

# Alive and well in London

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*Brian McFarlane* reviews a classic theatrical revival, a new play paired with an old one, and a musical adapted from a film for the stage

Serious versatility: Anna Chancellor in David Hare's *South Downs*.

WHAT first strikes the visitor about the London theatre repertoire in mid 2012 is the amazing preponderance of musicals on offer. When I was first in London decades ago, I remember having to book months in advance for *My Fair Lady* and *West Side Story*, but the other musicals I saw could be counted on the fingers of a damaged hand. At the other end of the spectrum, the likes of John Osborne's *The World of Paul Slickey* or the supposedly decadent *Valmouth*, derived from Ronald Firbank, reached niche audiences for modest runs. Eclectic but high-minded chaps like me would take in the big musical hits but avidly pursue productions of canonical classics (able authors like Shakespeare) and controversial new plays by the likes of Harold Pinter or Arnold Wesker.

It is not easy in mid 2012 to arrive at such a balanced diet. There are no fewer than nineteen musicals being touted, at least three of them – *The Phantom of the Opera*, *Blood Brothers* and *Les Misérables* – having run for over twenty-five years. A further several titles had their genesis in films – for example, *Top Hat*, from the delectable old Astaire-Rogers starrer, or *Wicked*, with its origins in *The Wizard of Oz*, or *Singin' in the Rain* from the MGM hit of 1952... and *Mamma Mia!* As one who was unwillingly taken to see this last-named as a film, I had no intention of submitting myself to possible further excruciation in this matter.

BUT all is not lost. If there are not many new plays – they seem mostly to have their genesis in the South Bank's National Theatre or the Royal Court, Chelsea – there is at least one brilliant classic revival at the Old Vic, which first opened its doors nearly 200 years ago. In the intervening decades, most of Britain's theatrical luminaries have done major work there, and to their number can now be added the name of Eve Best, currently starring in [The Duchess of Malfi](#). John Webster's ugly, beautiful, brutal, tender tragedy gets many fewer airings than the works of his near contemporary W. Shakespeare. I've been in Britain twenty-eight times and this is only the second chance I've had to see a play I've venerated since undergraduate days. Maybe I've just been unlucky with timing, and I know there have been productions at the Barbican and elsewhere that haven't made much clamour. I wonder why.

Part of the answer may be that Webster – perhaps the darkest of the Jacobean playwrights – makes greater demands on our capacity for looking on horror, for confronting the wickedness of which humans are capable, than audiences are often ready to meet. On the other hand, like Macbeth, surely by now we “have supped full of horrors,” the media constantly directing our attention – for instance, the quite recent story of an aid worker who was beheaded in Somalia. We ought to be able to take a little on-stage strangulation, by comparison, in our stride. The other possible answer to the relative rarity of *The Duchess* in the theatre may be that it makes extraordinary demands on its star.

The lines that have stayed with me down the decades since that first reading are three. The Duchess, her life constantly under threat, declares: “whether I am doom'd to live or die, I can do both like a prince.” Then there is her great cry as her death draws near in Act IV: “I am Duchess of Malfi still.” In his brilliantly imaginative production at the Old Vic, Jamie Lloyd has, in Eve Best, an actress who has the commanding power to give these lines their full resonance, their power to thrill us with the potential of human integrity and strength in a limitlessly corrupt world. And most memorable of all are the staccato sentences of her vile, incestuously inclined

brother, Ferdinand, as he surveys her corpse: "Cover her face; mine eyes dazzle: she died young." Best's Duchess, intelligent, witty, sexy, humane, vibrantly alive until she is so hideously dead, has been of such an order as to make us believe in the depth of the evil Ferdinand's horror and sense of loss, even though he has ordered her death. A great "Duchess" must *inhabit* these first two lines and justify the pain of the third. Best has no problem in meeting these demands.

But this remarkable central performance is far from being the whole show. Lloyd has chosen to set this alarming tale of treachery and ruthless greed in a stunningly designed permanent setting of labyrinthine black and gold, of stairs and tracery and elegant columns seeming to vanish into the upper air and to offer opportunity for concealment and intrigue. Hovering around its suggestive edges are cowed figures who make you realise that the threat of hoodies (potential bank robbers all, as we know) is nothing new. From the moment masked and hooded figures slither into the inner spaces and the time-serving Bosola tells the Duchess's brothers – the Cardinal (Finbar Lynch, scarlet-gowned, in a study of endless depravity) and the more insidiously malevolent Ferdinand (Harry Lloyd, formerly the young Denis Thatcher in *The Iron Lady*) – "I am your creature," the stage is set for horror. It is also set for the Duchess's first appearance, bathed in light as she enters this bullring of corruption.

If the horrors, including a mock-up of the hanging of Antonio, the Duchess's steward whom she has secretly married, and her son, not to speak of her own strangulation, are done with frightening verisimilitude, there are also accesses of the most touching affection. Her scenes with Antonio have both warmth and passion – Eve Best and Tom Bateman create in these roles a sense of loving partnership – and her scenes with her servant, Cariola (engagingly played by understudy Lucy Eaton when I saw it), suggest a friendship that cuts across the social gulf between them. These moments attest to the possibilities of human devotion even when up against boundless cruelty and evil. We may be, as Bosola muses near the end, "merely the stars' tennis balls and bandied which way please them," but the score is not always or wholly to the server's advantage. It is part of this great play's – and this production's – triumph not just to leave us appalled by human nature in action.

IF THE set for *The Duchess of Malfi* suggested possibilities for all manner of sinister machinations and assassinations, the sturdy receding wooden arches that flank and cross the stage for the double bill of David Hare's [South Downs](#) and Terence Rattigan's [The Browning Version](#) are both imposing and confining. It is the sense of confinement that matters most in both plays. Even before we see this, the "fourth wall" consists of a wood-panelled wall on which are represented a school's honour boards. We're alerted to the public-school setting for these two plays.

*The Browning Version*, a long one-acter, is usually performed with another Rattigan piece, the mildly amusing comedy of theatrical life, *Harlequinade*. To mark the centenary of his birth last year, however, the Rattigan Estate asked Hare to write a new play to accompany the Rattigan drama, and *South Downs* is what he came up with. *The Browning Version*, certainly one of Rattigan's finest achievements, is set in the 1940s, when it was written, while Hare's play, set in a school loosely based on his own experience at Lancing College on the South Downs, is placed in the 1960s. Both are sharply redolent of the periods of their setting, and both exude a potent sense of life that goes beyond mere limits of time and place. "Obviously I wanted the two plays to be loosely, subtly connected," Hare has said in interview, and, in an evening of riveting theatre, his aim has been fulfilled.

Here, then, are two plays set in a boys' boarding-school, more than sixty years apart in their writing but only twenty in the time of their action. In both, the approach to youthful education now seems light years away – for better and worse. The double bill has two different directors (Jeremy Herrin for the Hare; Angus Jackson for the Rattigan), so that the effect of putting the two plays together is likely to be more fluid than if both were the work of one director. As Herrin expressed it in the same interview, "different people will allow the plays to talk to each other in different ways," and this is indeed one of the fascinations of this memorable occasion in the theatre.

While both are concerned with the situation of the outsider in such a closed and often unforgiving environment, Hare's play is about the boys, how they treat each other and how they view their masters, whereas Rattigan's focus is on the classics master, Crocker-Harris. In *South Downs*, the outsider is a scholarship boy called Blakemore (brilliantly played by Alex Lawther, who is in fact still at school), whose individuality sets him somewhat apart from the other boys. Everything about the Anglo-Catholic boarding school is geared to

streamlining the boys' development, whether it's religious studies as conducted by the Rev Eric Dewley, known as Eric Hysteric, or the martinet English master, Basil Spear, who terrorises his class by demanding that they reach his interpretation of Pope's "What oft was thought but ne'er so well expressed." Where the Rev Eric insists on the element of personal "transportation" in religious experience, adding that "Jesus was much more guarded about social problems," Spear is enraged when a boy offers "What Pope is trying to say..." claiming he wants "to free poets from the demands of originality."

No wonder Blakemore, with a problematic background and uncertainty in the matter of relationships (his "best friend" Jenkins feels his friendship to be oppressive), finds himself at odds with most of the life of the school. Clearly intelligent beyond what he can easily express, he finds a moment's release from the daily pressures of the school when he has tea with the actress mother (Anna Chancellor) of one of the older boys. She wonders if he's ever thought of "dissembling," that is, *acting*, as a way of coping, and leaves him with a cake she has bought at Fortnum & Mason's, and perhaps with a more enduring gift that will help him meet the challenges of loneliness and cruelty.

A gift is what precipitates the climax of *The Browning Version*. The set for this play cunningly converts the echoing spaces of the stage for *South Downs* to provide the sitting room of the Crocker-Harris. He is the disappointed, desiccated, classics master whose career at the school is coming to an end because of his ill health. She is a bitch undoubtedly, but the play is generous enough to understand how life has seemed to let her down. In Anna Chancellor's performance, Milly's pent-up anger and frustration, and the sexual neediness that has led her into a sporadic affair with another master at the school, Frank Hunter (Mark Umbers), are given vivid life. Crocker-Harris's pedantries, seen in his dealings with the student Taplow (Liam Morton), to whom he is giving extra coaching, may seem to be the sum of the man until, towards the end of the play, Taplow gives him as a going-away present the eponymous version of *Agamemnon*. The "Crock" is moved to tears by the gift, which Milly, in an act of supreme cruelty (still shocking to observe after all these years and performances), derides as a bribe from Taplow to ensure a better grade from his master. Hunter watches this moment and, repelled by what it has revealed of Milly, turns on her with another sort of cruelty. But for Crocker-Harris all that has gone before has left him with a new determination: he phones the urbane temporising headmaster to insist on a right that he has previously allowed himself to be talked out of.

I've described only so much of the action of each play as to suggest how they complement each other. Whereas each displays various kinds of human cruelty at work, both also quietly celebrate the transformative power of a gift freely given, and given with an intuitive understanding of how it might be received. The strength of this remarkable double bill lies partly in the echoes each sets up with the other, at the time and later. They opt for differing points of view: whereas Rattigan has primarily enlisted our interest and sympathies with Crocker-Harris, and we know of the boy Taplow only what he reveals in his meetings with Hunter and the "Crock," Hare wants us to see the masters wholly from the boys' point of view, so that we know nothing more of them than how they reveal themselves to the boys.

These two plays provide an evening of the most compelling interest and entertainment. The latter word implies a level of wit in each as well as tautly contrived human drama, and this latter element has the advantage of some stunning performances. The boy actors in *South Downs* entirely avoid caricatures of adolescence, homing in on the individualities of their respective characters and how they are coping with the strange severities of the boarding-school regime. The contrast with these strictures offered by the visit of the actress mother brings a breath of outsider's exuberance and generosity into the fraught environment. Anna Chancellor's playing of this brief but crucial role juxtaposed with her cruel and unhappy Milly in *The Browning Version* testifies to serious versatility: filmgoers will remember her for her slightly goofy Henrietta in *Four Weddings and a Funeral* and television watchers for her haughty Caroline Bingley in the BBC's *Pride and Prejudice* or, most recently, as the intense BBC researcher in *The Hour*. Tall and handsome, she has a statuesque quality that is ideally suited to the roles she plays in the current double bill.

Though the casts of both plays are exemplary, the unforgettable highlight is Nicholas Farrell's Crocker-Harris. He is at least the fifth actor I've seen in this role (the others are Michael Redgrave and Albert Finney on film, Alec McCowen and Paul Eddington on stage), but none has caught the pain and despair and vestigial recovery of this failed man so harrowingly as Farrell. Till now I've thought of Farrell as one of nature's Horatios, the ultimate

“hero’s friend”; no one does doggy devotion and decency more touchingly, but his Crocker-Harris is something else. I’ve rarely been more moved in the theatre than by his breakdown in convulsive sobbing – and his heroic effort to pull himself out of this despair.

SO, a classic revival, a new play paired with and echoing an older one, and now a musical, without which no account of contemporary London theatre would give a true sense of the scene. A knowledgeable friend assured me that, not only had *Singin’ in the Rain* been doing the rounds for several decades – somehow I’d missed it on past visits – but that [Top Hat](#) was both new and a superior adaptation of film to stage. Despite a longstanding interest in the processes of adaptation of literature and drama into film I hadn’t given much thought to the reverse traffic, especially that of transposing film to stage. Film is, by the time we see it, a “text,” a performance frozen so that it remains always exactly as we first saw it (give or take a “Director’s Cut,” which, not always wisely, adds all the bits there wasn’t room for originally). A stage play in performance is never a text; if you filmed it, it wouldn’t be the same thing it was in the theatre, where it is in a state of constant recreation nightly.

As for the version of *Top Hat* currently playing at London’s Aldwych Theatre, it is not being hyperbolic to say that an immaculate film musical has now become a memorable theatrical experience. When you consider that the 1935 film hit starred Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, the screen’s most famous musical-comedy team, perhaps the acid test for the stage version seventy-seven years on is whether it can make you forget the film while you’re in the theatre. Much of the full-house audience looked of a certain age, and if they reacted as I did – and they seemed to – I can only say the stage show never made me long for the legendary couple of the past. Their immortality has been secured on celluloid (or DVD); the onstage counterparts will have to rely largely on our memories for theirs.

So what’s it all about? The plot is barely featherweight, but that’s enough. It’s essentially a matter of mistaken identity, a notion that has done yeoman service in comedy and drama and pulls its slender weight again here. Broadway dancing star Jerry Travers is appearing on the London stage and staying at a hotel with his bumbling producer Horace Hardwick. Tap-dancing in his suite, as you do, he prevents the beautiful Dale Tremont in the room below from sleeping. She comes up to remonstrate, mistakenly assumes he is Horace, husband of her friend Madge, whom she’s planning to join in Venice. Need I continue? What the acidulous Madge makes of her inept husband’s apparent charms and the ways in which these four, complemented by Horace’s valet Bates and an Italian couturier called Beddini, take a couple of theatrical hours to work out who is who and to whom Dale may or may not be married, are more than adequate as a framework for some of the niftiest song-and-dance numbers in a long time.

Matthew White’s production understands that a romantic comedy, with or without music, can get away with a plot-line that seems to defy gravity as long as the audience is adequately engaged by the actors and the characters they give life to. In Tom Chambers and Summer Strallen he has no worries on that score: they are not merely handsome, as nimble-footed and sexily attractive as Fred and Ginger, but they also give their cardboard cut-out characters as much suggestion of reality as we need to accept their growing attraction in the face of absurd complications.

And those wonderful hangers-on that one remembers from the film? Could anyone be as funny as acid-tongued Helen Broderick as Madge or as endearingly bumbling as Edward Everett Horton’s Horace? The answer is yes: individually neither Vivien Parry nor Martin Ball ever puts a comic foot wrong, and in their duet, “Outside of That [that is, a long list of terrible habits], I Love You,” they would have brought a less sturdily constructed house down. They manage to exorcise their ghostly predecessors at least for the play’s running time, and the same can be asserted for Stephen Boswell as Horace’s sniffy manservant (“We are Bates”) and Ricardo Afonso’s outrageously camp Beddini in relation to their illustrious forebears, Eric Blore and Erik Rhodes. I mention all these by name because anyone who venerates the Astaire–Rogers film (perhaps not a youthful demographic) would have been sitting poised to see and be captious about any chink in the armour of what needs to be a gold-plated cast if it is to displace the film for a couple of hours.

But wait a moment. This is a musical, so what about the music? The answer is that those Irving Berlin oldies come up as good as new. If the intervening decades, from Elvis to One Direction via the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, haven’t spoiled your aural palate, you could wallow in one of the zippiest, most exuberant and sweetest

scores ever put together for a musical comedy. Whether it's the romantic duet, "Isn't This a Lovely Day to be Caught in the Rain?" or "Cheek to Cheek," or the dazzle of "Puttin' on the Ritz" or the breathtaking Depression-era optimism of "Let's Face the Music and Dance!" there's not a note or a word you'd want changed.

And how, those who recall the film's art-deco sheen in the effortless fluidity of Van Nest Polglase's production design may wonder, does the play *look*? With perhaps less obvious resources than were available at RKO in 1935, Hildegard Bechtler's design works ingeniously to recreate 1930s high life and theatricality in a series of art-deco variations, as it cunningly segues from ballroom to bedroom (yes, the tapping on the ceiling is intact), from London's Hyde Park in the rain to Venice's Lido. There is in fact an impressive unity of inspiration about the look of the piece that allies itself smartly to the sound – spoken, sung and tapped – to create an irresistible whole.

The audience was wildly enthusiastic throughout and, at the end, beside itself with delight. And this was exactly as it should have been.

ON THE basis of these three carefully chosen productions – the reincarnation of a play from the canon, a new play by a major dramatist writing to complement a modern classic, and the adaptation of a famous film musical – I think it might be said that the London theatre is alive and well. It may be over-indulging in musical comedy, but there is enough notable other to account for a healthy diet. •