

## Reviews

# Modern Japan exposed

FACTS OF LIFE ★

Hayward Gallery

Nick Hackworth

FOR anyone who has not thought of using a live tortoise as a sex toy, this exhibition will be a revelation. In a tasteful series of black-and-white photographs, we see an attractive Japanese lady simulating fellatio with a tortoise. I say with, rather than on, because it is the entire tortoise, led by its suggestively-shaped head, that appears to be disappearing into her mouth.

Although this is the largest exhibition of contemporary Japanese art ever seen in London, it was inevitable that Araki, veteran photographer of the carnal, would steal the show. The tortoise series is hidden amid a mass of photographs depicting copulating couples and posing models, all of which are mounted directly onto the gallery walls, creating a seamless wall of writhing flesh. Part pornography, part sociology, Araki's images belie the traditional view of Japan as a nation of prudes.

Araki is only one of a number of big names included in the show. Hiroshi Sugimoto, who has exhibited widely in London this year, contributes a mesmeric video piece called Accelerated Buddha, consisting of a five-minute loop of 16 still images taken in a temple in Kyoto that is filled with life-size statues of the Buddhist goddess of love. The images are repeated ever quicker, until the entrancing soundtrack reaches a climax and the images become one, a symbolic insight into the underlying unity of all things.

Yukio Fujimoto, fresh from the Venice Biennale, uses his sound sculptures to make a similar point. His simplest piece is the



Child's eye view: from a series by Takashi Homma as part of the Hayward exhibition

most effective. Up on one of the roof terraces, a chair sits between two plastic pipes mounted at ear level. Drawn up to the ears, the pipes distort and magnify the surrounding ambient sound, creating a weird humming, forcing us, as intended, to find interest in the most humdrum of phenomena, background noise.

The inclusion of a fair number of younger artists brings a vibrancy to the exhibition. Tadasu Takamine and Masashi Iwasaki present Inertia, a video of a young woman

strapped, as the conceit would have us believe, to the front of a bullet train and engaged in a desperate battle to keep her dress from flying up above her waist, all of which operates as a metaphor for the dehumanising force of technological progress. Given the knee-jerk tendency to brand the Japanese as a nation of technophiles, its inclusion helps mark out the changes that the country has undergone in recent times.

● Hayward Gallery, South Bank, SE1. Until 9 December.

# Small spaces, grand designs

IN 1964, the director Peter Glenville decided to transfer Anouilh's play onto celluloid, crowning Peter O'Toole as the petulant monarch Henry II, and assigning him Richard Burton as his turbulent priest.

The film was seen by some to be superior to the stage version, since the medium carried an obvious advantage for depicting the hunting and battle scenes, so it seems incredibly brave to confine this play to the tiny Southwark Playhouse.

But designer Anna Toumanova has created a cloistered dream out of a potential claustrophobic nightmare, so that audience members walk into a darkened room to have their ears serenaded by choral music and their noses pleasantly assailed by incense. A small diamond-shaped stage rises up in the centre of the auditorium, and when the music crescendos and the lights finally go up, a bearded, half-naked man is seen on his knees in prayer.

That sense of theatricality which is so central both to organised Christianity and the monarchy eventually makes this play seem eminently suited to the stage. The half-naked man, it emerges, is the repentant Henry II engaged in mental self-flagellation for causing the death of his former friend, Thomas Becket; the rest of the drama is a series of flashbacks to the initially flamboyant lifestyle the two shared during their friendship.

This is a drama about personal chemistry

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

BECKET: THE HONOUR OF GOD ★

Southwark Playhouse

Rachel Halliburton

as much as politics — and while Rupert Degas, as Henry, displays plenty of willfulness and petulance, he acts too teddy-bearishly to give a convincingly monarchical edge to his temper-tantrums. As Becket,

# Shock troops subdued

THE British pianist Nicolas Hodges gave the first of two violent performances of La Femme 100 Têtes by the American composer George "Bad Boy" Antheil (1900-1959) on Monday. The 35-minute suite was composed in 1933 in response to the surrealist Max Ernst's "collage-novel" of the same name. No collaboration was intended then but devotees of Antheil's music have long wanted to experience the music and images simultaneously — that is how it was presented here in an inappropriately comfortable lecture theatre.

Hodges painted the air with rhythmic pounding discords, wild random leaps, scales of inoffensive banality, visceral bass riffs, tiny fussy melodic details, wide-stepping, low-high nightmare tunes and commonplace harmonies. None of this related directly to any of Ernst's projected grey engravings —

Colin Salmon has the necessary austere aloofness and gravitas, but he needs to be far more confident to convey both why he was so magnetic to the king, and why devout religion suited his charismatic character.

Even so, the production possesses an intriguing religious chic. Fine-tuning from the leads could make this intimately very powerful.

● Until 20 October. Box office: 020 7620 3494.

NICOLAS HODGES ★

Tate Modern

Rick Jones

diaphanous old-fashioned nudes intruding on scenes of violence, dismemberment, execution, fear and bewilderment — but both elements were suffused with the troubling uncertainties of their mid-century decade. Would it come to war? In fact, there is little of art beyond these time-bound works' desire to startle and we have, meanwhile, become used to far greater provocations. Ideally, we should have torn up the seats and reacted with disgust but the evening ended with a genteel question session.

● The performance is repeated on Monday at the Tate Modern. Tel: 020 7887 8888.

# Sharp wit for the bop zone

GILAD ATZMON AND THE ORIENT HOUSE ENSEMBLE ★ ★

Pizza Express, Dean St, W1

Jack Massarik

JACKIE Mason, ex-rabbi and New York super-comic, was appallingly unfunny on BBC FiveLive this week on post-twin towers attitudes. Not so Israeli saxophonist and ex-soldier Gilad Atzmon, who launched his latest album, Nostalgico, in London last night with a volley of crisp political quips.

"Good to see so many men here tonight," he said, "when your country is preparing to go to war." Or later: "We don't want to mention anthrax, but our new album sums up the last century for the very short next one." And: "We just got back from Algeria, where they have a folk song, Wahele, Wahele (illustrating it with soprano sax and drums), just like God Save the Queen. And they want it back."

Between gags, his mix of bop and klezmer was delivered with such visual, shoulder-hunched passion that, after po-faced performances by so many recent bands, he could hardly lose. Largely ignoring his main instrument, the alto sax, he picked up the more vocal clarinet and soprano sax to give famous jazz numbers like Petite Fleur and Footprints ("Wayne Shorter's foot-and-mouth print") a unique blend of snappy East Coast and soulful West Bank.

His precis of the 20th century involved Gershwin's It Ain't Necessarily So, the middle-eight of Duke Ellington's Caravan, and the first eight of Kurt Weill's Mack the Knife. Sidemen Frank Harrison, Oli Hayhurst and Asif Serkis on piano, bass and drums played sensitive supporting roles behind a sharp-witted leader with radical ideas well worth hearing.

● Until Saturday. Box office: 020 7439 8722.



Passion player: Gilad Atzmon

David Sinclair

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