

## Going Out Reviews



Spellbinding debut: Christine Rice as Rosina, with Toby Spence as a modest and slightly anxious Count

# Brecht betrayed

THE GOOD WOMAN OF SETZUAN ○  
Cottesloe, National Theatre  
Patrick Marmion

BERTOLT Brecht gets the Jerry Springer treatment in the National Theatre's education department production of a typical Springer issue such as "My Mother's Beating Up My Boyfriend" thrashed out in front of a braying mob, it's more like "My Businessman Cousin's Been Compromising My Class Conscious Solidarity" — thrashed out in front of an audience of hormonally volatile school children. The effect in Tanika Gupta's new "version" is a brazen travesty of the German pedagogue's artistic principles.

In fact, Jerry Springer is not the only source of popular culture pillaged to re-upholster a potentially uncomfortable piece of political didacticism. The three gods who descend on a Chinese province in search of a single virtuous woman are dressed up as a soul diva, a rock star and a Manchester United footballer. They prevail on a penniless water carrier, played as a new-age hippy, while the play's virtuous heroine is presented as a feisty bleached-blond Glaswegian.

In keeping with Brecht's "alienation" techniques, Stephen Powell's multi-media production designed by Colin Peters lays bare the mechanisms of its illusions — lest any bourgeois mystification cause us to mistake the scenario for unmediated reality. Powell's production is also nominally interactive. But as in TV shows such as Chris Evans's TFI Friday, audience activity only creates the further illusion of meaningful participation. A red light overhead signals which bits are written by Brecht and which are improvised by the company. But this device just prompts the question as to how much of this "version" really is Brecht's and how much is Gupta's. At least mixed-race casting universalises Brecht's themes and there are one or two good musical turns, including a dub reggae rap and a TOTP spoof. However, with all its TV gimmickry, the production is in the end no more revolutionary or edifying than one of Jerry Springer's closing homilies.

● In repertory. Box office: 020 7452 3000.

# Exuberance in spades

NORMALLY, when Dr Bartolo comes outside to find the note Rosina has dropped from her balcony, our two boyos, Figaro and Count Almaviva, make themselves scarce. In William Relton's brilliantly polished revival of Jonathan Miller's *Barber of Seville*, they stand with their backs to the audience in a doorway a few feet away from the Doctor, obviously relieving themselves. This is, after all, St Martin's Lane. And, in case there's any doubt about it, when Bartolo later heads off on business he skirts the imaginary pool with exaggerated delicacy.

Just a touch. But the joy of this irresistible hit show is that it's so stuffed with hilarious details, yet so invincibly lifelike. Gordon Sandison as Bartolo can't really sing his aria now. But he can do everything else in spades — including falling horizontally asleep on the floor while sitting listening to Rosina's demo

BARBER OF SEVILLE ★★★  
Coliseum  
Tom Sutcliffe

aria in her voice lesson with Don Alonso. This extraordinary team of young stars from ENO's Company ensemble can play fast and loose with the business, blagging yet never undermining the affectionate emotional reality, because they're so organically inside their roles. Excitement for a packed ENO audience stems from the virtuoso way all on stage rise to the vocal challenge, and relish the downmarket delights of the now rather spiced-up Holden translation. It's musical difficulty what makes them shine. That's why Rossini wrote bits you have to stretch for. Evidently, Christopher Maltman as

Figaro was just over flu. The only consequence was added flourish and extra evidence of vocal health and robust extrovertiness. Maltman's gift is irrepressible. But, as a result, competitive pressure made Toby Spence's Count seem modest and slightly anxious, lovely for the role — and anyway good for a tenor. The biggest thrill of the evening was Christine Rice's spellbinding debut as Rosina, with her gorgeous naughty smile and her ravishingly soft-hued mezzo. To ensure she went off like a rocket, there were extra high notes, knock-out runs and impeccable coloratura in her numbers. Mark Beesley's Basilio, with a terrific "slander" aria, and Catherine Savory's Berta were sheer bonus. Michael Lloyd, conducting, accompanied immaculately and ensured effervescence.

● Until 26 April, and from 30 May. Box office: 020 7632 8300.

## Playing for the mob

FUN LOVIN' CRIMINALS ★  
Ocean  
Max Bell



Looking sharp: Huey

WHEN Huey, Fast and Steve bust out of New York City six years ago they rode in on the ultra-hip tails of Pulp Fiction and the celluloid legend of their locale, exemplified by Scorsese and the take-no-prisoners gangster chic of De Niro and Keitel. Several albums down the line since *Come Find Yourself* they've been savvy enough to retain the mob-influenced method act while packing a different kind of musical heat, one that encompasses lounge, jazz rock, R and B, rap beats and a touch of metal.

Last night's show in Hackney's ever-so-high-tech Ocean saw the Fun Lovin' ones going about their polished business as usual: Huey looked sharp and told crude jokes; Fast zipped about between instruments and drummer Mackie oozed homey menace behind his snare and trap. Older favourites like *King Of New York* and *Korean Bodega* rattled along like a downtown subway train, rhythms were crisp and riffs soulful. Contemporary material fared less well. The excellent single *Loco* passed by in a blur, despite the faux Venezuelan vocals of guests Super Bad Brad and Cooley High. No matter though because the audience were on side and the Brooklyn swashbucklers proved to be ideal ice-breakers for the Ocean party.

# And new in at number three...



Detail from *The Fun One Hundred* by Peter Davies

Ratings: ○ adequate, ★ good, ★★ very good, ★★★ outstanding, X poor

PETER DAVIES ★  
Gagosian, Heddon Street  
Nick Hackworth

PETER Davies's work consists of two strands. First, he paints brightly coloured Top-of-the-Pops-style lists of famous artists with short, funny descriptions of each one, aping the art world's concern with status and categorisation. One, *The Hot One Hundred*, was in the Sensation exhibition at the Royal Academy.

Another, *The Fun One Hundred*, features in this show and lists 100 artists, supposedly in order of who had the most fun. Picasso occupies top slot. Duchamp, described as "a pisser", comes second and, a non-mover at number three, Salvador Dali, who "liked lots of checks (sic) (+ gold)".

His second strand of work consists of abstract and semi-abstract works that knowingly, and jokingly, refer to their heritage. His *Blue & White Lines* Painting, a mess of intersecting squareish shapes of different hues of blue, and *Red Circles* Painting look like cheesy early-Seventies wallpaper.

Meanwhile, his *Blue Strips and Green Triangles* Painting makes the Russian Constructivists look silly by taking

their serious abstract forms and painting them in lime greens, pinks and oranges instead of the blacks and reds that dignified them in the past.

By being funny, pretty and self-consciously vacant, Davies makes it easy for you to like his work, and hard to make criticism stick. At least what you see is what you get.

● Until 21 April. Telephone: 020 7292 8222.

# Smugness supersedes passion

TOMMY SMITH QUARTET ★  
Pizza Express, Dean Street  
Jack Massarik

TOMMY Smith is not the crunching Liverpool defender of yore, but the slim tenor saxophonist from Edinburgh who won a scholarship to Berklee, the Harvard of jazz, while still in his teens and now directs the Scottish National Jazz Orchestra. (France also has one of these, by the way, while we still await an English version.)

This might explain last night's faint air of smugness about Tommy, who didn't impress this listener until the final number of his opening set. Until then his stately meanderings on *The Peacocks*, *My Secret Love* and *I Want To Be Happy* (standards all featured on his new album, *Sparta-*

cus) had scarcely disturbed the muffled clink of diners' cutlery.

It was strange to find Smith, originally a Coltrane disciple, now demonstrating the airy Stan Getz tone and mainstream phrasing of earlier saxophonists, a reversal of the usual jazz chronology and a regression that seemed to inhibit his rhythm section. Dutch drummer Sebastiaan de Krom switched from sticks to

brushes and displayed the dreaded silent hi-hat disease whereby the cymbals twitched but didn't snap together with a satisfactory chunk.

The usually ebullient Gareth Williams was almost dozing at the keyboard by the time Smith finally called the Coltrane burner, *A Love Supreme*, and roared into action with the taut tone and phrasing that is his first and only love. Even here, though, his closing cadenza tailed into a near-whisper that was horribly at odds with the ersatz fury that had gone before. So much technique, so little true passion.

● Until Sunday. Box office: 020 7439 8722.