



Witch-hunt: Brid Brennan and Mali Harries play mother and daughter in Verga's *La Lupa*

The cry of the she-wolf

IT'S hard to believe this 1896 play hails from a hot, Catholic country with a powerful matriarchal tradition. This is probably partly the effect of the *verismo* or ruggedly naturalistic writing of Sicilian Giovanni Verga, who saw fit to recount the experience of his contemporary peasants in a language more closely associated with the frozen Protestant north. But it is also an effect carried forward by David Lan's taciturn adaptation and Simona Gonella's minimalist RSC production that transfers to the Barbican from Stratford.

Beloved of DH Lawrence, himself a rather more colourful and symbolic writer, Verga seems to share Lawrence's horror and fascination with angst-ridden animalism and sexuality. The action starts with a harvest festival party in a barn, cock-a-hoop with song and dance. Pina, the sexually voracious she-wolf of the title, wants to copulate with an aloof young harvester, Nanni, who in turn has his heart set on Pina's blushing daughter, Mara. The story then becomes a sexually-driven witch-hunt — a miniature

LA LUPA ○
The Pit, Barbican
Patrick Marmion

precursor of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* — as the disapproving peasants demonise Pina's unbridled libido.

David Lan's translation adopts a puritanical tone as colourless as David Fielding's and Nicky Gillibrand's design, which occupies the all-white set of Richard II, but which was originally a clinically bleached format anyway. Although Lan's tone seems in keeping with Verga's austerity, it makes for a drily pious experience, reducing the action to its bare mechanics. Nanni, for example, is accused of always joking but hasn't a single funny line, and Pina's sexual determination is insisted upon rather than celebrated.

Flown from Milan to direct the play, Gonella follows the elemental apparatus of Verga's *verismo*, but there is also more than

a touch of Brechtian machismo. Her treatment is less about peasant realism than it is about meditating on the musculature of its own artifice. The scene change between acts one and two is therefore effected with the parading of the props and Pina's daughter Mara strapping on a pregnancy girdle under her dress. The result is unembroidered melodrama with only terracotta ropes and lanterns for décor, as well as distant country sound effects.

The almost solemnly disciplined acting is also rigorously unembellished with many of the actors reduced to authorial mouthpieces — especially Glynn Sweet and Janet White-side as the moralistic older folk. Brid Brennan is a hard Pina, controlling rather than seducing, Declan Conlon's soft, gentle Nanni and bullying Mali Harries as her rose-cheeked innocent of a daughter. It's a dynamic that works in terms of articulating the play's brooding themes, but it is also a somewhat sexless, pleasureless ritual.

● *Until Saturday 24 February. Box office: 020 7638 8891.*

Fun, fame and the trouble with Gavin



Gavin Turk: artistic ends

GAVIN Turk likes to pretend he's famous. He notoriously failed his Royal College of Art MA for presenting at his degree show, an English Heritage plaque commemorating his own presence at the college. Since then he's assumed the personas of, amongst others, Sid Vicious and Marat for a series of life-size wax works, aping our obsession with fame by appropriating it for himself.

So when he announced a two-week-long series of events and discussions entitled *The Story of Che Gavara*, there was confusion (*Gav* as in *Gavin*...). Would the two weeks focus on the real Che as the publicity claimed? Would they bring a 1968-style collaboration between artists and crusty political activists? Or would Turk, as usual, appropriate an icon for his own, purely artistic, ends?

Well, the two weeks kicked off on Monday to a mildly inauspicious start.

GAVIN TURK/
The Che Gavara
Story ★
The Foundry, Great Eastern
Street, EC2
Nick Hackworth

After the media circus had departed and the smoked salmon and cream cheese bagels (Che's favourite snack?) had been eaten, there were only 10 of us left at the inaugural meeting. Seated on plastic chairs in a cold, sunlit room above a shabby pub in Shoreditch, we formed a rag-tag band of assorted journo and artists and waited to see what would happen. Not much, unfortunately. We talked mainly about what should happen over the

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

next two weeks. But we seemed unsure as to whether we should be learning about Che, making art or generally go around being socialist in some unspecified way.

At least the two weeks of organised chaos promise to be fun, if not the genesis of a new political era. A German reporter from *Der Spiegel* asked hopefully if there were likely to be any Zapatista guerrillas hanging around London, and if so could we get in touch with them? The suggestion somehow got lost in the consensual debate.

● *Discussions and activities begin at 11am during the day (planning and activities) and 7pm in the evening (films, talks, cigar smoking). Mon-Sat. Location: The New Foundry, 84-86 Great Eastern Street, London EC2 (Side door). To participate call 0207 379 6932 or visit www.yearoftheartist.com, or just turn up.*

At last, a man who knows how to smoulder

ENGLISH NATIONAL BALLET ★★

Coliseum

Anne Sacks

AS part of its 50th anniversary celebrations, English National Ballet is presenting a mixed programme with two signatures, Michel Fokine's *Les Sylphides* and Harald Lander's *Etudes*. *Voluntaries* was scheduled but cancelled through injuries and replaced by four pas de deux. The alteration turned into wonderful opportunities for the young dancers Yosvani Ramos and Erina Takahashi and principal Monica Perego. They are the impromptu stars of the show, shining in their scheduled roles and causing a sensation in the *Le Corsaire* and *Don Quixote pas de deux* respectively with ravishing dancing.

Ramos, who is Cuban, is a revelation. He is the poet in *Les Sylphides*, and the only man. *Les Sylphides* is a flowing and poetic ode to romantic ballet that rebels against the frenzy of technique by restoring lightness and ethereality. Most men who dance the poet seem never to blend with the tranquil ethos but Ramos, with his smouldering matinee-idol looks, achieves the extraordinary by merging with the serenity transmitted by the floating sylphs. His constrained and meditative dancing never disrupts the delicacy of the mood so exquisitely created by the company. He and Takahashi are adorable in the flamboyant *Le Corsaire pas de deux* with Ramos adopting the dramatic flourishes of the Kirov's Faroukh Ruzimatov without compromising taste or technique. Agnes Oaks is vivacious in Derek Deane's *Impromptu*, a duet that tests partnering with Thomas Edur catching, launching and steadying Oaks with panache.

Etudes is a bouquet of virtuosity with women in sparkling white or stark black tutus and men in silver shooting through all the tricks in the book with dazzling style, aristocratic glamour and commendable skill. They are a credit to themselves and to director Derek Deane, who has created a top-flight company.

● *Tonight only. Box office: 020 7632 8300.*

Fast footwork in 10 movements

JANE WATTS ★★

St John's Smith Square

Rick Jones

MOST organists can make a fist of Widor's *Toccata*, the flashy organ piece most frequently requested at the end of wedding services, but comparatively few have played the complete six-movement solo organ symphony it comes from, or any of the other nine such works for which jovial old Charles-Marie Widor (1844-1937) was responsible.

The Welsh organist Jane Watts bucked the trend last night when she embarked on a five-concert recital series to play all 10 on the handsome Klais (Sainsbury) organ in St John's. She began with *Organ Symphony No 2* which has unexpected delights. The *Pastorale* sounds like *The Teddy Bears' Picnic*. That would perk up the congregation on a Sunday morning. Not that these are religious works. Widor composed them to provide the King of Instruments with a repertoire rather than to flatter the church.

That being said, the fourth movement is a dazzling *Salve Regina* with a seraphic trumpet-stop entry for the pedals. We could see Watts' impressively fast footwork in the screen on stage. It is a pity this innovation has done nothing for the popularity of organ recitals. Jam-packed it was not.

Watts played *No 4* with less assurance. Some of the runs in the opening *toccata* were blurred. Still, the Bach-like *Fugue* had clarity, the *voix celeste* stop in the *Andante Cantabile* suggested a revivalist hymn, while the amusing, chorister-friendly *Scherzo* perforated the air with a chuckling, pin-prick *staccato*. Every organist should learn it. The next concert includes the famous *Toccata*. Time to renew vows.

● *Jane Watts plays Widor's Organ Symphonies Nos 10 and 5 on Tuesday 30 January at St John's Smith Square (020 7222 1061).*