

Reviews

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Heavy duty: Andrew Shore extends his padded bulk with irresistible phoney elegance and exaggerated delicacy

Fat knight's clumsy tale

PAUL DANIEL doesn't put a foot wrong with his conducting of Falstaff at the English National Opera. This most delicious of Verdi's scores, exquisitely romantic and full of jokes, is played with fervour and precision by the ENO orchestra and Daniel's affectionate perceptiveness ensures results. It's a strong revival cast, with Andrew Shore's exuberant fat knight extending his padded bulk with irresistible phoney elegance and exaggerated delicacy, though his top notes were less firm and glowing.

ENO really needs a production that uses the scale of the Coliseum stage, especially in the last act. The detailed ensemble work in Matthew Warchus's original production had a fluency that

FALSTAFF ★

Coliseum

Tom Sutcliffe

Steven Stead's rather clumsy revival cannot aspire to. A cut-down stage space and eccentric designs do not assist the appropriate atmosphere, except in Falstaff's realm inside the Garter Inn. Why have snow falling? Why give Windsor Italian Renaissance streets? The perspective jokes, though, with Alice and Meg portrayed by stand-in children crossing back and forth upstage, are fun. The moves and characterisations are full of enthusiasm but no longer coherently focused. Falstaff is a work ENO needs to roll out regularly in a good state.

The two wives are luxury casting. Yvonne Kenny's Alice is a gem, full of bubbly humour and sung with real artistry and colour. Alice Coote has far too little for her considerable talent as Meg, but does it all, such as it is, superbly. Rebecca de Pont Davies's elongated Quickly and Susan Gritton's yummy Nannetta make an odd assortment visually, yet are a gorgeous earful. Toby Spence's Fenton seems a bit insecure and overworked, with a few nice phrases but not convincingly characterised. Ashley Holland is a roughly rebarbative Ford with magnificently velvety lines. Smaller roles such as Stuart Kale's Caius, Clive Bayley's Pistol and Richard Roberts's Bardolph are very decently taken too.

● Until 26 May. Box office: 020 7632 8300.

Glassy labyrinth

FOR most architects, designing a building is a torrid love affair, full of drama and tantrums.

When it's over, it's over — some can't even bear to see their completed buildings again. The Tokyo architect Fumihiko Maki is married to his most famous project, Hillside Terrace, a village of offices, homes and shops that has so far been more than 30 years in the making. Back then, the surrounding area of Daikanyama was some lightly populated wooded slopes; now it's the Rodeo Drive of Tokyo, with a reputation for elegance that Maki did much to create.

What's more, his office is in the complex, so he spends every day with his successes and mistakes. Except that making mistakes is not really Maki's thing. He's punctilious and precise and his buildings are delicate and refined. It's the opposite of the hefty and assertive Sixties architecture you find in London.

The best thing about Hillside Terrace is the way that little

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

THE ARCHITECTURE OF
FUMIHIKO MAKI ★

V&A Museum

Rowan Moore

courts and passages filter off the street, so you can wander through a glassy labyrinth of unfolding spaces. Art galleries open into shops and cafés, and at a point, the buildings open up to reveal an ancient burial mound. It's like an Italian hill town built with precision implements.

This project is at the centre of the Maki exhibition deep into the wild blue yonder of the V&A, which is part of the Japan 2001 festival. It is presented in chronological order, with a timeline connecting it to historical events during its construction — the 1968 May Revolution in Paris; in 1984, the First Apple Mac. Other works are on show, and you should look out for his floating pavilion in Groningen, Holland, a helical fabric cloud seen sailing past some bemused Dutch sheep. But Hillside is the star.



Inside job: Hillside Terrace phase VI

Spirituality and beauty

BILL VIOLA ★★

Anthony d'Offay Gallery, Dering Street, W1

Nick Hackworth

ON the wall, immediately upon the left as you walk into the gallery, hang two flat, rectangular plasma screens. A silent video plays on each display, a man in one, a woman in the other. They both stand facing the viewer, contorting as if possessed, their faces and bodies twisted in quiet pain. The videos have been slowed to a pace that is a fraction of real time so that their agony is artificially stretched across the elongated seconds. The plasma screens only serve to intensify the emotions, delivering an almost tangible hyper-real richness, luminosity and density of colour.

All the pieces are variations upon this theme, basic human emotions or actions with the stuff of everyday life stripped away till all that is left are the bare bones, explored through high-tech video, often with time expanded or contracted. Bill Viola, who has been at the forefront of video art since the late Sixties, has always investigated these themes. But since many of these works are displayed on LCD and plasma screens, comparisons are being drawn between them and medieval and early Renaissance devotional works that have a similar visual intensity and the same ability to evoke emotions through a pared down focus on the human form.

In the same room, a triptych displays three female faces going through a cycle of basic emotions; joy, fear, anger and sadness. But the cycle is so slow and the change is so imperceptible that the essence of each emotion is lost and each face becomes trapped in a permanent moment of distortion, as when the words of a sentence are read at glacial pace and lose their relation to each other and become a sequence of random, abstract sounds.

In the next space, on the first floor of the next-door building, five wall-to-floor screens illuminate the otherwise darkened room. Five Angels for the Millennium shows videos, in reverse, of a man diving into a body of water with arms splayed. At one point the figure hangs suspended in the water, illuminated by an ethereal green light, mimicking at a stretch, the crucifixion.

Many will see a spirituality of sorts in these pieces and there is certainly a gentle, low-grade humanism at work, a belief in the universality of the emotions and actions portrayed, and the power to be gained through their depiction. And there is beauty. It is a word bankrupt by over use, but here regains something of its currency.

● Until 21 July. Box office: 020 7499 4100.

Eastern promise just blown away

THE WINDS OF GOD

Drill Hall, WC1

Patrick Marmion

A HUGE cultural windsock would be handy to figure out which way this extraordinary Japanese tragi-comedy is really blowing. From its set-up, it feels like an innocuous, comic breeze: two Tokyo comedians killed in a farcical push-bike accident in 2001 are re-incarnated as trainee Kamikaze pilots in 1945. But, after about half an hour, these light comic air-currents turn abruptly into the chill wind of tragedy. No longer a gentle flight round the Pacific Rim, the play becomes a turbulent, angst-ridden raid on Japan's imperial past. Cosy modern values of egocentric materialism are suddenly threatened by the raw emotional power of the Old World codes of honour and discipline.

Cross-cultural gusts from East and West further complicate Masayuki Imai's play, for better and for worse. A lot of the scripted comedy is lost in the English translation and much of the comic timing is flattened by the actors' halting diction. Then, on its tragic side, a strong Western wind sweeps Imai's play into the realms of a buddy movie, complete with the sort of lachrymose resolution favoured by Hollywood's Vietnam flicks.

However, Western film buffs may be disorientated by the incongruously kitsch Japanese rock music used to inflate the emotional climax of the final suicide missions.

Less equivocally, Imai's production uses thunderous sound effects and retina-scorching lights to simulate atomic and other explosions. Although often stated rather than dramatised, many under-developed ideas waft round the writing. These touch on the mysteries of time and reincarnation, as well as hypocritical atrocities perpetrated in Japan by the Christian West. Such intellectual drafts do much to redress the racist caricature of blind fanaticism often used to mock Japanese military traditions. As a result, even if it is an unsettled and changeable play, the old saying holds true: it's an ill Wind Of God that blows nobody any good.

● Until 26 May. Box office: 020 7307 5060.