

Reviews: Kenneth Branagh Co

Women triumph in Branagh's starry rep

KENNETH BRANAGH COMPANY
GARRICK THEATRE
THE WINTER'S TALE
★★★★☆
RATTIGAN DOUBLE BILL
★★★★☆

Continuing the Olivier comparisons, Kenneth Branagh has established an eponymous rep company and year-long Garrick season. It opens with a problematic Shakespeare problem play and incongruous Rattigan double bill – material made financially viable by a starry cast of veterans and bright young things. They're led by Branagh himself, who also co-directs with Rob Ashford.

The Winter's Tale gets the Hollywood blockbuster treatment, from intrusive music cues to Christopher Oram's lavish design – Nutcracker-esque Victorian Christmas card for the court, with carollers and ice skating, and then a Bohemia so idyllic and fecund it's ripe for Cold Comfort Farm parody.

Presiding over this operatic excess is Leontes, and to make sense of the king's sudden descent into jealous madness, Branagh plays him as if in a Gothic horror. He strains against demonic possession, roars, paces and melodramatically swoons. It's a psychological affliction made physical – arresting, but ultimately less interesting. Judi Dench's Paulina, in contrast, is strongly grounded. Still robust and magnetic aged 80, the great dame briskly dismisses Leontes's cowed yes-men in her towering defence of the queen, refusing to witness injustice. Her luminously effortless verse speaking proves you don't need histrionics to stir the soul.

There's good support, too, from Jessie Buckley's warmly



■ Kenneth Branagh and Judi Dench in *The Winter's Tale* and below Zoe Wannamaker in *All on her Own*

sensual Perdita, Miranda Raison's dignified Hermione, John Dagleish's musical rogue Autolycus, John Shrapnel's shrewd Camillo, and Michael Pennington's doomed Antigonus. But Hadley Fraser and Tom Bateman follow Branagh's example with their hot-headed royal pair, making this a tale of sensible women putting up with loony men. The climactic statue reveal is beautifully done, but, with the play painted in such broad brushstrokes, feels more fairy tale cosy than redemption powerfully won.

Playing in rep is a Rattigan double bill. There are connections with *The Winter's Tale* – long-lost daughters, grieving spouses, disguises and a preoccupation with ageing – but it's not a must-see combination. *All On Her Own* (1968) is the surprise package, an understated 20-minute monologue in which Zoë Wannamaker's desolate widow mourns the socially inferior husband she tormented in life. It's a starkly vulnerable performance, and a more effective illustration than Branagh's Leontes of how persecuting others can be an

Pictures: JOHAN PERSSON
act of self-harm.

That's bizarrely paired with 1948 knockabout backstage comedy *Harlequinade*, essentially *Kiss Me, Kate* without songs or the first act of *Noises Off*. Branagh is a hoot as pompous actor/manager Gosport, who leads a bedraggled second-rate rep company taking Shakespeare to the regions. Rattigan snottily dismisses any link between art and social purpose, but brilliantly skewers industry types: Wannamaker's boozey, interfering old-timer; Bateman's put-upon stage manager; Fraser's eager spear-carrier; and Shrapnel's failed actor in crisis.

Did Branagh deliberately programme a critique of luvvie foibles as a commentary on his own overwrought *Winter's Tale*? Both are commercial draws with this celebrity cast, despite some self-indulgence, but just as Rattigan's myopic thespians can't see a world beyond theatre, so this rep company runs the risk of offering more to its actors than its audiences.

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