

topiary hedges and a mirrored tunnel to Wonderland which offered both mystery and space as well as enhancing the choreography. Costumes, though clearly derived from Tenniel, had a distinct character of their own and those of the Wonderland figures, such as the Caterpillar's, moved superbly well with the dancers. The whole work set up an atmosphere very much of its own, yet consistent with the work in hand, so that those who had doubted whether Alice could actually be turned into a ballet were confounded. Moreover Michael J Whitfield's subtly precise lighting was an object lesson in what can be achieved by a visiting company in a strange theatre if the basic concept is sound.

The importance of sound basic concept was vividly illustrated in the contrast between the National Theatre's new Ayckbourn play, *A Small Family Business* in the Olivier and Simon Gray's new play, *Melon*, at the Theatre Royal, Haymarket. Working with Ayckbourn himself as director, designers Alan Tagg and Lindy Hemming had taken a unified and cohesive view of the play which was greatly to its advantage. Tagg used the Ayres and Graces family furniture business to provide the basic framework for the five family units that worked in and lived off it. He gave us one of those modern housing estate, four up, four down, residences that are so drearily familiar from advertisements, and with the discreetest possible use of the revolve, plus a total absence of decorative taste and the use of an occasional and highly apposite prop, made it an entirely credible home for whichever of the five couples happened to be living in the set during the scene in question. Ms Hemming's costumes skilfully delineated both generation and character without ever descending to caricature, and Mick Hughes' subtly understated lighting added to the cohesion and unity of the production. Their achievement was the more appreciable when I saw *Melon* a few nights later. Here Liz da Costa's tricky setting had a self-conscious modishness and unnecessary complexity, added to an alarming mixture of realism and stylisation that made only for distraction and confusion. Even on its own terms it failed to work; for from an admittedly poor seat at the side of the dress circle, some of the left and most of the rear of the set were obscured. I never really understood the layout of *Melon*'s office and found the whole staging irritating and confused.

The Royal Shakespeare Company clearly refuse to be daunted by their current financial difficulties and have recently come up with two entirely new productions for their two larger London auditoria, at the Barbican and the Mermaid, which up till now has been taking transfers from the Swan at Stratford. I hope that they will both prove to be crowd-pullers, but will be a little surprised if Terry Hands' second staging of Jean Genet's *The Balcony* does. His latest version has Farrah as its designer and adopts a lavish, bread and circuses approach. Genet's brothel is on two levels, with the upper one containing an orchestra behind a



*They Shoot Horses Don't They* (Horace McCoy adapted by Ray Herman) R.S.C. Mermaid. Director: Ron Daniels, Designer: Ralph Koltai, Lighting: Chris Ellis, Photo: Michael Le Poer Trench.



*Follies* (Stephen Sondheim) Shaftesbury Theatre. Director: Mike Ockrent, Designer: Maria Bjornson, Photo: Michael La Poer Trench.



*A Small Family Business* (Alan Ayckbourn) National Theatre. Director: Alan Ayckbourn, Designer: Alan Tagg, Costumes: Lindy Hemming, Lighting: Mick Hughes.

screen. The customers are huge and elaborate puppets making skilful use of stilts, and the girls wear such attributes of sexual deviance as boots and black leather bikinis. With Hands' and Barbara Wright's new translation of the text being resolutely British in style, and the lighting being bright and brash, the overall effect is of a grubby television spectacular, with Genet's brothel less a house of illusions than the incensation of the bawdy British seaside postcard with fashionably 1980's camp overtones. I did not enjoy it. The RSC's *Mermaid* production is of *They Shoot Horses Don't They?* which deals with the dance marathons of the American Depression and was the basis of a successful film, starring Jane Fonda, a few years ago. Here, directed by

Ron Daniels and designed by Ralph Koltai it is given a determinedly 'verismo' staging, again on two levels with band above, and with the stage surrounded on three sides by the audience, which also contains members of the cast who participate in the action. Koltai's setting is commendably uncluttered, with the management and medical offices seen beyond the dance-floor, and it transfers smoothly from dance hall to camp-bedded 'rest-room' when required. But somehow, abetted by Chris Ellis's bright, cheerful lighting, it all seems too agreeably sanitary to convince, and though the dancers' costumes become progressively tatter, and bandages appear on their limbs, there is no sign of sweat and little visual sense of suffering, which on stage, rather