

plays and players

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Cover: Rex Harrison as Pirandello's Henry IV at the Her Majesty's for a limited season. Mr Harrison gives p&p an exclusive interview this month

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Photograph Philip Ingram

Coming together in *Le Grand Magic Circus*, reviewed page 30.

Below, David Mercer's apocalyptic tableau for a time of national crisis; *Duck Song* reviewed page 34



THE COLLECTOR (St Martin's) John Fowles' sado-masochistic thriller with Simon Williams as the deranged pools winner and Marianne Faithfull as his unfortunate victim. The play was first seen on fringe theatrical circles during 1972. Reviewed next month.

THE CONSTANT WIFE (Albery) Another perplexing opportunity for Ingrid Bergman to explore her bizarre range of stage accents and postures in a naggingly upper-middle class English setting. Dorothy Reynolds wins most of the acting honours in this Somerset Maugham comedy which is directed, with no apparent rhyme or reason, by John Gielgud. Reviewed Nov 73.

DANNY LA RUE SHOW (Prince of Wales) It's the maestro's last drag show and, inevitably, it's being billed as the most spectacular. There's a new wardrobe of costumes designed by Mark Canter to illuminate the strange talents of one of our highest paid showmen. It's certainly the most effective all-round variety bill to be seen in London for a long while. Reviewed last month. *Recommended.*

DANDY DICK (Garrick) An obvious companion piece to *The Magistrate* of a few years ago, John Clements' production of the Pinero farce was the hit of the recent Chichester season. Alastair Sim and Patricia Routledge head the cast. Reviewed Dec 73. *Recommended.*

DESIGN FOR LIVING (Phoenix) An elegant, cool and totally committed revival of Coward's most complicated play. Vanessa Redgrave, Jeremy Brett and John Stride suggest a whole range of ambiguities and self-deceptions behind the familiar glitter of Coward's life-style. Reviewed Jan 74. *Recommended.*

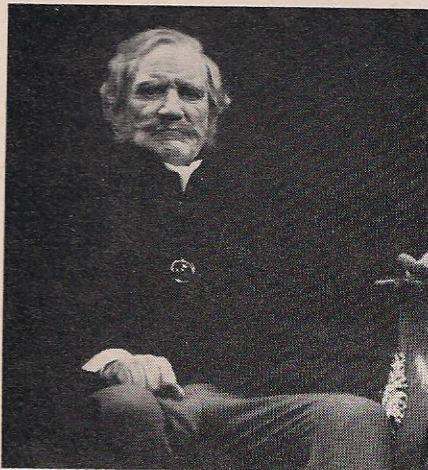
DUCK SONG (Aldwych) Almost a companion piece to Osborne's awful *A Sense of Detachment* last year, except that *Duck Song* comes from the more radically-tuned typewriter of David Mercer. It's still a ghastly theatrical occasion unredeemed at any point by either the writing, direction or acting. It's full of grandiose warnings about the end of the bourgeoisie, which actually occurs somewhere during the interval—but strangely obsessed with more mundane matters, such as the booze disappearing from the drinks cabinet (also during the interval). The RSC have obviously staged the piece as part of their commitment to the playwright, but wouldn't a tactful rejection slip have saved a great deal of embarrassment all round? Reviewed by Helen Dawson on page 34.

EQUUS (National) Last chance to catch John Dexter's production of Peter Shaffer's new play which is one of the most startling visual achievements that London has seen for some time. Both Alec McCowen and newcomer Peter Firth turn in finely restrained performances as a post-Laingian doctor and patient team.

It's a pity that in the end the presentation proves slightly more believable than the play. Reviewed Sep 73. *Recommended.*

FROM MOSES TO MAO (Round House) Le Grand Magic Circus have returned to London with an epic, surreal account of erotic history through the ages. The new work lacks the drive, impact and total involvement of last year's *Robinson Crusoe* but it still packs more invention, talent and sheer excitement in an evening than most shows we are likely to see in the West End this year. John Lahr describes the experience on page 30. *Recommended.*

GHOSTS/THE SEAGULL/HAMLET (Greenwich, from 14 March) An intriguing repertoire of three plays brought together by Jonathan Miller under the general Freudian heading of *Family Romances*. Irene Worth, Robert Stephens (who has never been better), Peter Eyre and Nicola Pagett are featured in three variations of the Oedipal struggle—taking the form of a highly-charged series of mother-son, father-daughter relationships through the plays. On the evidence of *Ghosts* and *The Seagull* the season is more than justifying its initial promise. *Ghosts* follows closely upon the rethinking of Ibsen begun by Ingmar Bergman and last year's *Doll's House*. It's a deceptively low-keyed, sinister and completely enthralling reading of a near impossible play. *The Seagull* is one of the most perfectly geared Chekhov productions that we have seen in London for several years. *Hamlet* has its premiere when the season starts up again on 14 March after the run of *The Maids*. The first two productions are reviewed on page 36. *Recommended.*



Trevor Howard returns to the West End in *The Waltz of the Toreadors* at the Haymarket. His co-star is Coral Browne.

Photograph Dominic

GODSPELL (Wyndham's) Robert Lindsay and Barry Stokes are currently alternating the roles of Jesus and Judas in Stephen Schwartz's account of the gospel according to St Matthew. After the Festival of Light and those countless chat shows with David Essex, the metaphysics of the Christian-rock revival are wearing decidedly thin. Reviewed Jan 72.

HABEAS CORPUS (Lyric). A change of cast has led to one of the most unique shifts of emphasis ever to occur in a West End comedy. Alan Bennett has taken over the role of Mrs Swabb, the cleaning lady, from Patricia Hayes. Robert Hardy replaces Alec Guinness as Dr Wicksteed, with Josephine Tewson, John Quayle, Sharon Mughan and John Guest also joining the cast. The play is one of the most dazzling theatrical events of the past year. Reviewed July 73. *Recommended.*

HENRY IV (Her Majesty's) Rex Harrison returns to the West End in Pirandello's strangely neglected masterpiece which is not to be confused with the Shakespeare play of the same title. The Italian playwright is dealing with the subject of madness and the nature of illusion—theatrical and human. Clifford Williams directs the cast which also includes Yvonne Mitchell and James Villiers. Mr Harrison granted *p&p* one of his rare interviews (see page 14). Reviewed by Alan Seymour next month.

JESUS CHRIST SUPERSTAR (Palace) The last supper was never like this, but it really doesn't make any difference. The sounds are excellent, some of the effects are stunning and the direction is fast and efficient, so does it matter if Christ and his followers all turn out to be cardboard cut-ups? Reviewed Oct 72. *Recommended.*

THE KING AND I (Adelphi) A surprisingly neat and convincing revival with Peter Wyngarde and Sally Ann Howes remembering a time when third world complexities could be almost overcome by whistling a happy tune. The production moves with zest, confidence and a strangely compelling sense of dignity. Reviewed Dec 73. *Recommended.*

THE MAIDS (Greenwich to 9 March) Glenda Jackson, Susannah York and Vivien Merchant star in a new production of Jean Genet's classic. Let's hope that the production lives up to the expectations of the patrons who ensured that the run was sold out well before the first night. Charles Marowitz reviews the show next month.

THE MAN MOST LIKELY TO . . . (Duke of York's) Leslie Phillips as the wolf man of West End farce in a comedy which has been popping in and out of London for almost half a decade.

THE MOUSETRAP (Ambassadors) What can we say except that Dame Agatha Christie wrote it and then gave the royalties away, and they've been coming in regularly for the past 20 years.

NO SEX PLEASE—WE'RE BRITISH (Strand) If this show has achieved little else it has given the tourists a new catchphrase about the British character. A gymnastic farce built around the avoidance of reading a work entitled *1001 Perversions*. End of plot. Reviewed Aug 71.



Left: Spriggs as Claire in the 1969 Edward Albee drama—'Claire was a strange one . . . in a permanent state of being slightly drunk'



strong voice—although I'd need a lot of practice. If I were older I'd like to do something like *Gypsy*. And if I were younger a modern one. I find the kids in *Godspell* so endearing. I love to see the way they work.'

Audiences can still take her by surprise. 'If people want to laugh, even in scenes where it comes unexpectedly, it's nice to know they're experiencing something, whatever it is. Towards the end of one of the previews of *Duck Song*, in a very delicate passage, I could hear people getting up and going out. Perhaps they were upset and disturbed, and I wouldn't blame them for leaving if they felt like that; but I don't think it was because of the play—more likely they had buses to catch. The point is that it's no good minding. You can't mind as an actor. You can't say, "Oh God, you've ruined my speech" just because somebody got up and walked out. You just have to go on playing. One mustn't object to audience reactions, unless of course they're being so noisy that they're disturbing the play for other people, like schoolchildren at some matinées of Shakespeare.'

Among her most appreciated performances has been the tactlessly truthful, deep-drinking Claire in Edward Albee's *A Delicate Balance*. 'I don't think it was actually necessary, of course, to have experienced all the things that Claire experienced, because Albee drew her so clearly and thoroughly that she could have been played by somebody who was teetotal. But certainly one has been tipsy, and one knows that one has been guilty of speaking one's mind when one is. What one did have to understand was the amount of bitterness that life had left her with. That's a thing I myself don't have. Claire's a strange one. It wasn't as though she might get drunk occasionally, like you or I might do; she was in a permanent state of not being really drunk—but slightly drunk. Those people who can hold their drink, and who drink regularly, are very aware of what they're saying sometimes, as opposed to somebody who might just get drunk once in a while and then say a lot of things which they don't know are being said, really.'

She would not have minded playing Claire for an extended separate run. 'So long as it wasn't for more than a year.' She was Gertrude to David Warner's Hamlet for two-and-a-half years, but with other roles in the RSC repertory to leaven the repetition of it. 'Of course, the

Centre . . . as the formidable Lady Gay Spanker in the long-running London Assurance for the RSC. Left . . . as Eleanore in David Mercer's *Duck Song* currently in the Aldwych's repertoire. 'One will probably work on her until the end of the run'. Her Indian friend, *Swift Arrow*, is played by Gareth Hunt

emotional mental strain of working with material like the Albee is much heavier over a period than my long run in *London Assurance*. But at least one can develop the part of Claire continually, which is more satisfying than doing something lighter like *Lady Gay Spanker*, who could only go to a certain pitch and then had to be held there with tremendous discipline. That is a great strain, and after a while it ceases to be rewarding.

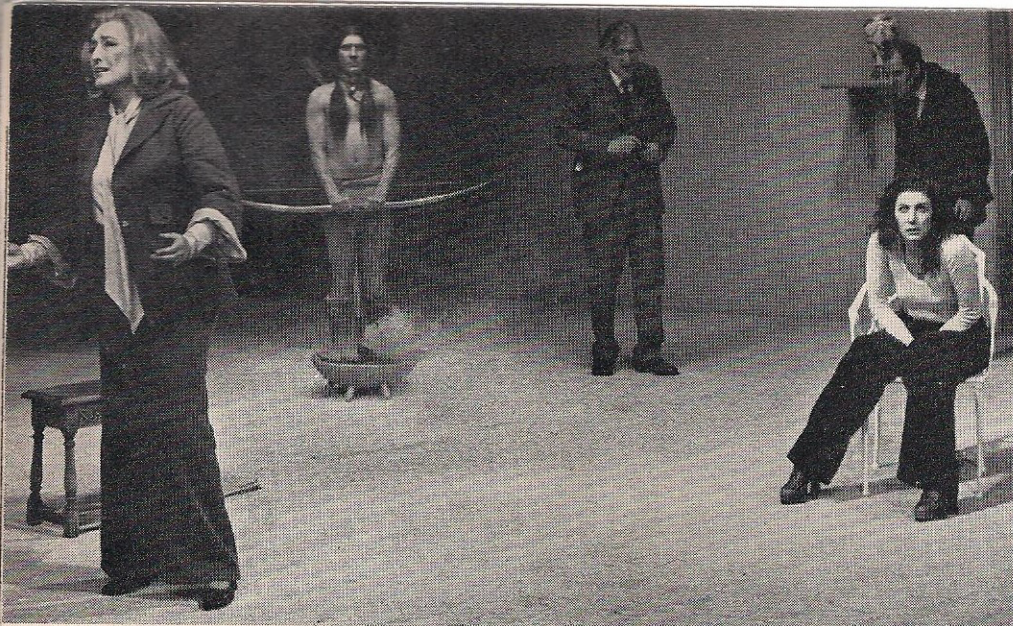
'As those 10 months went on with *London Assurance* I felt that I was standing still. What I missed as an actress was the growing. Usually we're doing such a wide capacity of work in the RSC that one feels one's growing all the time. *Duck Song*, for example, is something one will probably be able to work on right up until the end of its run in the repertory. And it'll grow.'

The idea of a character 'growing' is also stressed by Geraldine McEwan. She feels that it's impossible for a performer to have reached the ideal peak by a first night. 'That's impossible. Playing a part is a growing thing. It must be. And it can't be any good if it isn't a growing thing. If you're working in a properly creative way, the character is going to develop with each performance. That's why the preview system helps. When you get with an audience, it's a lovely extension of the rehearsal period, letting you feel that you are growing in a way that ought to be sufficient, if not more than sufficient for the first night. Not that I'm apologising for my first night performances. One ought to be ready for them.'

On account of the accumulative improvements, she feels that everybody would benefit if critics didn't come to a play until it had been running for about three weeks. 'And then what would be marvellous would be if they could come separately. Not all on the same night. I never go to see a play on its first night, because I can't stand the atmosphere. I'm not blaming anybody for it, but it's not a proper audience. It's the night when people decide whether the play will be approved or not.' A long run, such as she had in the original London production of Joe Orton's *Loot*, brings a bonus of security to the interpretation. 'Then you can be relaxed and free and inventive. True creativity comes out of a freedom which allows you to be reckless, and you can only achieve that state by confidence in what you are doing. The most exciting acting one sees—and does—is bound to have a sort of abandon to it. Not without a certain control, of course, because you can't go right over the top.'

'When the National took *Home and Beauty* to the Cambridge Theatre, there was a phase of about ten performances in two weeks solid. By the time we reached the fifth I was really free-wheeling.'

With a Feydeau farce as exacting as *A Flea in Her Ear*, she was 'always nervous. Very. I find farce terribly nerve-wracking, even though I did that one over a considerable period. The advantage of repertory is the stimulation of not getting bored; but the difficult thing, when you



The apocalypse approaches during the second act

DUCK SONG

DUCK SONG by David Mercer. Presented by the Royal Shakespeare Company at the Aldwych Theatre on 5 February, 1974. Directed by David Jones, designed by Hayden Griffin, music by William Southgate, lighting by Stewart Leviton.

Herbert Shanklin, DAVID WALLER; Eddie Bone, BRIAN CROUCHER; Maurice Shanklin, MARK DIGNAM; Jane Shanklin, CAROLE HAYMAN; Wheeler, ARTHUR WHYBROW; Eleanor Jimenez, ELIZABETH SPRIGGS; Lee McGuire, GARETH HUNT.

Photographs John Haynes

HELEN DAWSON

BOTH in preliminary interviews and in the programme notes for his new play *Duck Song* (Aldwych), David Mercer leaves us in no doubt that, as befits a writer moving through his forties, he is focusing on a developing sense of death. Death not as the result of a cruel accident or a disease which medicine cannot master, but death as an approaching, inevitable event; the result, as one of his characters puts it, of 'the built-in obsolescence of biology'.

Duck Song is peppered with the shrapnel of mortality, none of it is very original, but there is certainly plenty of it: time has become an elusive Aunt Sally; young people are resented; self-preoccupation increases as the end draws near, combined with a certain hatred of the world, a feeling that it is 'going to pieces'; the conflict between humanism and self-preservation becomes more acute, together with a general apprehension of impending tragedy. Most of these *pensées* are expressed by Maurice Shanklin, who is 71, the eldest scion of a family that made its fortunes in preserves and pickles. He was once a painter, who enjoyed a passing vogue, but whose work in his own opinion never achieved any 'magnificence'.

None of the other characters, squatting in his house and financially dependent upon him, could exactly be described as young. There's his safe-cracking brother, Herbert (60), who uses the excuse of an unspecified socialism for a compulsive, nostalgic life of crime, plus Herbert's

daughter, Jane, an 'angry psychiatrist' (of deep incredibility), who's a mid-Atlantic misfit in her early thirties, and her out of work boyfriend, Eddie Bone. Their visitors are Wheeler, a fellow-lag of Herbert's who comes to claim his share of the boodle only to find that the unfortunate Herbert buried it in a field which has since been ploughed up for a new housing estate, and Jane's mother, Eleanor (labelled by Herbert as Nemesis), who arrives from America complete with her Red Indian lover, Swift Arrow (alias Lee McGuire).

The main problem with these characters is that they emerge firstly as emblems, only secondarily as people. We have the flotsam of post-Imperial England in Maurice (Mark Dignam), a drowsy eunuch figure, in Herbert (David Waller), a bumbling, drunken petty criminal and, a generation down, Eddie (Brian Croucher), a layabout, given to saying 'Right on' and betraying a certain surface charm by being nasty to his own class (working) and by being crudely racist. We also have women as victims of their role; in the case of Eleanor (Elizabeth Spriggs), an unhappy, spoilt bitch; in the case of Jane (Carole Hayman), bewildered, confused behind all that anger. And we have the fruits of exploitation in Swift Arrow. But, as people, they're not a very interesting bunch.

This rather deadening factor is emphasised by Mercer's curiously stilted method in this play of introducing background information. Occasionally in the two scenes of the first act, during which the characters present themselves at rather over-near intervals, the dialogue lights up with that combination of laconic wit and engrained despair which characterises Mercer's work at its best. But the line of the play is oddly jagged, thrown out of true by clumsy exposition as characters tell each other facts they must have known for years, or at least months.

Just before the interval, when Swift Arrow brings in the luggage (a giant bull buffalo's head), Eleanor reveals that the

reason she has returned is something to do with Light. At that moment the lights on stage apparently explode. The curtain falls. As she had just been telling her daughter that, in America, psychiatry is finished and now it's all encounter groups and primal screams, you could be forgiven for thinking that this was the primal flash. Perhaps it was; anyway, after the interval, it is referred to as a 'cosmic snapshot'.

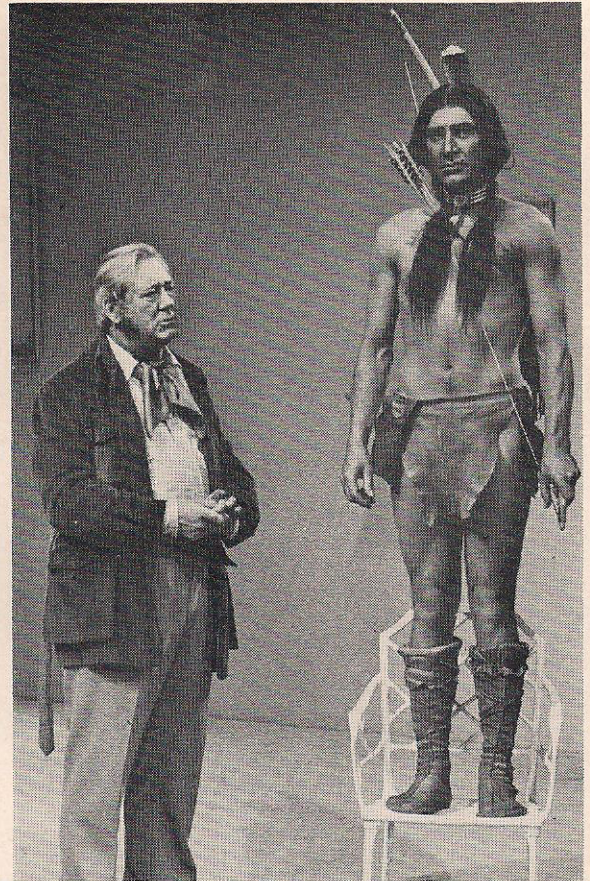
As a *coup de théâtre*, however, it is somewhat awkward. During the 15 minutes the rest of us spend at the bar trying to suspend disbelief the stage crew are busy stripping the set, so it is not altogether surprising that when we return the Shanklin residence has been transformed. Where there were pictures, books, bottles, a clutter of bric-à-brac, there is now only a sharp whiteness. The primitive presence of the buffalo has replaced the irritating intricacy of the cuckoo clock.

Where are we? When are we? There has been some kind of deluge, certainly (unlikely, I think, that it was nuclear). We may be in purgatory, or a transcendental clinic, or the other side of the 'rational' world; it is a place and a time where the characters are free, or perhaps forced, to reveal their essence. In the world of the first act they all felt that death would not be so difficult if they had really lived; here, in the second act, death—at least temporarily—is impossible, even in the face of popping pistols and flying arrows.

'We are all in extremis,' says Maurice at one point. In this extreme situation, hatreds and secret dreams are exposed; racial condescension is countered by a squashed egg; women's screams against violation by male chauvinism are turned into longings for marriage. I think, 'Crisis is no excuse for want of logic,' says Eleanor, but without wishing Mercer to be glib (there is more than enough of that around), a little more elucidation from the author might have helped the audience.

At the end the cosmic electricity mounts again. There are noises of sirens, disaster, a revolution; the windows blow away surreally in the wind. There are the forsaken sounds of ducks (who have 'no aspirations') on the wing. Under the buffalo's head, the cast huddle together like a many-peopled pieta.

It's a strong visual image, frozen like a frame in a film. But I'm not quite sure what it signifies. Like many other moments in the production it is powerfully stressed by David Jones, but I'm not convinced that, impressive as it is to look at, his direction helps the text very much. The one outstanding element is Hayden Griffin's set, a marvellously faded clutter, that meticulously marries past wealth with the dustiness of the present. The acting, alas, is less assured; with the exception of David Waller and, to some extent, Brian Croucher, it ranges from disappointing to downright bad. A somewhat sad evening, then; and while applauding Mercer's avowed search, 'in a more painful way than ever', to create an invented world, I only wish it had seemed more fruitful.



Top left: Jane (Carole Hayman) and her out of work boyfriend, Eddie Bone (Brian Croucher) discuss the arrival of the burglar (Arthur Whybrow). Above: Herbert (David Waller) pays homage to his ex-wife's Red Indian lover, Swift Arrow (Gareth Hunt, on chair). Left: Eleanor (Elizabeth Spriggs) addresses the prisoner while (below) Bone metes out some brutal treatment

