

Going Out Reviews

Hindu epic shines

THE RAMAYANA ★

Olivier, National Theatre

Rachel Halliburton

FAITH may move mountains, but in Peter Oswald's reworking of the Ramayana, a stubborn monkey god proves equally effective. The episode when this monkey god, Hanuman, is sent to pick a herb and returns with a significant sample of the Himalayas, is emblematic of a production where the comic blends freely with the miraculous, and a directly colourful style evokes the elusively mystical.

Director Indhu Rubasingham has worked hard to eliminate the alienation factor between a largely secular multicultural audience and a Hindu epic that draws deep on notions of good, evil, and redemption.

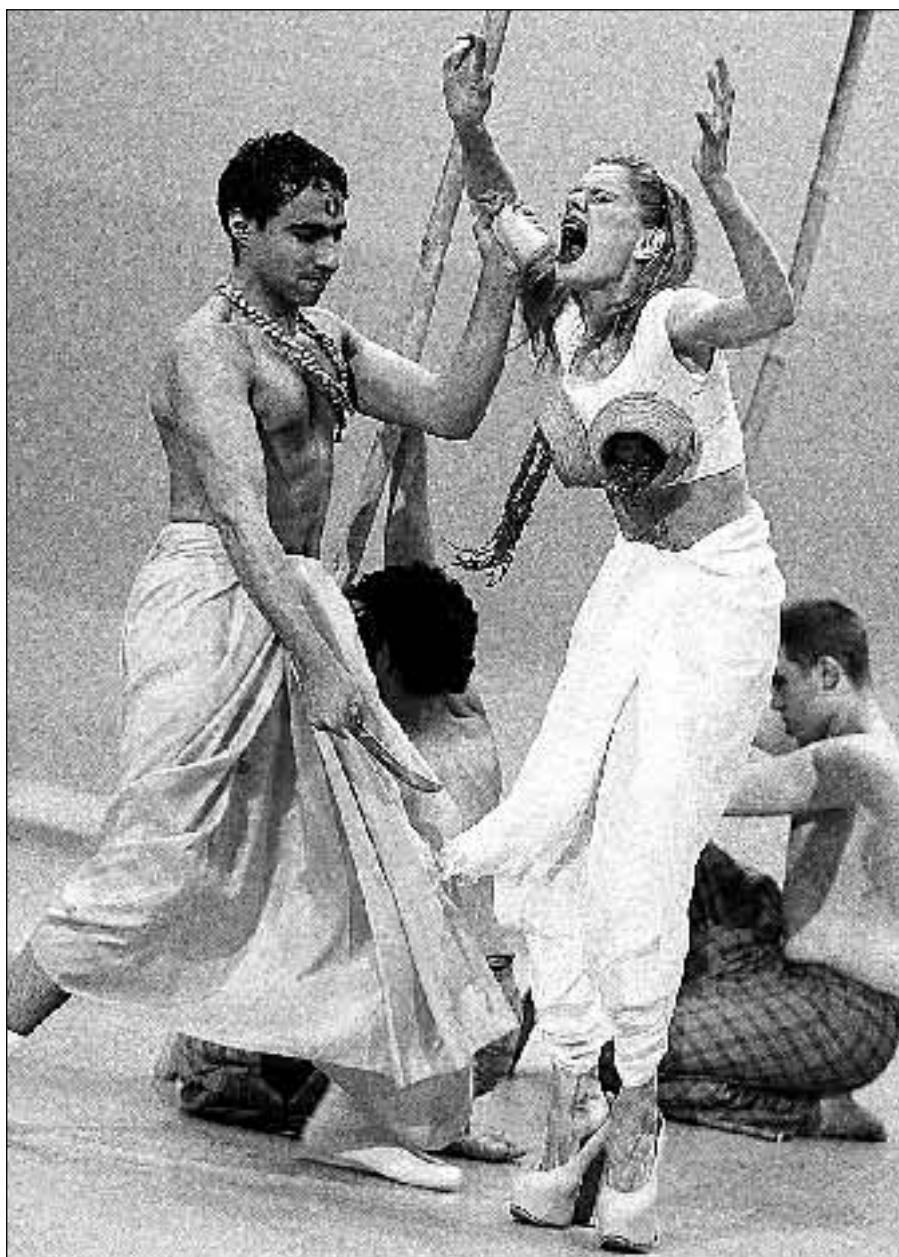
As the Olivier fills up, a cast member calls out to audience members to "make yourselves feel at home" and house lights shining throughout the action allow tales of demons, royalty, and monkeys to spill freely into the auditorium.

Rama — central figure to the Ramayana — stands resplendent in metallic blue body-paint on the stage.

The son of king Dasharatha, he also represents the god Vishnu, who has descended to earth to be born in human form so that he can fight with the demon Ravana. Peter Oswald has adapted the myth from the point when Rama and his wife Sita are living in semi-voluntary exile.

When Sita is kidnapped by the demon Ravana, a long battle begins to win her back.

Rubasingham's bright populist touch certainly removes the cultural awkwardness from approaching these unfamiliar characters, but sometimes it feels that the story has been over-



Not just monkeying around: Guy Rhys and Charlotte Bicknell

simplified. This could be due to its visual presentation — given the vast resources of the Olivier, there is next to no variation in the basic white lighting — but for the first part of the production, it feels as if the characters are little more than cut-outs from a beautifully illustrated book, somewhat stranded on the large stage.

There is a redeeming ingenious quality, however, to a production that allows beer-crates to evoke cliffs by the sea and transports its whirling demons on bureaucratic swivel-chairs. At some points, you wonder if Rubasingham has

irreverently taken a bet that she could stage a show at the National for £50, as your eye falls on vast swathes of cardboard fixed round the stage and some of the more plastic props.

Ramon Tikaram's dignified Rama is ably supported by Ayesha Dharker's heartfelt Sita and Miltos Yerolemos's enjoyably happy-go-lucky Hanuman, in a story that develops in human interest. Ultimately this culturally complex banquet has been successfully reborn as a light dish that slips down with ease. ● *Until 21 April. Box office: 020 7452 3000.*

A bite that still eludes

GISELLE/Royal Ballet ★

Royal Opera House

Anne Sacks

GISELLE, the most famous ballet of the Romantic age, is inspired by the restless yearning of poets hellbent, to the point of death, on pursuing the unattainable woman, usually a ghost. Giselle is that spirit or, more ominously, the shy village girl who is jilted and dies before her wedding only to join a sisterhood of vampires fixated on wreaking vengeance on men. That's what becomes of the brokenhearted. It is a ballet of contrasting halves between earth and air, day and night, the physical and metaphysical. Dance legend has it that a ballerina usually excels in the earthy act or in the second supernatural act but seldom in both. And so it proved with Sarah Wildor on Saturday and Tamara Rojo last night. Rojo's radiance and innocence enlivened the village act, whereas Wildor was celestial in the lugubriousness that suffused the mystical act.

Wildor and Rojo provide yet another contrast. Wildor is blonde, light and ethereal; Rojo dark, earthy, and graceful. Wildor's finest moment is her confrontation with the intractable Queen of Wilis to

shield her guilty and remorseful lover (Jonathan Cope). She is not only tender but nurturing in her last feminine act before joining the band of man-eaters. Wildor's fluid arms transform her into the ghostly creature of the haunted forest, while Rojo's strong footwork buoys her dancing and her expressive face melts hearts. Even the haughty aristocratic woman to whom her philandering lover (Johan Kobborg) is engaged finds her irresistible.

Neither is wholly artistically supported by a ragged corps de ballet of Wilis, or vampiric spirits, who should be proud and triumphant in their full gauzy skirts as they prey on the grieving gamekeeper Hilarion, in love with Giselle and unprotected by her. Muriel Valtat in the dances for six on Saturday, looked as if she had staggered in from the afternoon's Grand National on lame legs and crumbly feet, but last night's group, led by Jane Burn and Hubert Essakow, were lively and polished. The complete Giselle still eludes the Royal Ballet.

● *In repertory to 16 May. Box office: 020 7304 4000.*

Barbarism as entertainment

STATIC/CLEAN ★

Riverside Studios

Patrick Marmion

WE'VE all been there: munching dinner on the sofa while distant atrocities are played out on television. The status of others' barbarism as virtual entertainment is a troubling one in the cosseted West, and Chris Thorpe certainly provides salutary food for thought on this unsettling subject. His play *Static* is a couple of unflinching monologues, delivered in tandem from three immaculate squares of snow-like salt. One is about a cocky young man returning from work to eat dinner and watch telly. The other is about a Kosovar woman waiting her turn to be shot in the back of the head.

As the man, Jon Spooner is averagely self-absorbed, hatching idle masturbation fantasies on public transport. The first sting in his tale comes when his description of shopping in an odourless supermarket is set against the scent of "growing things" in the woodland selected as the terminus for Clare Duffy's Kosovar woman. The title of the play refers to the stasis of the man's anaesthetic routines and the numbing effect of the horror experienced by the woman. But *Static* also has a more troubling implication — suggesting a nastily settled synergy between couch potato and human sacrifice.

Clare Duffy is also the writer of the more whimsical companion piece for Leeds's Unlimited Theatre, *Clean*. It lacks Thorpe's rigour and craftsmanship. It's a new take on the tale of the French maids who murdered their employers in 1933 and inspired Jean Genet's most famous play. Here, Duffy's two psychotic sisters are living in a mutually sustained fantasy world with its own private games and language. You know the sisters have done something wicked, but never know exactly what. Extrapolating from their regressive rivalry, the suggestion is that childish indolence is the gateway to murderous excess. However this is not an idea set out with anything like the clinical technique that Thorpe displays in *Static*.

● *Until Saturday. Box office: 020 8237 1111.*

Coming to a screen near you

AFTER the fall of the once mighty Nasdaq and the pricking of the over-inflated dotcom bubble it would be churlish to expect anyone to get excited about anything internet-related for some while yet. But this exhibition (the UK's first internet art exhibition in a major public space) is a timely reminder that the internet was once a terra nova in which artists, academics and techies congregated and brought Utopian ideas about how technology could change the world. Then it became a virtual extension of the shopping mall. And then it went bust.

The three pieces of work on show each articulate a critical response to this ongoing commercialisation of the internet. Collectively, they accurately represent the socially and politically engaged character of internet art that stands at sharp odds with the art that dominated the scene for the past

ART NOW: Art and Money Online ★★

Tate Britain

Nick Hackworth

decade — art that refuses to stand for anything excepts its own status as art, and not even that sometimes.

The most exciting piece, almost breathtaking in its complexity, is Black Shoals Stock Market Planetarium. The work takes live, global stock-market data, provided by a Reuters data feed, and represents the information as a night sky projected onto a dome within a darkened room — highlighting the existence of private, commercial networks that have made information the ultimate commodity. Each of the thousands of stars that flicker in the sky represents a listed company and, grouped together in clusters and constellations, they represent



What a waste: Free Agent by Redundant Technology Initiative

market sectors. As the companies rise and fall in price, so do the stars brighten or dim. There's also a colony of artificial-life creatures that swim through the stellar void feeding on the energy of the glowing stars.

CNN Interactive just got more Interactive, meanwhile, by Thomson and Craighead, invites users to surf the live CNN site while listening to soundtracks provided by the artists. As the soundtrack options include Jubilant, Festive, Dramatic,

Contemplative and Disaster, the potential results are predictably amusing. Continuing the activist tenor, a group of artists and activists, the Redundant Technology Initiative, has produced a piece called Free Agent, which highlights the vast waste of technical equipment in our economy.

In time the critical voice of internet art may be silenced by the art market. Till then it deserves to be heard.

● *Until 3 June. Information: 020 7887 8008.*

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