

## ARTS

## A Superdad with visiting rights


**Superman Returns**

12 CERT, 154 MINS

Superman, let's face it, is never going to be the coolest superhero. When Warner decided to relaunch the Superman franchise, it was never going to have the option of doing a *Batman Begins* (last year's very grown-up Batman movie in which the hero is revealed in all his flawed humanity). Not only is Superman not human, but – more crucially – he wears a Lycra all-in-one with his pants over his tights.

The much anticipated result, *Superman Returns*, is in many ways quite a sensible offering. Its overall feel is of the old Superman we know and love, brought up to date and retold. The new guy, Brandon Routh, looks remarkably like Christopher Reeve: the costume is the same, the balance of big action scenes and romantic take-Lois-flying-over-Metropolis scenes is about the same and the staff of the *Daily Planet's* inability to recognise Superman just because of a pair of glasses is as silly as ever.

It is a little more soft than previously; Kevin Spacey's Lex Luther is demonic, camp and – for one short scene as he attacks Superman with carefully sharpened daggers of Kryptonite – deeply sinister. The special effects are good but left me wanting – a little too technical and James Bondy, not quite enough awe.

In line with other 21st-century superheroes (think Spiderman), Superman has also become more soft and sensitive. Brandon Routh took movement lessons



'The Man Of Steel Is Back': Clark Kent surveys the headlines

in order to learn how to glide effortlessly through the air, something he does so convincingly he looks slightly like Tinkerbell.

As Superman his hair is immaculately coiffed, his quizzical smile ever so slight; he is a curious mixture of humble and deeply smug.

Through this haze of competent predictability, like rays of light, are two new themes that, although they clash,

and although they are both controversial, inject some genuine interest into this film. The first is Superman's dysfunctional family, and the second is Superman as Jesus Christ.

Superman has been away for five years on a trip back to Krypton, in a failed search for survivors. Apparently, before he left, he "spent the night" with Lois Lane (Kate Bosworth), who was so hurt by his sudden departure that she

wrote a Pulitzer Prize-winning editorial entitled "Why the world doesn't need Superman." He had a baby with a nice chap called Richard (who looks a bit like Superman and flies around in a seaplane) and is living with him and her son. Back comes S-Man who, shocked by the news, begins a ruthless campaign of flirting with Lois, even though she was getting on better without him.

Suddenly it is revealed by a feat of heroic strength – read no further if you want to be spared the denouement, but it is too important to leave out – that five-year-old Jason is not Richard's son at all, but baby Superman! Superman ends up flying into his son's bedroom and talking to him while he sleeps.

The decision to turn our hero into a single father with visiting rights only really makes sense in light of the second new theme. Superman as Jesus Christ. No longer is he just a benevolent visitor from another planet; he is sent to earth by Jos-EI specifically in order to save the human race. "They can be a great people, Kal-El, they wish to be. They only lack the light to show the way. For this reason above all, their capacity for good, I have sent them you... my only son." As Superman explains to Lois Lane: "You wrote that the world doesn't need a saviour, but I hear them crying for one everyday."

In light of this, the boy Jason, Superman, is ideally set up – his divine father absent but also present, his kind foster-father Richard (Joseph), and his mother Lois (Mary). So the generations continue and as Superman's father said to his son: "The son becomes the father and the father becomes the son." This, more than Clark and Lois, is the central relationship of the film.

So, what might have been a rather anodyne new Superman becomes modern at last. All superheroes express that of their generation, and this one – more grand and godly, more sensitive and yet more dysfunctional than ever – pretty much sums up the needs of his.

**MEDIA MATTER**

## The gospel of special effects and fancy dress

Here's a mystery which, for some reason, has never before occurred to me. *Radio Times* is printed weeks in advance, but the networks precisely manage to fill their advertised schedules with films, repeats and unwatchable tat to coincide with blazing hot weather which the BBC Weather Centre is unable to predict at a day's notice.

This is another way of observing that there was nothing on television last week worthy of critical attention, so instead let's look forward to a delight that will be reaching our screens in the near future. I refer to *The Miracles of Jesus*, which begins on BBC 1 on July 30, and in which the more superficially improbable Gospel stories will be subjected to the usual logical-positivistic-for-morons routine, complete with special effects and extras in fancy dress. But just to spice up the formula a little, the thing will be fronted by Ragh Omar, who recently published a book about his experience as a (very far from typical) British Muslim.

There – arguably – a case for having the Christian story examined by an outsider to the tradition, and for hiring a well-known broadcasting face to drag in the viewers; but I wonder if the Beeb actually thought through the task with which Omar is charged before commissioning the series.

For there are three ways to approach the miracles, whether one is presenting a television show or teaching children:

1) These were the miracles performed by Our Lord.  
2) This is how the story goes, and people have believed it for 2,000 years, so we might do well not to dismiss it as hogwash.  
3) It's hogwash, but if you don't know the stories, along with those of Greek and Roman mythology, a myriad allusions, analogies and metaphors in the canon of English literature will be obscure to you.

Alas, we can hardly expect the modest BBC to go for option one, although it would be controversial enough to make it much more likely than option three. Number two is where the series will undoubtedly fall, though in a way that leans rather more heavily

on visual effect than on coherent verbal content. Oh well.

Meanwhile, though, we are told by the *Times* that this new venture heralds the start of a new policy whereby religious programming will replace vacuous "reality" shows in Aunty's prime-time broadcasting. I don't believe it for a moment, but in any case this noble initiative on the part of the corporation's new head of religion and ethics, Michael Wakelin, is fatally undermined by the BBC's stated commitment to "present all faiths equally".

Why should the BBC wish to do such a thing? For all its troubled religious history, Britain remains constitutionally, unequivocally a Christian country (which the humanist, secular republic of France, despite its overwhelmingly Catholic population, is not), and the emphasis adopted by our state broadcaster should reflect this.

Programmes dealing with other faiths should be broadcast less to stroke and pander to their British adherents than for the interest and enlightenment of native Christians – for, as it were, in-house programming for non-Christians can be broadcast over any number of cable channels, without compromising the cultural identity which the BBC should be striving to uphold in its domestic output (the World Service, of course, must fulfil this remit slightly differently). Still, Mr Wakelin will no doubt do his best, though I'm not sure whether to anticipate keenly or dread the soap-style dramatic reconstruction of Holy Week he has pencilled in for 2008. But at least he promises to give us criticism something on television that's worth writing about.

Nick Thomas

Lett: Ragh Omar



## Grappling with an unruly musical mammoth


**MUSIC REVIEW**

Igor Torony

Last month, within the space of one week, the Barbican played most to three outstanding pianists of our age: Mikhail Pletnev, Alfred Brendel and Stephen Hough.

First up was the famously intemperate Russian, Pletnev. Eccentricity is often forgiven of Russians, since we assume it is part of their genius. When, in the 80s, the Soviet pianist Sviatoslav Richter demanded to play recitals in almost complete darkness, he did and the audience lapped it up.

It was unclear what Pletnev's demands had been for this performance, but clearly

they had not been heeded. He emerged onstage 15 minutes late, upset, looking like a Russian Stan Laurel. He moped over to his seat, fiddled endlessly with his stool and dusted down the piano. He seemed completely uninterested in the presence of the audience.

The first piece, Tchaikovsky's Seasons, was smothered in self-indulgent moodiness. Although suited some of the more introspective movements, it completely suffocated the others. Schumann's Kreisleriana fared even worse. Jamming his foot against the pedal, the journey was as interesting as a motorway cruise, the odd intriguing detail whizzing past in a blur.

Pletnev treated his audience with utter contempt, but received a hero's applause in return. Then again, so does every big name. Brendel certainly did, and more deservedly so.

His recital presented a very different personality from the one so well-known. Brendel, in this valiant, more or less certain. Instead we looked on at a wizened old man spinning stories. The performance consisted of staple works from the

classical repertory – Mozart, Haydn, Schubert. At 75 Brendel refuses to tackle anything more technically difficult. In Schubert's Sonata in G major, however, he didn't appear in complete control. The fitful musical character, ever-present in the music, failed to emerge, while the fragile, childlike piece pervaded all.

This mattered far less in the spare and sparky Haydn sonatas. The D major was quiet and intense, the playing profoundly delicate. Later we had the C minor, which rolled along cheerily.

Brendel slipped in a couple of single movement Mozart favourites, including the tricky Fantasia in C minor. In the wrong hands, it can seem annoyingly difficult. But Brendel led us through adroitly, engrossing at every twist and turn. A tender Andante encore, again from Mozart, rounded off a muted though perfectly balanced programme.

Stephen Hough, on the other hand, was there to tackle one of the great noisy musical mammoths: Beethoven's Emperor Concerto. Much of the excitement in this recital came from seeing a

truly virtuosic performer. Hough's technique and strength are remarkable, his dynamic range enormous and, as a result, there was no shortage of interesting detail that usually goes unnoticed (for example the passages for the left hand, and the tutti moments with the orchestra usually seem to have no purpose).

Again and again, his relationship with the orchestra was also masterful, one moment battling against it, the next under its spell. Whether working together or in tension, pianist and conductor Yakov Kreuzberg were compellingly united in purpose.

Above all else, however, here was a brilliantly coherent and idiosyncratic interpretation. Seamlessly moving from ferocity to reflection, the piece's disparate characters were convincingly brought together. In the sinewy rondo Hough burst through like a drunken uninvited guest, the merrily bounding along to the end, thrillingly unruly.

Out of the three this was certainly the most satisfying recital. With a beautifully animated touch, muscularity, and thoughtfulness, Hough's playing had it all.

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## Wanting wisdom

**THEATRE REVIEW**

QUENTIN DE LA BEOYERE

Little wonder that Bertold Brecht worked on *The Life of Galileo* for 18 years. Truth, freedom, reason and autonomy are the nodal points of the human condition and there are no formulae to solve the tensions that exist between them. Brecht, in this version by David Hare at the National Theatre, London, until October 31, uses the story of Galileo, more or less accurately, as a vehicle through which to examine them. It is not an attack on the institutional Church (although of course the Church comes out badly), since the problems are too universal to be locked to any specific story.

Fans of Simon Russell Beale will not be disappointed. He dominates the stage, moving from the triumphant, even cocky, champion of scientific truth to the misery of his ultimate recantation. In betraying his ideals he has "fathered a race of inventive dwarves". Science, as he foretells, is

now at the service of commercialism, and, in a month in which we commemorated the Somme, some pursuits which are very much worth pursuing.

This is a rich production, over three hours in length, with many fine performances. There is humour, wit, and much subtlety. A pity, then, that the acoustics of the Olivier are too poor to enable us to capture every word, or that modern actors, bred to the microphone, are no longer adequately trained in voice production. The older school rang clear, while their juniors mumbled. Only when theatre critics insist on the poorer seats will they be able to speak for the whole audience rather than those in the best seats.

I should note the quality of the production (by Howard Davies), the fine use of an ingenious, revolving set, and the performances of Oliver Ford Davies as the inquisitor, and Andrew Wood as the pope who, both in history and on stage, played Pontius Pilate. And I must deplore the retention of the Brechtian song and dance act which contributes nothing but a good deal of noise.

Perhaps the correspondence between Galileo and his daughter was not available to Brecht, and so we were denied the element of direct, practical and spiritually based love which would have added a balancing dimension to the mix of human motivations inspired

by little but self-service. Or perhaps such perceptions would have been closed to Brecht.

This is a play to breed thought and conclusions. In its search for truth science must proceed by way of doubt, yet "Can we build a whole world on doubt?... the doubts of science lead away from man." And its progress is ineluctable: "No force on earth can make a man unsee what he has seen." Autonomy is a key value, yet unuttered, the compass needle swings at random. Reason, despite its apothecosis in the Enlightenment, of which Galileo was one precursor, is not an end in itself, merely an essential tool through which to approach truth. Once more we are faced by the often forgotten distinction between the objectivity of truth and the subjectivity of our grasp.

Again and again, although the word is not mentioned, the missing element is wisdom. The key to the fulfilment of human life is wisdom, and to hold the gods in awe. But then I am only paraphrasing Sophocles (Antigone), who knew the answer two and a half millennia ago. Yet if the new sciences and the old authorities had invoked wisdom and ultimate values we should have had no play. It is, in a way, the greatness of Brecht's work that *The Life of Galileo* is not an account of history, but an account of the present and, frighteningly, of the future.

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