

ARTS

Libidinal mix of local colour

THEATRE REVIEW

CAROLINE MCGINN

Bemockle and Betrice" scribbled Charles I beneath the title of *Much Ado About Nothing* in his copy of Shakespeare's Second Folio. And no wonder: the misogynist and the man-hater who won't admit they're made for each other are the heart of *Much Ado* (in spite of being technically sub-plots). Their "merry war" is a modern wit-match of sexual equals. And their quick-fire quips and impossible come-backs leap off the page so lightly that they make maul, not Petrarchan flattery, sound like the language of love.

The quibbling twosome, "too wise to woo peaceably", help make *Much Ado* one of the merriest of Shakespeare's comedies. But by translating the play to the political hotbed of 1953 Cuba, Mariame Elliott unfolds its darkest materials. Elliott's production is (typically) densely atmospheric: the cruel and sultry Cuban night buzzes with intrigue, music, cigar smoke and chattering insects. The Cuban setting makes sleazy sense of the conventional romantic leads, Hero and Claudio. This gauche young officer who publicly disgraces his timid rookably virgin because of her "savage sensuality" looks like a victim of both war and interference. Whatever Claudio thinks Hero may have done offstage, it's the image of his commander Don Pedro, lion-masked at the carnival, groping Hero's limp body as he lifts her up high in the dance, which lingers in the audience's mind.

Both carnival and broken wedding are a libidinal, Samteria mix of local colour and Catholic iconography. When the pennit Claudio, believing Hero dead, comes to church to choose a new bride, each of the four masked women wears an outsize mild face framed in golden sunburst spikes, exactly copied from the altar statue of the Virgin Mary. It's sensationally vivid, but with such a strong subtext



Tamsin Grieg plays a glamorous Beatrice in the RSC's 'Much Ado About Nothing' at the Novello Theatre, London

of vengeance and violence, it cannot be happy, and the Cuban context pulls the play even further out of shape. The benevolent Don Pedro makes an uneasy Batista, and it's perverse to re-make panto-villain Don John as a Castro-esque revolutionary loping through the jungle – especially as the whole scope of his mischief is a nasty sexual scheme to subvert the natural course of romantic comedy.

The production is sufficiently critical of established norms to visually identify Tamsin Grieg's Beatrice with Don John. Her dark, knife-edge glamour matches his fine elegance in a play whose other men are sharply creased in military beige, and whose other girls (twice) in naive pastels. In one of the production's numerous added

dumb-shows (which include the audience in the play's massive surveillance op-site "nothing" which its title puns on) they share a seductive cigarette. Grieg is smile-free and spike-heeled: half 1950s Vogue cover and half preying mantis, her "every word stabs". She lacks the lovely prolix ease that Benedick describes in her "impossible conveyance" of jest on jest: she is pained and alone in her "bitter disposition". But Joseph Milson's Benedick grows into a generous foil for Greg's sharpness. When they conceal themselves (in consecutive scenes) to overhear their friends reveal they love each other, Greg freezes (in superbly angular alarm) behind the handkerchiefs of an old Vespa, while the exuberant Milson

stumbles into a rubber plant. Merriment, however, is not the major key. The mood of military corruption even includes comic partners Dogberry and Verges, who are unprofessional in more ways than one: their inspection of the watch plays like a camp tribute to *Dad's Army*. Elliott strikes a note of discontent in every little cameo: even the bit-part boy who fetches a book for Benedick was happily smooching with Balthazar (here a nightclub diva) before he went. The final tableau is a visual warning which would be more apt in a problem play like *Measure for Measure* – just after Benedick cuts in on Beatrice, all freeze. Batista/Don Pedro steps forward, and the lights go down on a ferocious grid in his eye.

MEDIA MATTER

Why Charlie Drake stands beside Beckett

All the annual retrospective copy is now done and dusted, one with Nineveh and Tyre, and this week your newspapers have been full of "Our Experts' Predictions for the Year Ahead", none of them of any interest whatever unless you want to put them in a scrapbook and laugh at the hapless hacks who have to turn out this bilge when their forecasts are contradicted by events. But I want to look back one last time, because our bumper Christmas issue went to press before the death of Charlie Drake, and, although there were many lavish obituaries, his passing is worthy of another look.

For all the appreciations I saw led on the line, supplied by his agent, that he was the master of slapstick comedy. That may be true, but it is not how I remember him. I have a vague recollection of a sketch show, and a televised live cabaret in the 1960s; but I was 13 years old by the time *The Worker* was first broadcast, and my parents and I were united in regarding it as one of the high points of the viewing week.

The premise was simple: Drake played an unemployed layabout who lived opposite what was then the Labour Exchange, and whose daily routine consisted of crossing the road in order to be the despair of the man whose job it was to find him work, played to dry perfection by Henry McGee. The dialogue was the very best of the feed-to-punchline formula, but there was a great deal more to the show than that.

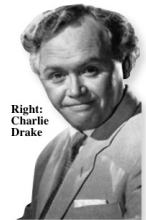
For a start the spectre of high unemployment was only just beginning to threaten, after a post-war boom preceded by a peacetime depression in which millions had been out of work through no fault of their own. The idea that the long-term unemployed might be just bone-idle chancers was a shocking, radical challenge to prevailing nostrums.

But Drake's character was more complex than say, Carla Lane's benefit fraudster, Joey Boswell, in *Bread 15* years later. Drake played a man who often seemed keen to work if the right job could be found, but whose uncon-

ventional nature and adherence to seamless private logic disqualified him from anything on offer. He was like a psychiatric out-patient whose superior intelligence defeats the therapist's every effort to lever him into some definition of normality, an individual who resists the relentless attempts of officialdom to force him into a pre-labeled box. In *The Worker* transcended satire and became downright subversive, and, funny as it was, followed closely in the footsteps of Patrick McGeehan's cult renegeade spy fantasy *The Prisoner*. Then *The Worker*, like *The Prisoner*, turned surreal as it continued to explore the mind of its central character. Doubtless the tapes have been wiped in some wave of cost-cutting, space-saving vandalism, but I remember an episode in which the epomaniac worker finally turns a considerable honest living, busking with a miraculous animated tea-towel, only to lose it to love for another one, with whom he leaves it, lovingly entwined but inanimate once more, on a clothesline, his source of income surrendered in a kind act for a friend. Who has managed to extract such paths from such utter absurdity? Chapman, Beckett, Charlie Drake.

When anyone we admire does it's easy to say "we shall not see his like again", but this is usually true only for being truisitic. There will be other great comics, but to be in Drake's league they must first master the art of cheap, innocent comedy, then hold firmly to their audience's hand and soar into heights whose rarified air will never be forgotten.

Nick Thomas



Right: Charlie Drake

Hollywood blunts the edge of a heady concoction

FILM REVIEW

DAVID SHARMA/TAMMARI

If you think the idea of a man who can identify clove oil at a hundred paces is outlandish, think again. This is the remarkable talent displayed by the fictional anti-hero of *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer*, a film adapted from Patrick Süskind's bestselling novel of the 1980s.

But his condition is not without basis in medical fact. Anyone who knows Oliver Sacks's astonishing professional memoir *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* will remember the haunting case of Stephen D, the medical student with a weakness for amphetamines. He awoke one morning to find his world completely transformed – the drug had somehow ratcheted up his sense of smell. Suddenly, he was able to find his way around New York blindfold, simply by following his nose; he knew exactly who had visited Dr Sacks's office before him because of the

odour they left behind. For Stephen D the hypersensitivity quickly became overwhelming. Jean-Baptiste Grenouille (played by newcomer Ben Whishaw), who has the misfortune to start his life amid the filth and poverty of 18th-century Paris, also finds it more of a curse than a blessing. Born to a fishwife in a particularly Hogarthian section of the city, he is left for dead before being taken to an orphanage where his strange behaviour – sniffing rats, that kind of thing – does little to endear him to the other children. From there he is sold into the service of a tannery, perhaps the most fate imaginable for a lad with an acute sense of smell, though he seems to get on alright. He meets the great Baldini (Dustin Hoffman), a man who sounds like a magician but is in fact a celebrated perfumier fallen on hard times, and, after working the old man with his olfactory prowess, becomes his apprentice.

By this time, however, Grenouille has revealed a darker side to his nature – his fascination with the scent of a beautiful young fruit seller has led him to claim the

first of many victims. Exasperated at being unable to preserve her smell, he becomes obsessed with the idea of capturing the essence of a human being. Leaving Baldini behind, he returns to the undisputed capital of perfume-making – Grasse, in Provence – to learn the mysterious art of *essence*. While there he embarks on a killing spree, harvesting young women like flowers, with the aim of concocting the greatest fragrance known to man.

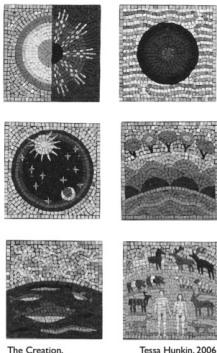
Perfume doesn't shy away from the grotesque, and faint-hearted cinema-goers should probably steer well clear. Many wondered how Süskind's novel, which conjures up a heady scent-infused world, could possibly work on screen. The filmmakers' strategy has evidently been to compensate with an assault on the eyes (the opening sequence is a case in point: Grenouille's birth is shown in all its brutish detail). The young man's sense of smell is cleverly evoked by quick cutaways – here's a pallet full of sardines, a basket of peppers, a bunch of roses – so that we get an idea of how overloaded his

senses are as he moves around the stinking city.

There are some nice performances. Ben Whishaw, handsome and intense, is probably destined for great things. Dustin Hoffman and Alan Rickman make welcome appearances and John Hurt does a fine job as narrator. But somehow *Perfume* doesn't really hang together. Part historical thriller, part fairytale, it fails to capture either the authenticity of the former or the playfulness of the latter. After the opening, which is satisfyingly visceral, the story loses momentum. It has also one of the strangest, most overwrought climaxes of any film I can think of. There are shades of Ken Russell's *The Devils*, and didn't suffer the credibility-sapping effects of Hollywood production values, which have robbed *Perfume* of any edge it might have had. For all his two and a half hours on screen, Grenouille, I fear, will not stay in my mind half as long as Sacks's Stephen D.

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THEATRE REVIEW

ROBERT TANTICH

Are there any good plays?" asked a friend. "I mean London doesn't seem to offer theatregoers anything but an endless supply of musicals." In the past year it has been possible to see plays by Sam Shepard, Edward Albee, Tennessee Williams, Samuel Beckett, Arthur Miller, Peter Shaffer, Noel Coward, Maxim Gorky, Harley Granville Barker, Tom Stoppard, Bertolt Brecht, James Joyce, Eugene O'Neill, Michael Frayn, Bernard Shaw, Ben Jonson and, of course, Shakespeare.

There are four plays running now which are well worth seeing. Conor McPherson's *The Seafarer* at the National Theatre is set in a dirty Dublin suburban basement. The first act is very funny, just establishing the characters of five alcoholics. The second act involves a dramatic game of poker in which the stake is a man's life. If he loses he goes to hell. Twenty-five years earlier, an unknown person got him off a charge of manslaughter on the condition that the man would return for him later. And he's here now, asking for his soul. McPherson has produced the best description of hell since James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. His inmates are locked alive in a space smaller than a coffin, lying a thousand miles down

under the bed of a vast black sea, thinking that they are going to die but never doing so. The play is excellently directed by McPherson and it is hard to imagine it being better acted. The cast includes Karl Johnson as the man, Conleth Hill as his mate, Ron Cook as the devil, and the incomparable Jim Norton as a blind, cheery, vindictive bully.

Peter Morgan's absorbing docudrama *Frost/Nixon* at Gielgud Theatre benefits from two superior performances. President Nixon's name is synonymous with political corruption. He committed the biggest felony in American history and resigned before he could be impeached. Many journalists had tried to nail him and had failed. Could David Frost, a lightweight English chat show host, get him to confess that he had been involved in the Watergate cover-up and had broken the law? Most people didn't think Frost had any chance at all, because he didn't have Nixon's intellectual astuteness. The confrontation – a combination of politics and show business – was broadcast on television in 1977 to a record audience. Frank Langella, the distinguished American actor, does not look like Nixon, but he has the gravitas for the role. His breakdown, with a close-up of his haunted face relayed on to a giant screen, is very moving. Michael Sheen is persuasive as Frost, unyielding yet always vulnerably, physically and vocally spot on.

Nicholas Wright's adapta-

tion of Emile Zola's *Thérèse Raquin* at the National Theatre is a rare opportunity to see one of the best psychological melodramas of the 19th century. It was written when Zola was 27. The critics accused him of writing pornography, which was excellent for each other. They were married, far from setting them free, has killed their love for each other. Their wedding night is choreographed by Marianne Elliott as an expressionistic nightmare of violent sex, nausea and misery, and is acted out in a seemingly never-ending series of black-outs to a jangle of sound effects. Charlotte Emmerson and Ben Daniels, totally confident, meet the melodrama head on.

Don Juan in Soho at Donmar is Patrick Marber's 21st-century version of Molière and though it is relentlessly crude, it doesn't have the shock value the original play must certainly have had. Rhyds Ians, as the heartless, amoral, charismatic aristocrat, swans around looking like a younger Peter O'Toole. The most fearsome personage should be the statue but he is diminished by being transformed into Soho's much-weathered statue of Charles II. Jun is driven to his death in a rickshaw and ends up in the gutter murdered by two Irishmen. Frankly, this is in no way as terrifying as being swallowed into the bowels of the earth and going to hell.

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