

The Arts

Vibrant Verdi is larger than life

OPERA
Falstaff

Royal Opera House

Brian Hunt

ABOUT 10 years ago I saw a young Bryn Terfel sing selections from Verdi's Falstaff at a Wigmore Hall recital. He had not played the role on stage. I thought that it would one day be a great interpretation, when he had learned to express more through pure singing and less through vocal and dramatic effects. Well, Terfel being Terfel, nothing of the sort has happened. At the Royal Opera House, he throws his vast personality into the even vaster caricature of Falstaff, and it's pretty much irresistible.

His all-out approach seems to have spread through the entire cast. Connoisseurs of tasteful legato singing should stay well away, unless keen to practise their wincing. This is not a cast performance one would relish on record or

radio. True, Finnish soprano Soile Isokoski sings Alice Ford with luminosity and dignity, even if the contrast in scale between her voice and Terfel's makes her sound something of a misplaced Mozartian. But, judging merely on vocal style, Rebecca Evans is a sweet but fluttery Nannetta, Massimo Giordano a mellow but insubstantial Fenton and Stephanie Blythe a commanding but steely Mistress Quickly. The only singer to cultivate a real cantabile is Anthony Michaels-Moore, who makes the role of Ford much more affecting than the familiar study of comic frustration.

Yet who says Verdi's final masterpiece is a singing competition? In the context of Graham Vick's supremely confident production, and animated with crackling electricity by Antonio Pappano's vital conducting, all these performances are part of a rather wonderful whole. When the production was first seen in December 1999, all eyes were on Vick's safe-but-slightly-skewed



Fat chance: Soile Isokoski (Alice Ford) gets to grips with Bryn Terfel (Falstaff)

inventiveness and Paul Brown's complementary Alice-in-Wonderland sets, as this production opened the refurbished house. Now it can be enjoyed, not as a symbol of the best the Royal Opera can do, but as an exhilarating three hours of music theatre.

In the whirl of the comedy it is possible to miss subtleties and subtexts, but they are there: Falstaff's "honour monologue" as a soliloquy, not a lecture; the set literally turning his world upside down after his humiliation. There are moments and ideas

to quarrel with, but I feel sure both Verdi and Shakespeare would have applauded the sheer uplifting vigour of this show. Your humble critic would not presume to disagree with them. ● *Until 26 February. Box office: 020 7304 4000.*

Surreal voyage questions society's sanity

THEATRE
Henry IV

Etcetera, NW1

Rachel Halliburton

THE Roman Emperor Caligula's madness became most obvious when he considered appointing his horse as a consul and allowed it to drink wine from a golden goblet. By contrast, in Luigi Pirandello's drama about madness, it is a horse who creates the emperor, when it rears up and hurls a man at a fancy-dress party to the ground, leaving him with head injuries that make him believe he is Henry IV of Germany.

This startlingly modern work was written in 1922, but its premise reads like a distinctly Umberto Eco-style voyage into hyper-reality. It plays theatrically with that ancient theme — does the madman or society have the greatest claim to insanity? — by creating a scenario where several individuals have conspired to recreate an 11th century castle in which the fake Henry IV can act out his confusions of grandeur.

A plot by a former lover to shock Henry IV back to the "real world" and modernity is played out against Ana Mestre's svelte red and black set, which smartly evokes the fake regality of the play's setting.

Directors Dan Hine and Kirsty Housley have upped the artificiality stakes by introducing three screens for slide projections, so that photo images can provide both comic and visually inventive comments on the action.

Although this touch is true to the self-referential spirit of the play, it did little to convince this critic that multi-media flourishes provide any more than a distraction from the real business of engaging and provocative theatre. Far more impressive was Hine's own updated translation, which provided a botox injection to iron out any sagging out-dated references.

Among a snappy cast assuredly unravelling the labyrinthine meanderings of Pirandello's plot, Geoff Aymer's Henry IV is compellingly enigmatic, if not always relaxed enough. Interesting and challenging, this is a satisfyingly high-fibre revival for the fringe.

● *Until 2 March. Box office: 020 7482 4857.*

Random glimpses of very strange lives

EXHIBITION
Kutlug Ataman

Serpentine Gallery

Nick Hackworth

DESPITE being virtually unknown in Britain, Kutlug Ataman, a 41-year-old Turko-British artist and filmmaker, has, thanks to the herd-like mentality of London's top curators, unexpectedly emerged as the art world's latest flavour of the month. Alongside this, his first major show in the UK, Ataman is included in a group exhibition that opens at the Barbican tomorrow and, more impressive still, in the Tate's triennial survey of contemporary British art that begins in two weeks time. Inevitably this sudden burst of Ataman appreciation in Britain follows an international lead, specifically the critical acclaim his work received at a recent Venice Biennale and at a major international art exhibition in Germany held earlier this year.

The work that has so excited everyone is a body of long, simple and lightly edited documentary films, six of which are shown here, that,



Soul survivor: transvestite Ceyhan Firat talks about her troubles

Lehman Maupin Gallery, New York

through their relentless recording on the minutiae of the lives of people who are either odd themselves or subject to unusual circumstances, serve as anthropological studies of the idea and practice of individuality. The three-hour long, *Never My Soul*,

focuses on the Turkish transvestite Ceyhan Firat (pictured) talking about her struggle to be herself while the eight-hour epic, *Semiha B Unplugged*, features the clearly bonkers 92-year-old Semiha Berksoy, a Turkish ex-opera star who fancifully recounts her life

story while sporting tragically overdone make-up and a collection of fantastic costumes. The 4 Seasons of Veronica Read, follows the eponymous woman, an obsessive, full-time breeder of Amaryllis flowers, through the cycle of the seasons.

Thankfully, Ataman doesn't expect you to sit through all this footage but rather to randomly sample chunks of these people's lives and thoughts, so enjoying the poetry of their real, everyday, though strange lives, engaging with their stories and feel a paradoxical sense of shared humanity with their attempts to be individual. Sadly, however, our culture is rather awash with "real", lightly edited, low-budget footage of weirdoes going about their daily business and the Reality TV format is one that doesn't bear repeating in our galleries. Moreover, few are likely to positively identify with Ataman's subjects, being more likely to mildly ridicule them instead and thus Ataman's work inadvertently apes the sensibilities of Reality TV as well as its form. Not bad, but unnecessary. Ataman's films exploit the privileged space of the art gallery to harvest attention they would not get elsewhere.

● *Until 9 March. Information: 020 7298 1515.*

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