

# Star-crossed lovers with teen spirit

The raw passion of youth makes for a captivating Romeo and Juliet, there's more unbridled desire at the Young Vic, and Tyne Daly is superb as Maria Callas

Kate Kellaway



**Romeo and Juliet**  
Nuffield, Southampton; then touring

**The Changeling**  
Young Vic, London SE1; until 25 Feb

**Master Class**  
Vaudeville, London WC2; until 28 Apr

I watched **Romeo and Juliet** in the company of several Southampton school parties – bracing myself for a noisy night ahead. But Headlong, a touring company of generous unpredictability, offers here a production to silence outspoken schoolchildren and docile adults alike. You've got a delinquent in the class? That is nothing to what we have on stage. Everyone knows someone like Tom Mothersdale's exhibitionist Mercutio – charismatic, insecure, flaunting tasteless velvet trousers. And we have all met friendly, drunken fat boys like Danny Kirrane's Benvolio, swigging vodka until their eyes glaze over. But not one of us will have seen a *Romeo and Juliet* like this before.

What makes this such an extraordinary show is not its wit, its modern dress or its music (the Boomtown Rats' hit "I Don't Like Mondays" features), nor the liberties taken with the text (Shakespeare survives unperturbed). It is its focus on the power of teenage love. In Robert Icke's unfettered production, Romeo and Juliet are not attempting to embody a lofty romantic ideal. Romeo, convincingly played by Daniel Boyd, is callow, naive and a wearer of espadrilles. But when love comes, he can't resist. And when he speaks Shakespeare's most romantic lines,

one feels he is trying the language on for size, hoping to impress Juliet, wanting to be grown up. Catrin Stewart's Juliet is one of the most captivating and touching I have seen. Her excitement, playfulness, way of jumping for joy suggest the child she so recently was.

Headlong, whose artistic director is Rupert Goold, is the right company to be entrusted with a love that is headlong and against the clock. Time dominates. A projected digital clock lets time escape before our eyes (designer: Helen Goddard). The cast experiments with turning the clock back. Some moments are daringly replayed as if to test the truth of Juliet's line: "In a minute there are many days." Right up to the end, there is the sense that one extra minute might have saved the day.

The supporting performances are, without exception, terrific. Keith Bartlett's Capulet is oppressively salt-of-the-earth. Caroline Faber's Lady Capulet is beautifully nuanced. Simon Coates's Friar Laurence is an entertaining modern cleric and Brigid Zengeni's Nurse is a scream: a warm, indiscreet shopaholic in patent yellow heels.

But the stars have barely had time to get themselves crossed before the end approaches. Haste, in this production, leads to tragedy. When Romeo kills Tybalt, he is not thinking about consequences. Same thing with Mercutio (there is horrified surprise in Stephen Fewell's eyes when he realises he is dying). No one meant the story to end in death. Romeo, Juliet, Mercutio and Tybalt – they were only playing.

It has (strange synchronicity?) been a theatre week involving a great deal of party jelly. There were lashings of it at the Capulets' ball and bowfests in **The Changeling**. And if ever there was a play that came with a licence to treat it as a wild party, Thomas Middleton and William Rowley's *The Changeling* (1622) is that play. It is as fresh, violent and shocking a romp as if it had been written today. And in Joe Hill-

Gibbins's modern-dress production of this Jacobean tragedy, anything goes.

On the surface, Jessica Raine's excellent Beatrice-Joanna looks respectable, but this is in delicious contrast to the unstitched lust that governs her every move and the entire play. Daniel Cerqueira's De Flores – her nemesis – is disturbing and unusually convincing. He is commonly presented as a hideous yet sexually charismatic predator. Here, he has a weariness in his voice as if poor self-esteem were slowing his pace. His puce complexion looks wrecked, his exaggeratedly



**One has to hope that this portrait of Maria Callas is unfair. Tyne Daly presents her as a deficient diva**

greasy hair bodes badly. And it is to this unsavoury depressive that Joanna is fatally bound after hiring him to murder Alonzo (Duncan Wisbey) – her unintended. Her plan is to tie the knot with Alsemero (eager, decisive Kobna Holdbrook-Smith).

The murder scene is especially bizarre: Alonzo's head is dunked in red jelly after De Flores misses with the cake knife. But even more jaw-dropping in its extremity is the full-on scene where Diaphanta (played with appetite by Charlotte Lucas) is sent to Beatrice-Joanna's marriage bed

to trick Alsemero into believing his wife a virgin. Beatrice-Joanna mopes, rages and loses the plot for ever while Diaphanta and Alsemero writhe on.

The production teems with invention. There is never a dull – seldom a sane – moment. Only one complaint: the language could do with more breathing space. And it might be good to have an unfrantic moment in which to contemplate lust's horrific harvest.

Terrence McNally's **Master Class**, just transferred from a sell-out run on Broadway, is an entertaining, polished vehicle but tantalisingly thin about what made Maria Callas a great opera singer – and full of banalities about performance. Yet Tyne Daly is superb as Callas. One has to hope, though, that this portrait, focusing on the end of the soprano's career, is unfair. Daly presents her as a deficient diva. She is indecently self-centred while pretending to be humble. She urges students to listen but incessantly interrupts. Her "sense of humour" exists only on her own say-so. It is only because Daly is so accomplished that we see vulnerability in this monster – and like her anyway.

We are in a rehearsal room with a piano where Callas is coaching pupils, as she did at the Juilliard School between 1970 and 1971. Does anyone learn through humiliation? Dianne Pilkington's cheerful novice evolves into a tearful practitioner. As her fellow student (played by mezzo Naomi O'Connell, who actually did train at the Juilliard) becomes ever more angrily mortified by Callas, her Lady Macbeth soars. Only a trainee tenor singing Cavaradossi from Act I of *Tosca* (Garrett Sorenson) secures Callas's stunned approval (and the audience's). Daly barely sings – she talks through arias. And this is a judicious, powerful, moving decision – in Stephen Wadsworth's slick, meticulous production – because it is incidentally suggestive of Callas's vanished voice and hopes.

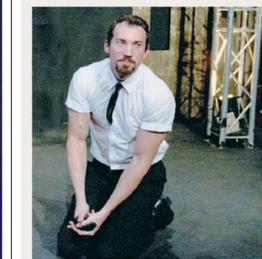
Susannah Clapp is away



Catrin Stewart and Daniel Boyd in Headlong's Romeo and Juliet. Below left, inset: Tyne Daly as Maria Callas in Master Class. Photographs by Tristram Kenton

## THE BEST PERFORMANCE I'VE EVER SEEN Janie Dee, actor

**The Changeling**  
Southwark Playhouse, 2011



'Beyond all expectations': David Caves in The Changeling. Nick Scott

A Jacobean tragedy can be difficult to relate to, but this production was realised in such a modern and emotional way that it completely got to me. It was the last night, so I ran along to Southwark Playhouse after rehearsals. All I could see on stage were TV sets and I thought: "What is this going to be like?" David Caves played De Flores and his performance went beyond all expectations. He managed to be both repulsive and attractive.

His character worked as a security guard, so he was looking through TV cameras at this virgin, Beatrice-Joanna. But she was repulsed by him. One of Caves's eyes was whittled out with a contact lens and he had an awful disfigurement on the side of his face. But he had the most amazing physical presence. He's muscular, hard, but moves almost like a dancer. De Flores knew that Beatrice-Joanna

wanted to marry this gorgeous guy, Alsemero, but the only way for that to happen was to kill another man she was betrothed to. She asked De Flores: "Will you do this for me?" and he said: "I'll do anything for you." She realised what he wanted in exchange and gave in to him. In that one incredible moment of the loss of her virginity, her reputation was replaced by a lust that absolutely encompassed her.

Caves made you understand why she could not resist De Flores. His performance was so enigmatic: it was worthy of more people seeing it. But had there been 200 people or 2,000 people, he would have given his absolute all. This is true of all great actors.

Interview by Annalies Whirry  
Janie Dee is in *Noises Off at the Old Vic, London SE1* until 10 March

## DANCE

# Love's labour's lost for Titania

This Oberon seems more interested in Puck, writes Luke Jennings

**The Dream; Song of the Earth**  
Royal Opera House, London WC2

**The Rodin Project**  
Sadler's Wells, London EC1

Following Sergei Polunin's abrupt departure from the Royal Ballet, last Monday's opening night of **The Dream** saw Steven McRae assume the lead role of Oberon. Choreographed by Frederick Ashton to music by Mendelssohn, the piece is a balletic rendering of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and this is a fine, detailed revival. The fairies are perfectly cast, with Akane Takada's Peaseblossom all flirt and snap, Romany Pajdak's Mustardseed the dreamy one, and Emma Maguire a pertly head-girlish Cobweb.

As Oberon, McRae emphasises the character's darker notes, materialising behind trees as a glinting, watchful presence and taking a perverse pleasure in the disorder he creates. He dispatches the technical challenges of the scherzo with lethal efficiency, his arabesques sharp as wasp stings, but emotionally his touch is less sure. Distrustful of Alina Cojocaru's capricious Titania, his Oberon evinces a homoerotic complicity with Valentino Zucchetti's sly, suggestive Puck. While arguably a valid reading, this undermines the final pas de deux, leaving us uncertain whether he has earned or indeed desires Cojocaru's exquisite, melting surrender.

No such ambivalence in the second part of this double bill (to be performed again at the ROH on 5 March). **Song of the Earth**, Kenneth MacMillan's magisterial interpretation of Mahler's song cycle, is a plangent meditation on mortality and life's renewal. Carlos Acosta has been refining his portrayal of the Messenger of Death for more than a decade now, and the result is baleful, sadly amused and utterly implacable.

As the mortal couple, Rupert Pennefather and Tamara Rojo provide a poignant contrast – he fatalistic, she fraught and resistant – and their journey is inscribed in choreography of the sparest, most austere beauty. Ever conscious of life's transient nature, MacMillan elaborated an entire choreographic aesthetic for the purposes of this ballet, and in consequence *Song of the Earth* stands alone, hermetic and shimmering, an icon of 20th-century modernism.

The principals and the 16-strong

ensemble rise to its challenges with measured precision, both technical and emotional. Acosta moves between quiet gravitas and mocking imitation of the activities of mortals unable to bear too much reality. Pennefather is lost to him almost from the start and this makes Rojo's evasions – at one moment she desperately clasps her lover's legs as if to physically arrest the passing of time – all the more piercing. Rojo's performance is utterly pared back, but vast in its reach and resonance and, in its ultimate acceptance of the dying of the light, sublime.

**The Rodin Project** is the brainchild of

Russell Maliphant. For some years now he has been investigating the human body as an instrument of the unexpected, so it's perhaps inevitable that he should have been attracted by the work of the fin de siècle French sculptor, with its astounding interplays of mass and weightlessness. The result, lit by Michael Hulls, sees the six performers inventively and dynamically deployed, but isn't yet a coherent, theatrical whole. As a work in evolution, however, it promises fascinating things and represents a brave leap forward on Maliphant's part.

'Lethal efficiency': Steven McRae as Oberon. Tristram Kenton



## MORE THEATRE

**Sex With a Stranger**  
Trafalgar Studios 2; until 25 Feb

A Saturday-night pull is the starting point for Stefan Golaszewski's new play, bleakly funny business when presented as forensically as this: a Lynx Africa-scented meeting in a nightclub pre-empting a pantomime grope by the fire exit, then a late-night journey home with only the interior fittings of an N73 bus to fuel conversation.

Russell Tovey and Jaime Winstone play Adam and Grace, our lacklustre couple. Adam tries hard to keep a flicker of eroticism in the night's tryst while Grace giggles and babbles, their progress towards the bedroom surviving a mini-drama over a lost Oyster card, a kebab, later an extended break for teeth brushing

Jaime Winstone and Russell Tovey in *Sex With a Stranger*.



and a disagreement over sexy lighting. It starts to feel like an over-extended sketch about the ritual of one-night stands when the story suddenly broadens into something knottier, more sinister. Is that really a genial vacancy in Adam's manner or a deeper misanthropy? He has a long-term girlfriend, Ruth (Naomi Sheldon), and through flashback we hop around moments in their relationship – the early-date discovery that they both like Pizza Express olives launching a drab but genuine affection, all but vanished by the time they're sharing a flat and Ruth is cautiously plotting to wall-bracket their telly while Adam plans a Saturday night out on his own.

There's a glimpse of a living-room fight, verging on proper violence, that's shocking and horrible. It's the only time the underlying menace of this engaging play is allowed into plain view. Tom Lambert

**The Devil and Mister Punch**  
Barbican, London EC2; until 25 Feb

One murder, according to the puppet-master Mr Harvey in this gleefully nasty piece of work from Improbable, is committed every 1.56 seconds. To help us understand this ghastly statistic, he sets a metronome ticking and intones "murder" at every second click, stabbing the air with a cello bow to drive home the point.

It may not happen every 1.56 seconds, but there is no shortage of murder in director Julian Crouch's atmospheric and very funny homage to the Punch and Judy



'Gleefully nasty': The Devil and Mr Punch. Photograph by Kevin Monko

puppet show, which is celebrating 350 years since its first recorded appearance in England. It's a recognisable Punch – beak nose, half-moon chin – who knocks off his wife and child and anyone else within swinging distance of his bat, and many of the characters here, from officious constable to hangman to devil, are staples of the tradition, but Crouch and his co-devisers add extra layers to the rotten proceedings.

Intrigued by the popularity Punch enjoyed in America in the mid-19th century, Crouch has woven two real-life travelling puppet-masters, Harvey and Hovey, into the action to move it along and slyly expose the artifice behind it. ("Don't look at me madam," Harvey admonishes an audience member, "look at the puppets.") The show is cleverly staged and beautifully performed, and on Punch's road to perdition there are many entertaining diversions: an orchestra of pigs meeting a grisly end, a typewriting dog with a litigious streak, and a tragic scene in which a bull, fatally in love with a female matador, begs her to pierce his heart with her sword. Killian Fox