A fine romance rich in Japanese ritual

THEATRE

Pericles

National Theatre

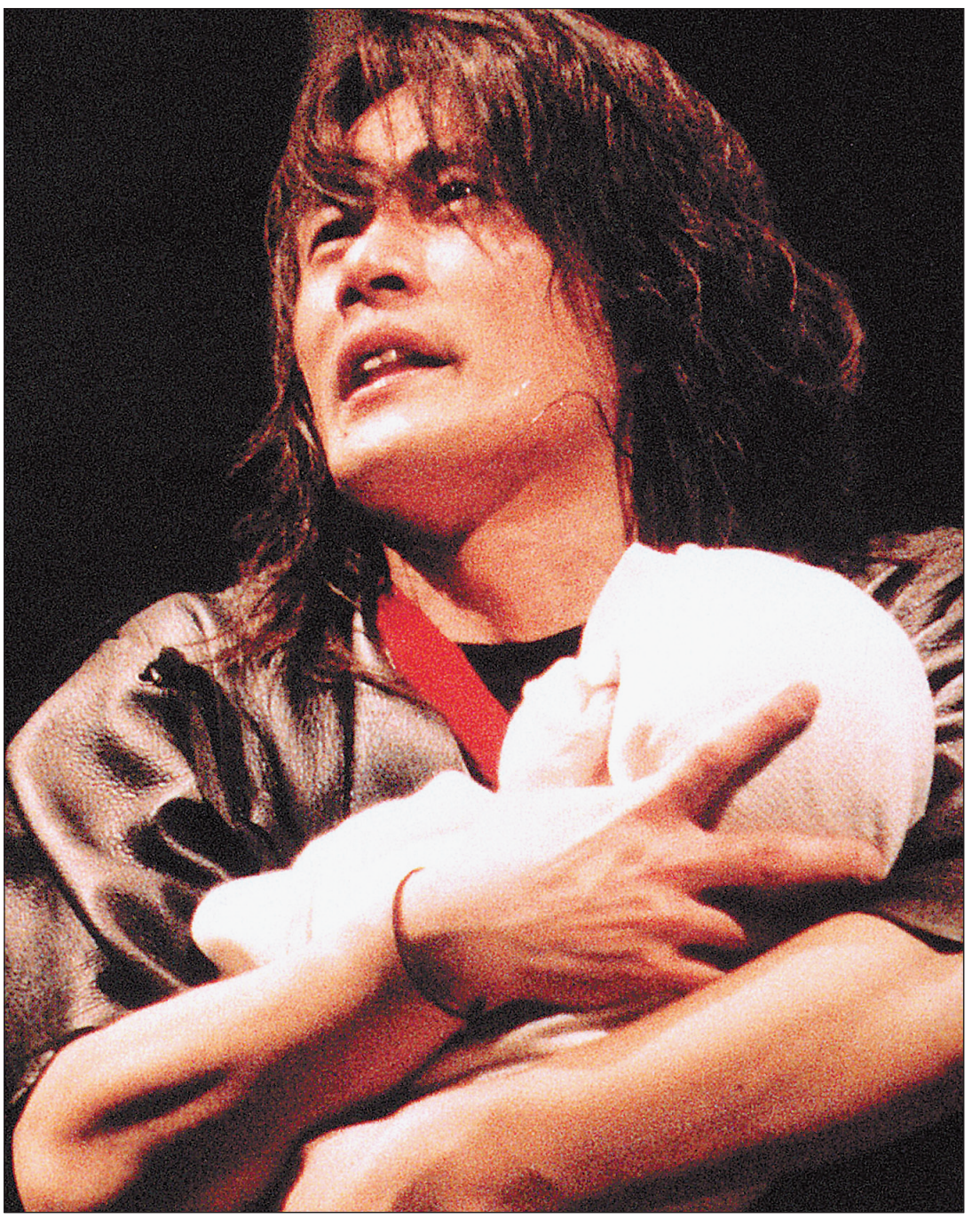
Nicholas de Jongh

WAR refugees — tattered, maimed and wounded — come streaming down the aisle to the accompaniment of machine-gun fire. Once arrived on the murky stage, which is traced with Tamotsu Harada's fine shafts of grey searchlights, they place parched mouths at the drinking-fountains on stage and stare at us in exhausted delight. This memorable scene of relief, of escape from warfare and suffering, prefaces and concludes Yukio Ninagawa's extraordinary, beautiful production of this late-Shakespearian romance. The scene described is Ninagawa's own invention and lacks direct relationship to Pericles. But its sense of restoration, of a happy ending snatched from catastrophe's jaws, conveys essential aspects of the epic fairytale: Prince Pericles suffers storms at sea, dangerous kings and queens on land and the apparent death of wife and daughter. Not until the final family reunion, when both women are restored to him, can he rest happy.

Ninagawa has often brought his own Japanese theatrical style, sensibility and flair for visual metaphor to Shakespeare. And Pericles offers the opportunity for the kind of spectacular scene-painting in which he famously excels. It moves from a bejewelled, royal banquet with tournaments to a storm-tossed ship and top person's brothel. Yet Ninagawa's Pericles mainly eschews spectacle, even using a toy ship and swirling sheets for the storm. Instead, it is delightfully conceived as a child-like fable, shifting from darkness to light, rich in ceremony, ritual and simplicities. But the music, at best beguiling, eerie Japanese whistles and dry twanging sounds, too often takes a turn for the West and worst with classic-pop lamentations.

Tsukasa Nakagoshi's imposing design of high, grey walls, with drinking-fountains and severed heads swinging in the air, is a claustrophobic, dream-like enclosure. The speaking style is rhetorical and impassioned. Gower's narrative, demonstrated by pupeteers with mirrored panels, is particularly delivered in this vehement manner. Masaaki Uchino's handsome, striking, pig-tailed Pericles in warrior-dress and ornamental cloak is radiant with swaggering power and athletic vigour, notably at the tournament: he woos Yuko Tanaka's smitten Thaisa. And Uchino movingly surrenders to vast howls of grief when Thaisa dies at sea and for one astonishing moment, literally rises from her coffin. Even though the great scene of reconciliation is muted, with Uchino missing out on ecstasy, Ninagawa's Pericles still captivates and compels.

● *Until 5 April. Box office: 020 7452 3000*



Radiant with swaggering power and athletic vigour: Masaaki Uchino as Prince Pericles

Terrible sweetness adds new depths to a superb Salome

OPERA

Salome

Barbican

Tannhauser

Royal Festival Hall

Brian Hunt

TWO operas in concert, one by Wagner himself, one by a later admirer. In fact, this weekend's performance of Richard Strauss's Salome had a particularly Wagnerian character, partly because of its cast: Jane Eaglen, taking the title role, is celebrated as a Brünnhilde and an Isolde; Matthew Best, who sang the Baptist, is a distinguished Wotan; and Peter Bronder's Herod had vivid shades of Mime, a role he has sung in Cleveland. Conductor Richard Hickox and the London Symphony Orchestra maintained superb balance both internally and with the singers, a feat that requires immense discipline, given the loudness of modern instruments. Although the damping-down process resulted in a dullness of orchestral phrasing in quieter passages, it was one of those nights when Hickox seemed much more than just a Really Useful Conductor.

To say that Eaglen is a vocally ideal Salome may seem silly, as part of the role's fascination is the way singers of utterly different style and personality have made it their own. But her unflagging ability to soar over the most voluminous orchestral climaxes, combined with the girlish informality of her tone, made the performance compelling. Rather than projecting a study in mental disintegration, she sang with what became, given the gruesome plot, a terrible sweetness.

If Eaglen (singing more steadily than of old) was the focus of attention at the Barbican, then conductor Franz Welser-Möst occupied that position for Tannhäuser. He was returning to the Festival Hall platform with Zurich Opera, the company to which he escaped after being mauled by sections of London's music press during his time at the LPO. The stellar cast (a reminder of the Swiss company's spending power) was placed behind the orchestra, allowing Welser-Möst to secure perfect balance; but it meant that by the time the voices reached the auditorium they were uniformly flat.

Peter Seiffert was smooth but a little strained in the title role; as Elisabeth, Solveig Kringelborn compromised gorgeous tone with rapid vibrato, but was visually a good foil for Liuba Chuchrova's raven-haired Venus (sung with a touch too much flamboyance). Thomas Hampson was a sturdy Wolfram, Alfred Muff a terrific Landgrave; Welser-Möst conducted warmly but without the important spark of spirituality in Act III to counterbalance the earlier eroticism.

Artificial proves better than vegetable

ART

Cristina Iglesias

Whitechapel Gallery

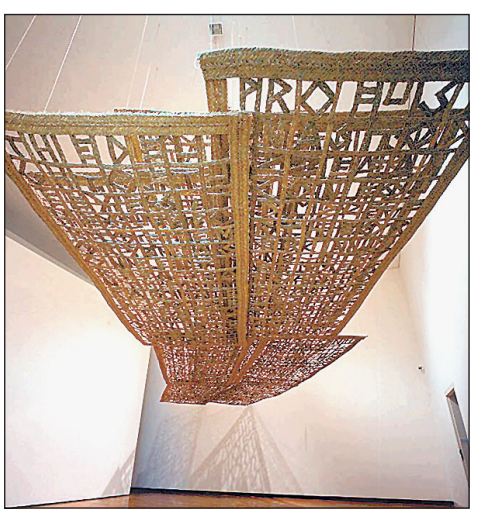
Nick Hackworth

ONE of Spain's most successful contemporary artists, Cristina Iglesias, now in her late 40s, belongs to a generation of international artists whose work has expanded conceptions of sculpture to include installations that incorporate elements of the pictorial, sculptural and architectural. Made between the early Nineties and now, the 40 works shown here revolve around the idea of space and environment, both man-made and organic, and their aesthetic and psychological reception by us.

Using various strategies, ranging from representation and allusion to actual physical interventions in the environment, she attempts to create strange and emotive "personal spaces", as is highlighted by the first work you experience. Suspended from the ceiling slightly above head height and just inside the gallery's entrance, Titled Hanging Ceiling is meant to at least surprise, perhaps even unnerve you. Large, flat, rectangular, grey and pitted with organically shaped indentations, it resembles a fossil bed dragged from beneath sea. Elsewhere, odd, intricately latticed screens that look Moorish in design stand together in odd formations. Like another ceiling-suspended piece, Passages, made of raffia, the screens incorporate abstract shapes and letters that make up fragmented quotes from Modernist novels and are repeated as silhouettes cast on floor and ceiling. The fullest expression of Iglesias's desire to manipulate environment, however, is found in the Vegetation Rooms, a series of corridors and alcoves made from panels of casts of dense organic matter such as leaves, stalks and flowers.

Ironically, it is Iglesias's earliest, most "traditional" sculptures that work best, for the artificiality of the art object both manages the viewer's expectations and allows meanings to be alluded to and played with. Most installations aim for "real" aesthetic and psychological effects in their audience that they simply cannot hope to achieve.

● *Continues until 18 May. Information: 020 7522 7871*



Suspense: Untitled (passage 1), made of raffia