

Theatre :Reviews

Moderate Soprano is a moderate success

THE MODERATE SOPRANO
HAMPSTEAD THEATRE
★★★★☆

Following *Farinelli and the King*, here's another gently aimless drama about opera and – more circuitously – the inestimable value of art. David Hare takes us back to 1934 and the birth of Glyndebourne, with Rae Smith's design illustrating its distinctive blend of public and private. The most interesting revelation is that this oh-so-English festival has considerable German DNA. Founder John Christie was impressed by their efficient opera houses and dreamed of a shrine to his beloved Wagner, while the original creative team were Germans emigrés. But once we're privy to the Nazi horrors they've escaped – laid bare in a mesmeric scene, immaculately paced by Jeremy Herrin – it's hard to get too worked up about whether or not a Mozart production in Sussex will succeed.

There are other competing strands in the choppy, non-linear narrative, including the late-in-life relationship between Christie and soprano wife Audrey, notions of patriotism



■ Nancy Carroll as Audrey Mildmay picture: Manuel Harlan

and integrity, and the conflicting demands of art, loyalty and commerce. Like a student eager to show off extensive reading, Hare has piled everything in, creating a curious 90-minute play that's more about a place than a driving idea.

Roger Allam, unrecognisable in bald cap and paunch, is typically excellent as the eccentric amateur bullheadedly determined to be a force for good. However, Hare can't reconcile several inherent contradictions: Christie lauds artists, but mistreats them;

believes in accessible art, but creates Britain's most exclusive cultural institution – "Snobs on the lawn".

There's stirring work from Paul Jesson, Nick Sampson and George Taylor as the courageous exiles, but the real draw is Nancy Carroll. Her Audrey is a cool, brilliantly astute diplomat, who privately fears becoming defined by her husband and later rages against the dying of the light. Warmth and wry wit, but only a moderate success.

Marianka Swain

Pit drama is grim but rich

HUSBANDS & SONS
NATIONAL THEATRE
★★★★☆

Three plays, three families, three hours of DH Lawrence. If that fills you with dread, I have good news: Ben Power's skilled melding of this trio of mining dramas, unperformed in Lawrence's lifetime, creates a spellbindingly intimate epic.

A *Collier's Friday Night*, *The Widowing of Mrs Holroyd* and *The Daughter-in-Law* (1911-13) all take place in the author's home town of Eastwood in the Midlands. Lawrence, who escaped through education, includes a self-parodic avatar in adolescent Ernest, boasting of his "instinct for Latin". But this community is driven by more animal instincts, and Marianne Elliott's visceral production honours its earthy, violent and sensual core.

The in-the-round Dorfman audience is thrust into the grimy action. Those in the aptly-named pit switch sides midway, so as to connect with the family on the opposite half of the stage – some detail



■ Anne-Marie Duff in *Husbands and Sons* picture: Manuel Harlan

needs to be seen in close-up.

Lawrence's focus is not the brutalised menfolk, but the women trapped in equally claustrophobic domesticity. Power lucidly explores their cycle of love and neglect, turning from indolent husbands to funnel ambition through their sons, who are then pulled from their own wives by this sub-Freudian bond.

Grim, yes, but the dialect is rich with wild poetry and salty humour, and Elliott's thoughtful evocation of the rhythms of working-class life is hypnotic. Bunny Christie's effective hyper-naturalistic

design gives us self-contained houses but no walls, with rooms and family names written on the ground – *Our Town* meets *Cluedo*.

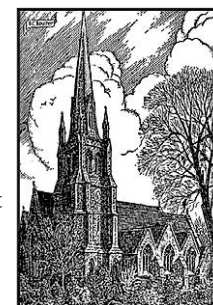
Standouts in a superb ensemble include despairing wives Anne-Marie Duff, Louise Brealey and Julia Ford, indomitable mother-in-law Susan Brown, gruff, coal-blackened Lloyd Hutchinson and soused spouse Martin Marquez. Reflecting Lawrence's own mixed feelings, there is both sadness and liberation in the knowledge that this is a world lost forever.

Marianka Swain

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REMEMBRANCE AND
THE EUCHARIST
Music: Victoria *Requiem*

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The Eucharist set to live jazz
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and Ewan King, minister of
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