

The Arts

Rivals are outfoxed

OPERA

The Cunning Little Vixen
Royal Academy of Music

Brian Hunt

WHEN it scheduled Janáček's *The Cunning Little Vixen*, did the Royal Academy of Music know it would be engaging the Royal Opera House in a head-to-head? If the administrators were aware their students would be performing hot on the heels of a stellar cast at Covent Garden, they can hardly have made a more provocative move than bringing in Sir Charles Mackerras as conductor. Through his recordings and live performances, the Australian maestro has established himself as the world's leading interpreter of the Czech composer's operas.

Yet would his presence be enough for this low-budget effort to emerge from the shadow of Bill Bryden's intelligent and much-admired ROH production, with its technically extravagant sets and costumes? By comparison with William Dudley's designs, Michael Holt's animal costumes are somewhere between *Nativity Play* and *Dr Who*. But they work well enough, as do the simple sets.

Director Anna Sweeny cannot fly in acrobats or rely on metamorphic scenery to hold audience interest in the long orchestral passages, so she has to coax mime and movement from her cast members — and singers, whether students or

celebrities, are rarely physically eloquent.

But however gawky this production looks at times on the cramped stage of the Sir Jack Lyons Theatre, it shows perfect understanding of the opera's related but differentiated human and animal worlds. That is a crucial advantage over the Royal Opera. And Jenny Ohlson's assumption of the title role is much more confident than was Dawn Upshaw's on her first night in Covent Garden — she is superbly plucky and vivacious. Delphine Gillot matches her strength of characterisation as the Fox and sings magnificently.

Although Rodney Clarke was miscast as the Forester, his namesake Andrew showed a tenor with a fine bloom as the Schoolmaster, Seung-Wook Seong was a swaggering Poacher, and Sofia Flodin's funny and nicely sung Dog deserves singling out.

As for the trump card himself, Mackerras utterly outshines John Eliot Gardiner's tentative effort at the ROH. He has the Academy Sinfonia playing their hearts out — the massive chords are planted like oak trees, the phrasing aches and soars and sings. The devastating candour of his rapturous interpretation (he returns for the last night) perfectly suits the honesty of the production. Alexander Briger conducts tonight and tomorrow; the cast changes from tomorrow.

● *Until 29 March.*
Box office: 020 7873 7300.



Animal magic: superb performances from Jenny Ohlson (Vixen) and Delphine Gillot (Fox)

Jonathan Docker-Drysdale

Satire as subtle as a wayward cluster bomb

THEATRE

War Crime

Theatre Underground, WC1

Fiona Mountford

THE last piece of news that I heard before entering the crypt of St Andrew's Church to see *War Crime* was about suspected civilian casualties because of erroneous coalition bombing of a Baghdad market. David Williams's play, about the lead-up to and after-effects of an off-course cluster bomb during the American intervention in Kosovo in 1999, could, therefore, not have been better timed. Sadly, this chronological coincidence is about the only thing in its favour.

It's a shame the inaugural performance in this atmospheric underground space, until recently home to 3,000 coffins, is such a load of one-dimensional twaddle. For Williams, who also directs, is out to Make A Point, viz the British and Americans are Ignorant Cultural Imperialists and Innocent People Get Hurt in a War. Well, thanks Sherlock. I've got Mr Annan on hold for you here.

In a meta-fictional courtroom — and we know we're at least two removes from reality because there's a spurious framing device of a television crew at work — Gordana, a young waitress from the Serbian town of Nisch, is questioned along with the American pilot who dropped the fatal payload. The interrogator, a smooth-talking Brit called Robinson, with an unexplained interest in everyone's leisure activities, favours the Yanks — no! — and, because this is a Biting Satire, ends up proving Gordana responsible for her own death. How we all laughed in a *Hollow and Knowing Fashion*. The troubles in Ireland even get a late look-in. Bring on those Issues, say I.

Isabel Pollen does her best with Gordana, although any leading part that boasts "I'm not from f***ing Poland" as its best line is clearly not waving but drowning. David Gyasi's American lieutenant has a nice line in staccato sentences ending with the word "Sir!", but he problematically makes his character more humane than the weak script can bear.

By all means let theatre make anti-war feelings known, as the admirable Latchmere in *Battersea* is doing with its excellent *Two Into War*. Peaceful sentiments have just got to be a lot better argued than they are here to stop those tanks rolling.

● *Until 19 April.*
Box office: 020 7583 3913.

How to turn dross into commercial gold

EXHIBITION

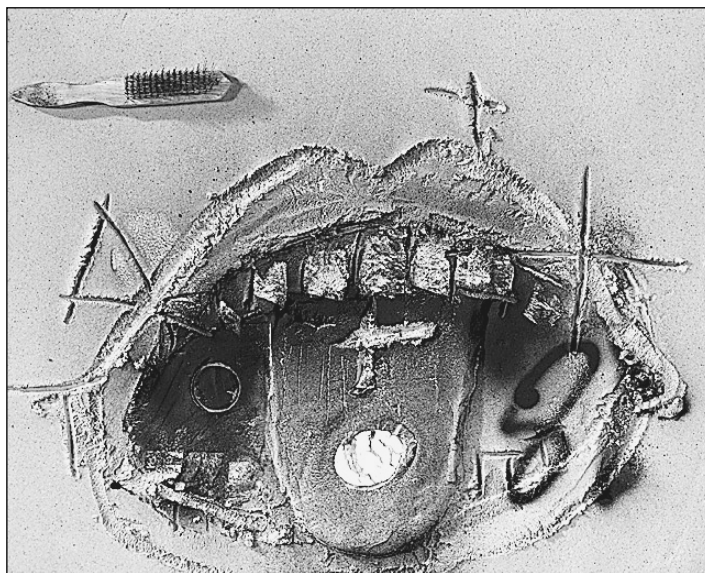
Antoni Tàpies

Waddington Galleries, W1

Nick Hackworth

FETED in the four corners of the world, winner of numerous awards and the subject of scores of retrospectives in important galleries, Antoni Tàpies, now 80 years old, has long been Spain's most eminent artist. Regarding himself as something akin to an alchemist, he has, for almost half a century, created rough, abstract, mixed-media paintings that combine painterly marks with rough textured surfaces, man-made objects and a smattering of cryptic symbols that are intended to endow them all with transformative, mysterious and magical auras.

Looking at the 14 paintings on show however, it is clear that the only successful alchemy here is that of the art dealer in turning such base material into the gold of hard currency. All executed within the last four years, the paintings suffer from a fatal lack of finesse. As is his wont,



Tàpies has littered the works with his initials and cross motifs, mostly drawn by finger into the sandy surfaces he has slapped on to half the canvases, where they look absurdly self-conscious and anything but magical. The applied textures do little to liven

up the proceedings, but worst of all are the silly things that Tàpies has incorporated into some of his pieces.

The largest painting on show, *Collage Sobre Materia*, for example, would have been quite nice with its internal interplay between various forms and

Cutting edge art or an advert for dentistry? *Collage del Raspall* by Antoni Tàpies (2001)

textures, had Tàpies not stuck a small blank canvas on to the lower left-hand side of the work, a gesture worthy of a foundation course student. Far more embarrassing is *Raspall*, which consists of 10 brush-heads that have been inexplicably but cruelly separated from their broom handles and planted, bristles facing outwards, into the work's sandy background, each one above a crude eye-shape drawn in black paint. While in the most figurative work, *Collage del Raspall*, illustrated here, a wire brush seems to serve as a mobile signifier for the importance of oral hygiene.

That Tàpies's late work should fail to impress should not surprise. Like many venerable contemporary artists he is trapped by the limited nature of his previous practice. When figuration held sway and art practice was largely skill based, passing age naturally implied greater proficiency since practice made perfect.

When your artistic activity, however, is a combination of deliberately crude mark-making, assemblage and emitting an aura, it's hard to see how practice can help.

● *Until 26 April. Information: 02078512200.*