

OBITER

RICH AND GREAT. After seeing *Titus Andronicus* and *The Trojans* in the course of one intoxicating week, I found myself echoing W. H. Davies in another connection—this was indeed the moment to say gratefully, ‘How rich and great the times are now’, and even if the two productions bear little resemblance to rainbow or cuckoo, yet they do at least share something of the indefinable magic of transience and may indeed never come together again; may never come this side the tomb. But how rewarding it is to have seen these two *monstres sacrées* at all, let alone in the same season.

Sir Laurence Olivier’s production of *Titus* came to the Stoll at last, trailing the clouds of glory which it had gathered, first from Stratford and then from half the capitals of Europe, though what some of these made of it one hesitates to think, considering that West Berlin found even the film of *Richard III* over-bloodstained to its taste. One therefore took one’s seat with reserve, rather in the mood of Diaghilev saying to the young Cocteau, ‘Etonnez-moi’; but in the space of the first five minutes it was done. The music, the set, the pace and Frank Thring’s Saturninus combined to suggest an atmosphere of sinister decay which made Olivier’s first appearance—a confident commander with an air of robust Staff College directness—highly disquieting in this particular context. And so the savage business began, with Maxine Audley’s Tamora a distillation of venom in both voice and appearance, and Anthony Quayle as Aaron visibly biding his time. Titus reeled under the successive blows—cold with authority at first, then shrill in incipient hysteria and later barely whispering in despair—always presenting the foursquare character of a limited, honourable, conventional gentleman quite unfitted to cope with this kind of thing. Lavinia once ruined, however, and that dangerous strain of delusion unleashed in a man clearly de-routed, literally round the bend, and the arrows go streaking off to the gods and neither he nor we know whether he really believes it or not. It must have been all of twenty years since I had even read the play when I saw the respectable Old Vic production earlier this year, and it struck me then that it was really much more formidable a work than one had remembered, but seen at the Stoll it leapt into murky life and one was continually jerked into admiration at phrase or line or whole passage of authentic genius. Aaron with his child, Titus ritually stabbing his loved Lavinia and Marcus Andronicus speaking with resignation of his ‘poor remainder of Andronici’ all seemed genuinely tragic, in spite of the prefabricated

holocaust, and I reeled out of the theatre feeling that I was now much better fitted to understand Lear and Othello for the future.

The Trojans was an endurance test, too, but in a different fashion; it began at six o'clock and we were not out till nearly eleven: and it was very hot. But even in the long, and to one who is at best no opera-addict, often ludicrous first act there was never a suspicion of boredom, and there were many moments of deep pleasure. One had, in a way, to separate one's appreciation, so that half the mind could dwell on the subtlety of the production, and half on the staggering impact of the music when heard for once in its proper setting. When the two fused, as happened at the approach of the vast looming horse, it was indeed something to remember. On the whole, however, I was oddly surprised to find that it was the tender and lyric passages that were the most memorable; one is rather apt to think of Berlioz as a master of the monumental, but it was the long 'on such a night as this' duet between Dido and Aeneas, or the homesick song of the young sailor in the last act that were the most moving, in spite of the splendid choruses of Trojan defiance or the Carthaginian court in full pomp. The production may have been all wrong for the pundits, but it was certainly an unforgettable experience for the uninitiated; the music surged and broke and rippled in one's ears as if some great ocean of creation were piled up behind it with irresistible weight, and Jon Vickers as Aeneas for once was as heroic as gallant as his role, while Miss Thebom as Dido was a queen that one could really believe in. When she let down her hair, all six feet of it, across the funeral pyre the Virgilian despair seemed brought truly to life. I had never seen a production of *The Trojans* before and probably never will again, but I count myself lucky to have caught this one on the wing.

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