

The Arts

Over-inflated but endearingly daft

EXHIBITION

Paul McCarthy

Tate Modern

Nick Hackworth

THE original "bad boy" of American art, Paul McCarthy, 58, is famed for his visceral and theatrical explorations of the kitsch and grotesque aspects of life and consumer culture. The tone of his work is exemplified by one video piece, *Santa Chocolate Shop*, in which, amid orgiastic scenes of consumption, Santa appears to defecate into the mouths of his elves. Yet, in an uncharacteristic display of taste and good humour, the Tate has invited McCarthy to deposit two new pieces, the largest inflatable sculptures in the world, outside the gallery.

Entirely black and 35 metres high, *Blockhead*, the larger sculpture, is a Pinocchio-style figure with a big square block for a

head and a long, thin cylindrical nose, sitting on a pile of books in the middle of which there lies, inexplicably, a cave-like room where you can buy sticks of "Blockhead" rock. Nearby, flopping obscenely in the wind, is the flesh-pink form of *Daddies Bighead*, a surreal depiction of a blob of ketchup rising from a bottle to assume anthropomorphic form, with spheres for eyes and a suggestive cone for a nose.

Typically, McCarthy's work is regarded as being dangerously transgressive in its fixation with taboo subjects, which credits the pieces with far more power than they actually have. Though mildly suggestive, these demented cultural forms derive their real impact from being funny and silly and a nice change from the usual pompous, po-faced stuff that passes for public art.

● *Until 26 October.*
Information: 020 7887 8888.



Dramatic velocity: Joan Plowright as the melancholic Signora Frola and Oliver Ford Davies as the only truly perceptive character, Laudisi

Mirrors of madness

WHAT a strange, strong spell the octogenarian director Franco Zeffirelli can still cast upon a production. As soon as the lights go up on the extraordinary set Zeffirelli himself has designed, we seem under the sway of a master-magician. A wilderness of wall-to-wall mirrors make the stage, with its coloured mosaic back-cloth and gilt framework, into a dizzying, optical illusion of extended width and height. This is no realistic, bourgeois living room as the playwright specified, but a handsome, towering architectural edifice. It is a labyrinth, the significance of which later becomes apparent.

Zeffirelli has taken a neglected parable drama by that revolutionary master builder of 20th century drama, Luigi Pirandello, and made it resound with riveting contemporary. The play, in Martin Sherman's fresh, witty version, demonstrates that truth is relative, elusive and dependent upon individual perception. The dividing lines between reality and illusion, Pirandello implies, are for ever blurred, with madness a

THEATRE

Absolutely! (perhaps)

Wyndhams

Nicholas de Jongh

device to ward off problems of identity. Curiosity, a governing drive of our own celebrity-obsessed culture, similarly dominates *Absolutely! (perhaps)*. Councillor Agazzi, his wife and daughter, not to mention assorted neighbours, are all agog to solve the mystery engulfing three new arrivals in town. Joan Plowright's melancholic Signora Frola admits she is barred from close contact with her daughter, married to distraught Signor Pronza, because this emotionally disturbed son-in-law claims his wife's exclusive attention. But Pronza insists that Frola suffers from madness, precipitated by the death of her daughter, to whom he was married, and that he now lives with a second wife.

Each fresh twist or revelation leaves the truth less fathomable, with the Councillor's family and prurient town's folk mystified about where the truth lies. The setting, with its trompe l'oeil illusions, literally and figuratively mirrors this sense of confusion. As a text *Absolutely! (perhaps)* seems endlessly illustrative of the impossibility of truth finding. But under Zeffirelli's magic, transforming control, the play advances further, poignantly dramatising the essential mystery, secrecy and strangeness of human relations.

Oliver Ford Davies ridiculously plays the sole, truly perceptive character with sufficient bellowing to enflame a Victorian melodrama. Barry Stanton's Agazzi succumbs to the same mode, while Liza Tarbuck as his wife remains ostentatiously wooden. Yet Miss Plowright's wonderfully enigmatic Frola, serene, desolate and placating, and Darrell D'Silva's naggingly distraught Pronza invest this Pirandello with thrilling emotional and dramatic velocity.

● *Until 23 August. Box office: 020 7369 1736.*

Kidman turns on the goodness

IF you have stars like Nicole Kidman, Lauren Bacall, Ben Gazzara and James Caan, what do you need scenery for? Lars von Trier decided he didn't. The result, *Dogville*, is a three-hour movie that bemused rather than uplifted audiences, though the stars and their director got prolonged ovations — more for their bravery in performing this ironic fable about virtue being its own comeuppance.

It opens in a small town in 1930s Depression-era America — only you can't see the place. The "town" and its streets, houses and vegetation are all represented by chalked lines on a flat studio floor the size of a football pitch, with bits and pieces of exterior and interior buildings — a suspended church spire, a token picket fence — and sound effects indicating where doors and windows are. Though it is unusual to see

FILM

Dogville

Cannes Film Festival

Alexander Walker

such minimalism in a star-laden film, it is far from innovative. Dozens of Expressionist plays were produced in the 1930s in just such a frugal manner. The voice-over narrator telling us who folks are is familiar from Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, to name but one of von Trier's sources. Another is Friedrich Durrenmatt's play *The Visit*, about the world's richest woman offering her natal village a fortune for the head of the man who done her wrong.

Nicole Kidman, as Grace,

arrives in *Dogville* in black fox fur, but rich she is not; she is seeking asylum from her gangster husband. What she very definitely is, is pure. Grace looks and behaves so innocently, pleads her case for refuge so successfully, that the townsfolk hide her from the police and her husband's hoodlums, who pin "Wanted" notices to the props.

All the characters move like actors blocking in their roles at rehearsal and represent various states of small-town folksiness. Grace fits in perfectly and everyone loves her: she teaches school, cares for the ailing, inspires a would-be writer, makes herself indispensable. But gradually the mood changes. Her sheer goodness becomes too much for the townsfolk, who turn critical

and crabby. Grace now has to contend with the resentment of residents who realise the place has become too dependent on her sheer goodness. They shackle her to a length of chain and call in the hoodlums. The moral seems to be: one's own ideals are hard to live up to, but even harder for other people to live with.

In the last act, Grace exacts a terrible revenge on the place and its people.

Dogville is an art-house film with an "A" class star. That oddity is its single main selling pitch. Kidman has never lacked the courage to perform in innovative productions on stage and screen, such as *The Blue Room* and *Eyes Wide Shut*. In this film, which is a bit of both, she acquits herself gamely.

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