

ARTS



'The Regatta at Sainte-Adresse', 1867, by Claude Monet. This summer Londoners only need to venture as far as Piccadilly to enjoy the French coast

The invention of the holiday



ART REVIEW
Christopher Lloyd

Summer has arrived – at least at the Royal Academy in London. The statue of Sir Joshua Reynolds in the courtyard is garlanded, the annual dinner has been consumed and the Summer Exhibition is attracting the normal bemused crowds to the main galleries. Upstairs in the Sackler galleries, though, is a rewarding exhibition of more than usual apponess. *Impressionists by the Sea* brings together 60 or so paintings, dating from the 1850s to the 1890s, which record the northern coast of France, principally Normandy.

During the second half of the 19th century places on the coast close to Dieppe and Le Havre at the mouth of the Seine estuary were developed and promoted as special resorts for visitors hailing mostly from Paris. The extension of the railway network meant that even smaller venues on the coast became more readily accessible. At the same time, the medical bene-

fits of sun, sea and fresh air, together with the therapeutic effects of proper relaxation, encouraged people in the pursuit of leisure. It is easy for hedonists like ourselves to identify with this ambition, but at that date the idea of pursuing pleasure as an end in itself, in a different environment from that of everyday life, was a novelty. This was born the concept of the holiday, with the corresponding growth in tourism so redolent of our existence today.

The local inhabitants had a different relationship with the sea and the coast. It was their livelihood, and they were aware of its dangers as well as of its beauties. Sea-bathing, sitting on the beach or promading in fine clothes were alien pastimes to those who depended on fishing and various other forms of marine agriculture for survival. There was an inevitable clash of cultures where the crumline is contrasted with the smock, or the bourgeoisie with the fishwife.

Conflict, however, was avoided because the indigenous population was canny enough to capitalise on a situation where holidaymakers took delight in watching (and sometimes participating in) working practices and local customs such as the religious *pardons*. Equally, the influx of visitors, 20,000 every summer in Trouville in the mid-1860s, the enlarging of hotels, the building of villas and casinos boosted the regional economy. An accommodation was therefore found. Trouville may have become "Paris transported

to the sea coast, with its qualities, its absurdities and its vices," but there were clear advantages on both sides. Contemporary guidebooks and travel literature (now eminently collectible items) tell the full story.

But so do the paintings, as this carefully calibrated selection of pictures makes clear. A great deal of effort – perhaps too much – has been expended on recreating the context from which the Impressionists (Manet, Monet, Renoir, Caillebotte) emerged and in which they struggled

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to survive. The brief opening section includes scene-setting works by Eugène Isabey and an early J.M.W. Whistler (*Alone with the Tide*) before dealing with the immediate precursors. There is an unparalleled group of works by Gustave Courbet dating from the 1860s that will change your idea of the artist for ever: *The Calm Sea*, *The Watersport* and *The Wave*, for example, reveal a remarkable range of technique and observation. In addition, there are two haunting lyrical seascapes by Whistler and a number of small paintings of figures on the beach by that potent puppeteer Eugene Boudin, who encouraged

Monet at the beginning of his career. There is also an opportunity to compare the young Monet with another of his mentors, J.B. Jongkind.

Famous pictures by Monet at Sainte Adresse and Trouville dominate the relatively subdued smaller room devoted to early Impressionism. Manet is also here, but works by Degas and Berthe Morisot are excluded, presumably on the grounds that the relevant pictures are outside the terms of reference. In the next room, for the sake of comparison, the viewer is reminded of how Salon painters depicted the coast of Normandy (J.C. Cazin, A. Guillemet, L.G. Pelouse and Boudin again). The argument goes full circle in the closing section when, during the 1880s, Monet and, to a lesser extent, Renoir turned their backs on modernity and re-engaged with nature. The full range of Monet's hand and eye is here manifested (*Shadows on the Sea*, *Chemin de la Caverne* at Pourville, *Etretat-Rainy Weather*), but Renoir's *By the Seashore* is a bewitching and dexterously painted image in the way the figure is placed against the background. Offerings by Caillebotte and Mary Cassatt fit uncomfortably into this section although they are pertinent. A solitary work by Paul Gauguin points to the future.

So, there is no need for a holiday: cancel all reservations. Instead, go to the Royal Academy to enjoy the sea or experience "the summer boulevards of Paris".

Romantics don't care about Molière



FILM REVIEW
Freddie Sayers

Molière

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Young people today are funny," wrote the philosopher and critic Florian von Schman last month, in his farewell editorial for *Die Naturwissenschaftliche Zeitung*. "In political, philosophical and spiritual they are children of the Enlightenment, but in literature they care only for the Romantic." At least, that is what he should have said, if either he, or that esteemed publication, actually existed. And what a shame they don't, because as a soundbite it is really very interesting.

I was struck by the wisdom of the (sadly non-existent) Herr von Schman's words during a recent screening of *Molière*, the new French film portraying the life of the great 17th-century comic playwright, out now in cinemas. It was really quite good. Essentially it is *Shakespeare in Love* but for Molière: a quasi-historical fantasy, presenting a year in Molière's life as a kind of Molière play. Just as Tom Stoppard's script for the earlier film was filled with witty references to Shakespeare's plays, and imagined the young Bard caught in his own *Romeo and Juliet* love affair, Molière finds himself playing Tartuffe, the religious impostor.

The farcical plot is a mélange of the playwright's own plotlines and biographical facts, all squashed into the "missing" year of 1664. When the young Molière's theatre company goes bust, he is hailed out of jail by a mysterious benefactor (a historical fact); the benefactor turns out to be an eccentric millionaire called M. Jourdain (Fabrice Luchini), who demands acting lessons in return so that he can win his mistress with his talent; Molière agrees to pretend to be the priest, Tartuffe, but meanwhile embarks on an affair with the beautiful, neglected Mme Jourdain (a wonderful Laura Morante).

Romain Duris, the young French actor of the moment and star of *The Beat That My Heart Skipped*, puts in a good performance as Molière; the horse impressions he offers during an acting lesson with M. Jourdain had me snorting with laughter, and yet he manages to remain a slightly sad figure throughout. Molière,

we are repeatedly reminded, wanted to write tragedy like Corneille and Racine, but found he only had a talent for comedy. The film offers a clever and compelling history behind Molière's particular branch of high comedy.

And yet, and yet. Despite all the skill and wit of its production, this movie continued to leave me cold. At first I thought it was because of the slightly camp over-the-topness – all that throwing notes over hedgerows and jumping through windows; then I thought perhaps it was the over-emphasised academic discussions about the nature of comedy and tragedy, which made me feel I was being cunningly taught a GCSE syllabus; or was it the art-art modern references, such as a nobleman's baffled response to a tradesman's idea that you could outsource cheap labour to Spain (*Espagne's Hal Pongrai pas en Chine?*); finally, I thought it must be the clichéd nature of the sets (pristine box hedges, fake spider webs in attic rooms) and costumes (bad wigs) that put me off. But no – all of these apparent weaknesses actually help to give the air of a theatrical performance of a Molière comedy.

For the real reason why it left me cold we must return to my friend Herr von Schman. Only this explains why this film will never be as successful as *Shakespeare in Love*. For Molière's plays are the comic answer to the high Classicism of Racine and Corneille – their emphasis is on restraint and order, on a single plotline and place, on well-bred society rather than individual emotion. Just as the crude humour of the gravediggers in *Hamlet* would not be allowed in a Racine tragedy, the weirdness and pain of *Twelfth Night* would not be allowed in a Molière comedy. When this Classical fashion heralded the beginning of the Age of Reason (whose political, philosophical and spiritual tenets so many people remain slavishly devoted to today), the taste for High Classicism in books or films has now entirely evaporated. In art, as the great von Schman suggested, we are slavishly the children of the Romantics – unless it is some way emotional or freely expressive, a movie simply won't make money at the box office.

Guiltily, I felt my own connivance in this taste embargo while watching *Molière*. The film is so successful in its attempt to capture the spirit of a Classical comedy that to a modern audience it feels superficial, insignificant. It is good, but it is clever rather than moving, restrained rather than free and – forgive me, Florian – I am a child of my time.

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St Joan versus orthodoxy

THEATRE REVIEW

St Joan

NATIONAL THEATRE

It is more rewarding to read the text of George Bernard Shaw's *St Joan* than to watch a production, even one as competent as the Olivier's current offering? For me, the reading wins. The text is fertile with ideas and the characters on the page are vivid. A production necessarily involves an interpretation, and an interpretation can lead that much further from Shaw's intentions, which he takes considerable pains to clarify.

I must not be unfair. The three hours passed without any loss of attention on my part, and there was no doubt about its warm reception. The audience was quick to respond to the running wit, and only occasionally inappropriate with their responses. It was right (despite Shaw's specific warning) to cut it judiciously, and its greatest loss – the enlightening but lengthy epilogue, here abbreviated to its bare points – was acceptable to those who are willing to read it elsewhere. Judging by the number of people poring over the text in the National Theatre, there will be many of these.

The part of St Joan will always be a challenge. Indeed Shaw was only

motivated to write the play when he saw, in Sybil Thorndike, an actress who was up to the part. Anne-Marie Duff does not quite make it. She understands her voices to be a psychological, if benign, delusion, obliging a gangling awkward teenager to convince a cynical Baudricourt (Joan's first substantial helper) to send her to the Dauphin. This puts all the burden on the authority of an actress who, in this case, has shoulders which are too meagre to bear it. Had I been Baudricourt faced by this Joan I would have thrown her out without hesitation. (Historically, of course, there was much more to the Baudricourt encounters than Shaw retails.) It is only towards the end, when Joan wills under reversals of fortune and the pressure of fear, that she both convinces and moves.

Paul Ready, who plays the Dauphin, was either miscast or misdirected. Shaw has him as a dauphin *faînéant*. Ready plays him as camp. Dunois (Christopher Colquhoun) hardly conveys the noble heart-throb and Paterson Joseph fails to give enough bite to his malicious Bishop of Beauvais. But the cast was adequate enough to allow the play to come through. Shaw explicitly presented his Joan as a proto-Protestant, and even has the Earl of Warwick inventing the term as a description of her: it is the voice of the coming

Reformation which takes its order directly from God rather than mediated through the Church. And much of what Warwick foresees as the eventual result comes to pass – although prophecy tends to be easier with hindsight. It was only later, and primarily for political reasons, that the ecclesiastical authorities were to take action against her. Just as her swift rehabilitation, although justified, was by then politically convenient.

Shaw is careful to give a fair account of the procedures of the Inquisition, and was criticised for it at the time. He makes plain the tension between the preservation of orthodoxy and the inspired revolutionary who vigorously threatens the order which the orthodoxy preserved. Her trial was fairer than the average secular trial at that time.

Once she had served her purpose, and we had wrung our hands in shame, Shaw challenges us to ask whether we would have welcomed a return of Joan. No more, I think, than the fictional Grand Inquisitor in *The Brothers Karamazov* welcomed the return of Christ threatening to upset the apple-cart of established order and the passive peace of a complacent Church.

Quentin de la Bédoyère

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