

minutes yet requires a complete lighting change, plus another set of especially lavish costumes for the entire cast, one really does begin to speculate on the quality and prudence of our National Theatre's housekeeping.

Shortly thereafter I was left with a very similar impression after seeing the Royal Shakespeare Company's revival of Brecht's *Mother Courage and her Children* in the Barbican Theatre. Not only is it possible to mount this play on a stage bare of anything save Mother Courage's cart — and a simple cart at that — that is also surely what Brecht's whole philosophy of theatre demands. Of all his plays this one cries out for simple, unadorned presentation to get its bleak message across. But none of that inhibited the RSC where Howard Davies's production had been blessed with what appeared to be the left-overs and afterthoughts from John Napier's designs for *Cats* and *Starlight Express*. At one end of a rather creaky central revolving axis was set a cute little gypsy caravan with detachable panels and doors, behind which lurked sticks of wurst in hung orderly rows, and from the roof of which poked a sweet little crooked chimney. Kitsch at one end was complemented by an elaborate and indecipherable contraption, apparently by Emmett out of Heath Robinson, at the other. In the centre of the axis was a yet more extraordinary Emmett-like structure, a species of weather vane atop a revolving wheel, which served no discernible purpose. Lest one was insufficiently distracted by all this, the back of the stage was littered with musicians beneath the murky glare of arc-lights. As in *Rough Crossing*, David Hersey was in charge of lighting, and here, as there, he did a thoroughly expert job. Too expert in this case, for the stage was bathed in a soft, romantic glow that was once again

at odds with the work in hand. Whether Mr Davies and the RSC feared that audiences would feel cheated by too bare a stage I do not know, but what I do know is that this absurdly over-elaborate treatment both obscured the meaning of the play and inexcusably wasted the resources of a purportedly hard-pressed drama company.

With the National's new production of *Cariolanus* in the Olivier it was not the concept but the execution that was disheartening. It was certainly good thinking by Sir Peter Hall and John Bury to turn that theatre's awkward stage into an amphitheatre, but the effect was clumsily achieved, with Bury's portico looking disproportionately heavy and his amphitheatre seats looking much more like theatre properties than stone. Moreover although

one could see the point of Hall wanting to set the play with contemporary relevance, the mixture of three-piece suits and Roman robes, contemporary graffiti and military uniforms, but reversions to swords, shields and loincloths for the actual fights seemed both self-conscious and uncomfortable. But most uncomfortable of all was the posse of about 100 members of the audience roped in to serve as the crowd. With their scarves, brief-cases and hand-bags, and the all-too-obvious directions of the NT supers in charge of them, these wretched paying customers, through no fault of their own, threw all credibility to the winds.

Both the National and the RSC might do well to study the work of Philip Prowse, under whose aegis the Glasgow Citizens Company has so brightly flourished. His



*The National Theatre's production of Rough Crossing adapted by Tom Stoppard from Molnar's comedy A Play at the Castle. Director Peter Wood, designer Carl Toms, lighting David Hersey and choreography David Toguri. Photograph Zoe Dominic.*



*Mother Courage — a new version by the RSC at the Barbican. Director: Howard Davies. Set design: John Napier. Costumes: Lindy Hemming. Lighting: David Hersey. Over elaborate treatment fails to convey Brecht's bleak message. Photograph by Nobby Clark.*



*Baron Ochs — one of the costume designs by Maria Bjornson for Der Rosenkavalier. (photograph by Donald Southern)*