

ETCETERA

THEATRE

Such thrilling stuff as dreams are made on

MARIANKA SWAIN immerses herself in Phyllida Lloyd's bold and kinetic all female trilogy of Shakespeare plays set in a women's prison

SHAKESPEARE TRILOGY KING'S CROSS THEATRE

★★★★☆

Phyllida Lloyd has completed her all-female trilogy, begun in 2012 at Donmar Warehouse, by staging *The Tempest* alongside previous hits *Julius Caesar* and *Henry IV* at a specially built performance space adjoining King's Cross Theatre.

Strong individually, they're particularly rewarding viewed together, with recurring themes: self-expression through role-playing; jostling for position and territory; loyalty and factionalism; and, most recently given the setting, captivity and freedom.

That setting is a women's prison, with the inmates sometimes breaking character or interrupted by guards. It justifies the all-female casting, but since that's no longer a radical idea but a trend, and as the performances are so convincing, it

can feel unnecessary, especially when we're wrenched out of the drama or when contemporary gags make the work too comic.

Amusing props contribute to that as well, yet there's an enjoyable element of play, with the prisoners grabbing whatever's available – toy furniture and guns from the nursery, a ring of rubbish as the sea, paper crowns and dressing gowns – and inviting us to join them in using simple things to fire the imagination.

Lloyd has ruthlessly cut the text, creating streamlined two-hour plays – *Henry IV* loses some meditative depth, otherwise this is crisp, emphatic storytelling. *Julius Caesar* is the most gripping of the three, claustrophobic and intense. The conspirators invade the front row to carry out their brutal murder of Caesar, afterwards donning red gloves, and when Antony engages in multimedia propaganda, James Farncombe bathes the audience in a



■ Sheila Atim (Gadshill) in *Henry IV*

Picture: HELEN MAYBANKS

TV static lighting effect.

The plays were developed with Clean Break, and there's real empathy for the individuals otherwise homogenised and marginalised by incarceration. Lloyd is alert to their underlying problems, whether domestic abuse, mental illness or addiction – the Falstaff/Hal dynamic is

interestingly complicated by the former's possible role as a drug-pusher. Harriet Walter plays Hannah, based on real political prisoner Judith Clark, who was sentenced to life without parole and separated from her 11-month-old daughter. That parental grief and weary authority infuses her roles: she's an anguished Brutus,

desperately searching for the honourable path; a King Henry steely and manspreading on the throne, but lonely and insomniac; and a watchful, isolated Prospero who fears abandonment. Mesmerising and androgynous, she anchors all three plays.

But it's a notably strong company, refreshingly diverse in its representation of women, and with its female performers able to show an impressive range often denied to them. Standout turns include Jackie Clune's swaggering Caesar; Jade Anouka's prizefighter Hotspur; lethal Antony and buoyant Ariel; Sophie Stanton's buffoonish but damaging Falstaff and self-pitying Caliban; Clare Dunne's fiery Portia and laddish Hal; Leah Harvey's open-hearted Miranda; Sheila Antim's stirring Lady Percy; and Martina Laird's eloquent Cassius.

Bunny Christie and Chloe Lamford's institutional design effectively encloses us with a chain-link fence, and there are vivid projections from Duncan McLean, propulsive movement from Ann Ye, organic fights from Kate Waters, and otherworldly island music from Joan Armatrading. Immersive, kinetic and a thrilling portrait of wide-ranging humanity.

It's now even easier to find your dream property in France

From a pied-à-terre in Paris to a farmhouse in the Dordogne, discover your perfect property today at your improved France Property Shop



BETTER
FASTER
SIMPLER



francepropertyshop.com

FRANCE
PropertyShop

IMAGE: ©Jayahand Govindaraj/Dreamstime.com

OUT NOW



Your 2016/2017 Essex Bride magazine available from all good newsagents and supermarkets and www.buyamag.co.uk