



"The tale is disjointed and fragmented"—the young man is seen running along institutional corridors, then walking through a desert

Zen and the art of vastness

THE title *New Ocean* is appropriate enough for a show that attempts to induce in us a sense of the sublime, updated for modern times. Across many screens of various shapes and sizes installed within the darkened confines of the Serpentine, Californian artist Doug Aitken shows us films depicting a natural world of incomprehensible vastness.

To emphasise its magnitude, Aitken constantly plays with our sense of perspective and scale. We might be looking at the highly magnified image of a single drip of water, watching each droplet swell and fall when fat, when suddenly we will be presented with an upside vista of a sea stretching into the horizon. Or see the slow formation of ice crystals replaced on the screen by a vast cracking ice sheet.

Serving as a counterpoint to these pervasive images of the organic are two pieces, each inhabiting their own room,

DOUG AITKEN/*New Ocean* ★

Serpentine Gallery

Nick Hackworth

that follow respectively, the lives of a young man and a young woman. There is a vague narrative at work, but the tale is disjointed and fragmented. First we see the young man running through endless, sterile institutional corridors. Then he is walking through a desert and finally he is wondering exhausted, through a neon-lit urban scene. Similarly the story of the young woman flits from sequences of graceful gymnastic movements to shots of her riding a metro staring wistfully at the dark cityscape beyond the window.

In common with Mike Nelson who is currently occupying the ICA, Aitken has utilised the entirety of the gallery in which he is exhibiting. This, combined with the slick film production skills on

show (Aitken also does commercial film work) and the soothing sounds that fill the gallery, serves to create a seamless environment into which we are immersed. Thus Aitken shows us worlds within worlds on screen and attempts to make the Serpentine into his world within the larger, more hostile world around us.

By showing us fragmented images of nature, interspersed with the mysterious shards of two modern lives, Aitken succeeds in communicating a Zen-like appreciation of the interconnectedness of all things. But it does so vaguely and, in that vagueness, one is never certain as to whether to read a sophisticated acceptance of the inherent subjectivity of all things, or instead, the avoidance of the more difficult task of creating a coherent communication that delivers a specific point.

● *Serpentine Gallery, Kensington Gardens. Until 25 November.*

A true paper tiger

ENNIO Marchetto is a real card. And so is his act. Over the years he has perfected the art of musical celebrity impressions, aided only by costumes imaginatively constructed out of sheets of cardboard. You want Celine Dion singing the theme from *Titanic*? You can have her, complete with sinking ship and falling Winslet. Who would have thought that a balding Italian with hairy arms could be so feminine? The only thing that could sink Marchetto's magic is mildew.

The current show reprises a number of his greatest hits. The live-and-kicking *Mona Lisa* is an early highlight. As is the Marilyn Monroe, complete with bouncing paper breasts. Marchetto's super-quick changes often happen onstage, one outfit miraculously peeled back to become another.

Whitney Houston, for instance, magically becomes a strutting Tina Turner, just by Marchetto extending his folding wig and shortening his folding skirt.

The show is tightly chore-

ENNIO MARCHETTO ★★

Greenwich Theatre

Bruce Dessau

ographed, the backing soundtrack leaving little room for errors. But it is also superbly well-paced. Just as things begin to look a little flat, he pulls off a spectacular *coup de théâtre*. Gene Kelly's metamorphosis into Stevie Wonder, complete with keyboard, is breathtaking. *Madame Butterfly* stabs herself and paper bloodstains appear out of nowhere. Elizabeth Windsor and Freddie Mercury combine to provide two queens for the price of one.

Admittedly the old gags are more high concept than the new ones, but Marchetto is prepared to have a bash at a fresh icon. His Eminem might literally be just a cardboard cut-out crotch-grabbing rapper, but he has Kylie's latest moves and revealing dress spot-on — although Pulp might have been a more appropriate pop act.

● *Until 3 November. Box office: 020 8858 7755.*



What a card: Marchetto as a mischievous *Mona Lisa*

Bringing back the class war

THE ACCRINGTON PALS ★

Pentameters Theatre, NW3

Patrick Marmion

PETER Whelan's 1981 play dates from the days when raising class consciousness didn't just mean subscribing to *Hello!* magazine. Revived by director Granville Saxton, the story is a hearty portrait of the working class people of Accrington in Lancashire during The Great War — the women who stayed at home and the young lads who signed up to be mown down in the mud of the Somme. But, in taking up their story, Whelan's play is passionately concerned with commemorating the changing social relations that the war engendered.

This task of charting day-to-day life in Accrington in 1916, calls for a good deal of documentary accuracy. Whelan's writing comes up to scratch by spinning out his loving portrait of these gritty northern souls with strong, but breezy, dialogue that's a cut above historical soap opera. Well dressed in period weeds, the only major flaw in the show is a shoddy set, somewhat ameliorated by Derek Carlyle's dark and painterly lighting effects.

However, the success of Saxton's production lies less in its trappings than in its rough and ready acting. The changing role of women in The Great War is championed by Amanda Daniels as the proud but prudish barrow girl gunning for financial independence and Jane Kahler as the pretty young lass sallying into sexual experimentation. Muriel Abehsera is a more stereotypical northern harridan brutalising her idiot son, but Julia Montague and Tracie Quinn are an excitable double act — one a pioneering female clippy, the other a bawdy wench about town.

Meanwhile, the recruits or "Pals" of the title are described as "men without guile or craft". Robin Laisby is a young artist uselessly besotted with Daniels's prudish barrow girl, while Graeme Sanders is a lyrical lover boy who gets to discharge his load before meeting The Reaper in France.

Dermot Canavan and Martin Trent, representing the military and spiritual establishment, are no less well rounded, while Philip Leamon provides slapstick and pathos as the town idiot. We all know how the story ends, but its emotional impact is secured by a well-drilled, poorly-resourced company of men and women. Together they prove that where there's muck, there's class.

● *Until 11 November. Box office: 020 7435 3648.*

Choice entertainers

ORCHESTRA BAOBAB ★

Royal Festival Hall

Max Bell

YOU may be aware that televised history is the new rock and roll/gardening/cookery (I blame prankster Marcus Brigstocke), but you may have forgotten that Black History Month is about to end. Orchestra Baobab, from Senegal, West Africa could have nudged your memory last night, in the neatest way possible.

The OBs have their own history, some of it involving the level of tragedy that makes The Charlatans background seem like relatively good news. We're talking voodoo, car accidents and jealous husbands. Yet back in the mists, this light-fingered aggregate also recorded their masterpiece, *Pirates Choice*, now rated on a level par with Youssou N'Dour and Baaba Maal's hottest work.

While not unusual in their blending of Latin, particularly Cuban rhythms, with Nigerian High Life and Wolof lyrical dynamics, Baobab still stood out before a rather sparse crowd because of their immaculate formality.

Dressed in suits, with the odd pork pie hat à la Mingus, the 11-piece returned to their piratical heyday on numerous occasions but didn't seem too phased at having to rehash an 18-year old disc.

In any case, their stately progress across Soldadi, Coumba and Ngalam was punctuated with idiosyncratic bursts of percussion and a back line more reminiscent of Jamaican ska from Kingston than the flesh pots of Havana. Sax, timbales and chattering guitars were interlaced with a triple harmony attack that lulled aficionados and eventually enthralled them. The Baobab men are re-treading former glories but it's still a smooth ride.

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