

Reviews: Theatre

Conflicting tragedy blows hot and cold

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 Euripedes' 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 cast 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 enraged King Pentheus, but as the monarch tries to regain control, his feud with Dionysus comes at his own peril.

This unusually classical piece for the Almeida is

■ Ben Wishaw in Bakkhai.
Picture: Marc Brenner



counterpointed by the casting of Ben 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 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 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

An engaging study of love

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 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, introduces active self-awareness, so the tangled lovers view their predicament with rueful, epigrammatic detachment: "Everyone is a



■ Cherelle Skeete and Royce Pierreson. Picture: Tristram Kenton

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 Ratikin 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

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