

## The Critics: Theatre

# Contrasting tragedy blows hot and cold

Bertie Carvel shines alongside Ben Wishaw, but the chorus stalls this iconic Greek tale

**BAKKHAI**  
**ALMEIDA THEATRE**  
★★★★☆

While the Almeida's Greek season opened in June with a boldly contemporary adaptation of *Oresteia*, its latest chapter strips both play and theatre back to their most visceral.

Under Antony McDonald's design, the brickwork of the Almeida's interior walls forms the sparse backdrop of *Bakkhai*, echoing the raw emotion of Euripides' final Greek tragedy. A dark parable of battling contradictions – ecstasy and terror, masculinity and femininity, civilisation and wildness – James Macdonald's production feels admirably fat-free, leaving its

impressive array of acting talent, including Ben Wishaw, to fare on their wits alone.

At the start of *Bakkhai*, we are introduced to Dionysus, the god of drama and wine, as he descends upon Thebes to force Greeks to accept his worship.

Having sent the city's women running wild, he has naturally enraged King Pentheus, but as the monarch tries to regain control, his resistance to Dionysus ultimately comes at his own peril.

This unusually classical piece for the Almeida is counterpointed by the casting of Wishaw as Dionysus – a likely draw for younger audiences. As the eerily-focused, androgynous deity, the Bond actor brings a natural charisma to proceedings, yet it is his co-star who truly runs the gauntlet of emotion.

Well known for his Olivier Award-winning turn as Miss



■ Ben Wishaw as Dionysus among the chorus of Bakkhai. Picture: Marc Brenner

Trunchbull in the *Matilda* musical, Bertie Carvel shines brightest as Pentheus – at once presenting the villain, the joker and the vulnerable outsider with terrific precision.

While the two protagonists face off, the wild women of Thebes form the chorus, whose beautiful a capella harmonies often come at

the cost of lyrical clarity. At first earthly and ethereal, their gradual transformation into a savage tribe fuels the play's elemental energy – throwing the audience into the heart of a raging conflict with religion, the natural world and human nature itself.

The production's strength is its timelessness – if it was shown

back in 405BC, when the play debuted, it would still hold the same fierce resonance as it does today. With the choral interludes often stalling the narrative between scenes, however, this is an adaptation that – fittingly with its penchant for contrast – blows both hot and cold.

Alex Bellotti

## A barn-stomping thrill ride



■ Charlene Ford and James Leece. Picture: Helen Maybanks

**SEVEN BRIDES FOR SEVEN BROTHERS**  
**OPEN AIR THEATRE**  
★★★★☆

For anyone who's had the privilege of watching the 1954 musical film starring Howard Keel and Jane Powell, director Rachel Kavanaugh's adaptation of *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* had much to live up to – as did her cast and choreography. But all more than surpassed expectation in the incredible attention to detail, and preservation of the main dance sequences for which the musical became known.

Alex Gaumont, who played the lead role of Adam Pontipee, was flawless – from the ease at which he adopted Adam's playful arrogance to his impeccable

delivery of well-loved solo number 'Bless Yore' Beautiful Hide.'

Laura Pitt-Pulford, as Adam's "sassy but sweet" wife Milly, gave a stellar performance and injected a strong feminist voice into the role; particularly in her refusal to give up on her marriage and her reforming of the appallingly behaved band of Pontipee brothers. While her version of a north-western American accent left something to be desired, her chemistry with Gaumont and the brothers was palpable.

A terrific cast including the seven 'brides' and the aforementioned 'brothers' gave the show its fun-loving, barn-stomping wholesomeness – evident in the famous 'Harvest social' dance and other pieces by Alistair David.

Mary O'Connor

## An engaging study of love's intoxication

**THREE DAYS IN THE COUNTRY**  
**NATIONAL THEATRE**  
★★★★☆

A month in the country is shortened to 72 hours in Patrick Marber's sardonic, hazily erotic 135-minute distillation of a Russian classic. The influence of Turgenev's 1850s country-house tragicomedy on fellow countryman Chekhov is clear, with its aristocratic family suffering the agony of stasis and yearning for

something just out of reach.

The latter is signified by a suspended red door, promising amorous fulfilment, in Mark Thompson's too self-consciously artificial design. There's no need for literal signposting in a production throbbing with unrequited desire. Chief sufferer is Natalya, who's fallen desperately in love for the first time – not with husband Arkady or long-devoted admirer Rakitin, but the young tutor to her son.

Marber, who also directs, intro-

duces active self-awareness, so the tangled lovers view their predicament with rueful, epigrammatic detachment: "Everyone is a joke they don't get." Natalya, imposer of social rules, soon realises passion is no respecter of convention.

There isn't much attempt at keeping up appearances, however, and some of the poetic, elegiac subtext has been sacrificed. But the net gain is bold contemporary sensibility, political consciousness, and memorable comic set pieces. The standout is Mark Gatiss's doctor suffering undignified impairment during a pompously pragmatic marriage proposal. Debra Gillett's snuff-taking spinster provides a superb deadpan foil.

As Natalya, Amanda Drew is both coolly manipulative and raw in her unfamiliar vulnerability, while John Simm's Rakitin is a wry portrait of one brought low by love. There's strong support from Lily Sacofsky's breathless teen, John Light's oblivious landowner, Nigel Betts's gauche neighbour and Cherrille Skeete's sultry maidservant, though Royce Pierreson's tutor is rather stolid.

An engaging study of love's giddy intoxication and excruciating pain. The advice of a typically Marber-esque card shark – "Don't show your hand!" – proves sage.

Marianka Swain



■ Cherrille Skeete and Royce Pierreson. Picture: Tristram Kenton