

strate a surer directorial and visual grasp and thus make better use of a superb natural setting.

Back in London E.N.O.'s first new production of the season, of Verdi's *La Traviata*, offered more of the same. Directed by David Pountney, who offered a lengthy and tedious essay in the programme concerning health and prostitution in the 19th century, and designed by Stefanos Lazaridis, it presented a brothel Traviata which demonstrated a lack of understanding of the mid-19th century distinction between a demi-mondaine and a prostitute. Violetta's opening scene party was clearly set in a brothel, appropriately crimson and gold, dominated by a lengthy dining table at which the tarts were feeding their clients. Then suddenly panels slid back in the upper walls and a host of leering voyeurs in top hats could be seen leaning out of one, and of

tatty tarts from another — just in case we had missed the point, I suppose. Worse was to come. By an ingenious mechanism a sub-set ascended through the middle of the dining table to form a platform stage, so that Violetta could meet Alfredo in her bed/work room, where they were surrounded by parched ears of corn and drooping poppies. This platform was maintained for the second act to represent Violetta's country retreat, still surrounded by the brothel and gazed upon by various interested parties, and at Flora's party the platform was used to accommodate a drag-act cabaret. Violetta's bedroom in the final act was cornless but by now the voyeurs were waiting outside the door, presumably poised for pickings at her death. Whatever it may have done for Messrs Pountney and Lazaridis, this staging seemed to do all too little for the audience: when, in *Traviata* of all operas, scenic

effects are greeted by titters from the audience, something has gone sadly wrong.

What has gone happily right however is the establishment of a truly exciting new theatre company in this country, the Renaissance, founded in April of last year by one of our brightest young actors, Kenneth Branagh, and David Parfitt. It receives no public funding and must therefore operate on a financial tightrope. At present it remains solvent, and with productions as satisfying and successful as its current three, of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, *As You Like It*, and *Much Ado About Nothing*, it looks likely to remain so. Indeed to see men hopefully waving banknotes outside the Phoenix Theatre on a wet Monday evening for a seat at *Much Ado* was a heart-warming sight. The company has arrived at the Phoenix after a nationwide tour, which also took in Elsinore, and this fact, together with the necessity for low budgets, means that their staging is far simpler and more modest than we are accustomed to see in Shakespearean productions by our two major subsidised companies. More modest maybe, but certainly not less stimulating or intelligent. Both *As You Like It* and *Much Ado*, which I saw, and *Hamlet*, which I did not, were designed by Jenny Tiramani, and both comedies had a single, simple set which showed great flexibility and ease of function. *As You Like It* offered a simple panelled screen whose centre slid open to reveal a small but concentrated and highly evocative Forest of Arden, enhanced by a leaf-strewn carpet in front of it. *Much Ado* had an arrangement of white canvas with an open panel in its upper reaches to provide a secondary playing area. Both sets were skilfully and precisely lit by Brian Harris, and Ms Tiramani's Edwardian costumes for *As You Like It*, and Napoleonic Empire ones for *Much Ado* were both witty and attractive without distracting from the matter in hand. Indeed it would be hard to distract from ensemble performances of Shakespeare as well directed — by Geraldine McEwan and Judi Dench — and well acted and spoken as these: truly Renaissance is a company that gives considerable theatrical pleasure.

Alongside Renaissance it so happens that both the National and Royal Shakespeare companies have been offering new



Renaissance Theatre Company's *Much Ado About Nothing* at the Phoenix Theatre. Designer Jenny Tiramani. Lighting: Brian Harris. Directed by Geraldine McEwan and Judi Dench.



Chekhov's *Three Sisters* at the Barbican directed by John Barton. Designer, Timothy O'Brien. Costumes, Louise Belson, Lighting, Robert Bryan. Photographer, Donald Cooper.

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