

The Arts

THE buzz



Rattled? Not our Simon

One of the biggest problems for Simon Rattle (left) at the Berlin Philharmonic was the number of empty seats facing his podium, vacated mostly

by players who had grown bored over the past decade. So he will be feeling relieved that two rigorous auditions, a year apart, have brought him a new principal oboist. And he'll be feeling even more relieved that the newcomer is Jonathan Kelly, presently a member of the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra. Rattle apart, no musician in memory has gone straight from Brum to Berlin, regional league to Premiership.

The small world of the Royal Ballet's Cupid

Who is that cute Cupid in the Royal Ballet's inconsistent *Sleeping Beauty*? Take a bow Alfie MacGibbon, son of former RB Governor Ross McGibbon and Fred Ashton biographer Julie Kavanagh. Small world.

Professor will not allow library to go quietly

Edinburgh University, emulating Blair-friendly Bristol, has decided that it has too many "privileged" students and is changing its admission policy to favour "human potential" rather than the best exam results. As part of its egalitarian mission, the university is merging its music department into the School of Arts, Culture and the Environment and dismantling its world-famous Reid Library. For composer Nigel Osborne, who is Reid Professor at the university, this is the final straw. "I have no intention of betraying this trust," fumes Osborne in a widely-circulated resignation threat.



Revving up for La Scala

Six years ago he was a leather-jacketed dispatch rider. Come June, he will be making his La Scala debut in Janáček's *Cunning Little Vixen*.

London-based baritone David Wakeham is revving up for the big time.

Art lovers are bowled over by WC grace

Forget Kapoor's Marsyas at Tate Modern, Parker's strung-out Rodin at Tate Britain or Mueck's models at the National Gallery. The best works of modern art are to be found at the rear of the new West End restaurant-cum-gallery, Sketch — the toilets. These futuristic egg-shaped pods have had the splashing classes in raptures for some weeks now, with Damien Hirst a confirmed fan. Hugh Grant, though, is said to find them difficult to use.

Venice Biennale crowds reach a critical mass

The last Venice Biennale, reports the Art Newspaper, attracted 243,498 visitors in six months. The first 30,000, it notes, were accredited press. How many newspapers in the world have fine-art critics?

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Two characters in search of a writer



Make-up girls: Mel Giedroyc and Sue Perkins spent so much of their show ad-libbing that they might as well have improvised the entire performance

CURRENTLY plying their trade on the morning car-crash telly of RE:SE, Mel Giedroyc and Sue Perkins could be forgiven for being intimidated by the packed house at the Arts Theatre. They don't usually get these viewing figures. Their natural response, though, is the same as ever. They treat the crowd to a shambolic, infectious mix of shameless mugging and overgrown student japes.

This is a show with innumerable highs and lows. At times the twosome trade so heavily on their charm one wants to throw things at the stage. A script for instance. Comedy thrives on spontaneity but they go off-the-cuff so often, pointing out fluffs or the rickety sets, that they might as well do an entirely improvised evening.

These unrehearsed moments tend to provide the highlights. At one point during *Leather*

COMEDY

Mel & Sue

Arts Theatre

Bruce Dessau

Island, a lame detective spoof featuring Lovejoy and Bergerac and a range of antique quips, a mobile phone rang. The culprit was press-ganged into playing the corpse. One couldn't help thinking that the timing and Sue's rapid response were so immaculate it had to be planned. Perhaps next Sunday it will be.

Theirs is an odd brand of camp, filtered through Seventies TV comedy. Expository scenes from an upright bed conjure up images

of both Morecambe and Wise and a Sapphic subtext. A sketch featuring them as shrill holiday reps was a little too Victoria Wood-ish, but things were redeemed by a tribute to Thora Hird, the couple squabbling over custody of the Stannah stairlift.

The nostalgic references do become tiresome after a while. Do we really need a Billy Joel tribute and knee-jerk jests about Peter Purves and Spacehoppers? But when their imaginations take flight Mel & Sue are capable of sheer brilliance. Their ageing luvvies, nursing murderous grudges towards Judi Dench, are pockets of genius.

This is a light, frothy show, with possibly the shortest second half on theatrical record. Then again, they have to be up early for their televisual day job. Or maybe they were nipping home to write some actual jokes.

Also 23 and 30 March. Box office: 020 7836 3334.

Caught in an overcrowded landscape

WHEN Richard Billingham was short-listed for the Turner Prize in 2001, many thought the nomination was mistimed. In 1996 he gained instant attention for his snapshots of his dysfunctional family in their council flat in a depressed area of the West Midlands — a true picture of working-class poverty. The art world, which has always had a nervously schizophrenic attitude to wealth and class, naturally embraced the work, revelling in its grittiness. It was subsequently included in the seminal Sensation exhibition and shown worldwide. If he was to be nominated, it should have been then. By the time he was included in the Turner Prize the family photos were old news and his new work,

EXHIBITION

Richard Billingham

Anthony Reynolds Gallery, W1

Nick Hackworth

essentially landscape photography, was both less sensational, less remarkable and something of a disappointment.

On show here are eight recent photographs in the same vein, calm, composed images, some of landscapes devoid of people, others of populated environments. Unlike his previous landscape images these are taken across the world — in Ethiopia, Pakistan and England — and are taken with a medium

format camera that gives depth and detail. The results are good but not exceptional.

Village in Pakistan shows a busy, dusty intersection. Sunlight filters in through the trees on a steep hill in the top right corner of the composition, casting a measure of serenity across the men going about their business, a sumptuously ornate truck and scuffed advertising boards. *Ethiopian Landscape III* reveals a lush, green and bucolic scene of men crossing a stream, gathering wood and other wholesomely natural activities. *Storm at Sea*, meanwhile, has great abstract qualities, the clouds, mist, sea and shore creating harmonious swathes of deep greys and blues.

Unfortunately Billingham, like all artists who display straight photography, labours in the shadow of the enormous mountain of images our culture produces. Being an ex-painter he has more of an eye for composition than most, and certainly he is aiming to capture the timeless quality possessed by the greatest landscape painting and photography. However, these images do not achieve that aim and, attractive though most of them are, they do not stand clearly apart from the sea of images that surrounds us.

Until 17 April. Further information: 020 7439 2201.

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