and not altogether uninteresting. The style of filming feels 1970s or 1980s – fixed camera positions, bleached colour palette, long moody shots, and lush music – think *Brideshead Revisited*, but instead of Jeremy Irons's baritone you get the often unnecessary narration of the director herself.

The third thing I can tell you is that eventually you get over both of these problems and that they cease to matter. If all comes down to the fact that the script is actually based not on the famous *Lady Chatterley* (which in fact was Lawrence's third re-write) but the lesser-known second draft, separately published in England as *John Thomas and Lady Jane*. Whereas the original is full of intelligent but now rather dated talk about the phallus, this version is almost talk-free. Instead of a retired military officer, Lady C's love interest here is an uneducated bloke who chose gamekeeping as a way out of the Sheffield coal mines.

The director wisely realised that Lawrence has been the victim of time: we have now had decades of

psychobabble and a thousand analyses of love and lust, so that all that talk – especially in French translation – would simply not come off. Those few moments when the two characters do start analysing their feelings or discussing the politics of their union are the weakest in the film; the strength comes instead from the slow, silent awakening of Lady Chatterley herself.

Mainly, this is due to a subtle and patient performance by Marina Hands (who is half English) as Constance Chatterley – demure, and yet as she rediscovers her libido, in her widest sense of love for life, decided and bold. Parkin (for such is her gamekeeper lover called in this version) will, I suspect, not be to everybody's tastes; instead of a pin-up, he is a balding fortysomething. The director said she cast him mainly for his old-fashioned body, and I can understand what she means; he is earthy, stocky without being prettified, and the casting works well. Even Clifford – who in previous versions has been cast as a vicious cripple – is softer here, pained but still fundamentally loving.

Constance's journey, of course, is charted by sex. There are six sex scenes in this movie, the idea being that each of them shows something new about their evolving relationship and Constance's development. They don't even take their clothes off until scene three. Just as Lawrence confronted an embarrassed public with his sexual home truths, this director confronts us with vivid, tender, non-movie-like sex scenes. The focus is on the awkward and the silly rather than sanitised Hollywood smooching; running around the forest naked, savouring the detail of putting clothes back on after it is all over, decorating – I am going to say this with a straight face – decorating each other's public hair with dawn-culled flowers.

Oh, but I can't confess I just giggled while writing that. You see, I'm not French, or French, or in drama school. This is a classy film, there is no doubt about it, and the sex scenes are not pornographic or superfluous to the story. But how I dreaded them, sitting there in the preview room, sandwiched between middle-aged critics, thinking to myself, what-oh-what will the next instalment bring? Will they – surely they're not going to – oh, they are – they are deconstruct each other's public hair with dawn-culled flowers. And then finally, like the hangman's kick of the stool from under the feet of his already benighted victim, there it was: the close-up penis shot I had been dreading, the ultimate taboo, sending your poor, infantile critic over the edge and into paroxysms of embarrassed hysterics. What Mme Ferran would say if she saw this pitifully English reaction to her beautifully intentioned offering I hope, for all our sakes, she shall never know.

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A witty, dynamic Passion

THEATRE REVIEW
The Oxford Passion
CREATION THEATRE, OXFORD

I am beginning to understand why Muslims refuse to allow Mohammed to be portrayed. Christianity, however, is a religion of incarnation, and has always permitted representations of its founder. Art is a natural extension of the principle of sacramentality. *The Oxford Passion*, based on a contemporary translation of the New Testament by Nick King SJ, is the latest attempt to put Jesus on stage.

A friend described the production to me as “Mel Gibson meets *Jesus Christ Superstar*”. The description is pretty apt. The play begins in the public plaza of the newly built Oxford Castle complex, with a powerful music and movement ensemble, before moving to the outdoor stage at the heart of the castle.

The writer Lizzie Hopley, aware that many in the audience will have no clue about Christianity, packs what she sees as the essentials into the script. The trouble is that the medieval audience, however unlettered, would at least have shared a Catholic worldview. *The Oxford Passion* is speaking to a very different audience.

Given this significant problem, the script has much to commend it. It is pacy, dynamic and often witty. “Do the thing with the fish again,” begs Andrew in

the face of the volatile crowd, “they’re quiet when they’re eating.” The script works well on the human level, and its strongest points are of comic relief. Its insistence on showing that Jesus had a sense of humour is something I sympathise with (though a divine joke may be quite different from a human one). The staging is brilliant, the movements of the cast and the choral backdrop perfectly capture the interior drama. And, among many fine performances, Dami Olukoya as the Angel of Death holds it all together with her beautiful voice and commanding presence.

The weakness of the production lies in the lost opportunities to use all this skill and conviction to bring people into contact with a mysterious “Son of Man” who was also divine. “The miracle that has to happen is a revolution, a revolution of behaviour,” insists Jesus at one point. This is OK as a response to the misunderstanding that he came to lead a political movement. Yet the core question remains: “Who do you say I am?” The answer to this will determine how his presence among us can effect such a revolution in behaviour.

There would have been an excellent opportunity to portray the divinity of Christ in, say, the scenes with Mary Magdalene. Yet the Lord's part of the dialogue is mired in stereotype. Such an intelligent production ought to be able to come up with something more interesting

than a sense that Jesus simply didn't have time to marry and start a family.

The gap between faith and culture shows up most clearly in the portrayal of Our Lady, played with lashings of motherly angst by Caroline Devlin. Mary's love interest here is an uneducated bloke who chose gamekeeping as a way out of the Sheffield coal mines.

The revelation that Gabriel and the Angel of Death are one and the same (or at least appear so to Mary) is interesting in this respect. Yet if you are keen to boost the feminine contribution to the story, why skate over the extraordinary man/woman, divine/human dialogue at the heart of Christ's miracle at Cana?

The desire to bring the greatest story ever told to a new audience is a laudable one. The trick is not to throw the baby out with the bathwater: how can we convey age-old truths in a modern idiom? *The Oxford Passion* is a fascinating and well-designed production which I hope will inspire further attempts. But perhaps the next person up should begin by reading Benedict XVI's *Jesus of Nazareth*, and then go back to another extraordinary text: the Gospel.

Leonie Caldecott

Kinnoull Redemptorist Centre of Spirituality in Scotland

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