

The Comedy of Errors; Salome; Lift: Life Streaming

Regent's Park Open Air Theatre, London NW1; Hampstead Theatre, London NW3; National Theatre, London SE1



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'Complicatedly hilarious': Josh Cohen, Daniel Llewelyn-Williams and Christopher Logan in *The Comedy of Errors*.
Photograph: Manuel Harlan

It is time to take a short summer break – in 1940s Casablanca. On the first night of Philip Franks's delicious production of **The Comedy of Errors**, the keen-eyed might have noticed an uncommon number of identical twins (by special arrangement) in the audience. Shakespeare was a father to (non-identical) twins and his farce of false sightings could be seen as a cautious celebration of twinship. Cautious, because it is also about the explosive consequences of mistaken identity. This ludicrous knot of a plot is so complicatedly hilarious that it takes much wit to untie.

Egeon, a merchant of Syracuse, is its sober strand. Christopher Ravenscroft keeps his performance straight and, velvet-voiced, makes admirable sense of his complicated family history. Antipholus of Syracuse (Daniel Weyman) and Antipholus of Ephesus (Daniel Llewelyn-Williams) hold up amusingly – tall fellows in grass-green blazers. The unmarried twin is an amorous opportunist, ready to take his brother's wife, Adriana (Jo Herbert), at her forceful word. The married twin is a fast mover too: locked out of his home, he makes a dash to a nightclub. Joseph Kloska and Josh Cohen play their servants, the Dromios, with gumption.

But the great coup is having Anna-Jane Casey as the Courtesan. Franks is wisely relaxed about putting Shakespeare on hold to let her sing. By the second half, day is fading across Regent's Park and pink lights twinkle in the Café Américain. The band starts up and Casey appears, sultry in strawberry silk, and sings: "I'm so in love, I've no sense of values left at all." It does not look easy to move seductively past the heads of fez-wearing men (fez navigation could be a new sport), but she does it. And there are other delightful moments to come, including Veronica Roberts as a hilariously passionate Abbess, Richard Warrick as a jubilant jeweller and a farcical use of laundry baskets to outclass *The Wind in the Willows*.

Steven Berkoff's **Salome** at the National was a benchmark production. It was like an Aubrey Beardsley drawing (*Oscar Wilde's* first edition was illustrated by Beardsley).

Jamie Lloyd's production – feral, noisy, dark – could not be more different. It has its own integrity but swallows Wilde's symbolist poem alive. The imagery should insinuate its way into one's head. But here, language is an opponent to be cudgelled.

Con O'Neill plays Herod with a turkey-cock swagger. When not shouting or masturbating ferociously, he is swigging red wine out of a petrol can. Zawe Ashton's Salome is breathlessly in love with herself too, with the fidgety self-consciousness of a teenager. Jaye Griffiths plays her mother dynamically – an older and wiser siren. Iokanaan is terrifyingly conjured by Seun Shote – a chained man who rises from the earth into white smoke, his face as thickly tarred as a new road, his eyes impossible to see.

If Salome cannot have him alive, she will enjoy him dead: in return for her dancing, she requires Herod to let her have his head on a silver salver. Yet for all its libidinous intent, the play seems, finally, to be about impotence. Salome's blood-soaked snog with Iokanaan's severed head brings the hellish evening to a suitably lifeless consummation.

Dutch director Dries Verhoeven is a visionary athlete who has taken an extraordinary imaginative leap. For **Life Streaming** outside the National theatre (as part of the London International Festival of Theatre) he has parked a mobile internet cafe containing 20 computers. It overlooks the Thames. On a beach on the other side of the world (country not to be disclosed here) is a second internet cafe – 8,000km away – where 20 performers wait at their computers for us. You leave your shoes, bags and prejudices at the door. I am not going to debate whether "digital theatre" is theatre or not. It hardly matters. This was unique. I spent an hour with a boy who let me know about a life in which loss is too commonplace to discuss. He told me about his culture. He was "proud as a peacock" of his country. It was a typed conversation – moving, intense, unsettling. Some contrasts were crude – my house (on Google Earth) contrasted with a shell of a shack on the shore, battered by the tsunami.

More often, it was subtly provocative. It is easy to be manipulated online. *Life Streaming* raised questions about intimacy, trust and control. Towards the end of the hour, warm water ebbed into the cafe – we were ankle-deep. But go – this is not a show about which, in any sense, to have cold feet.