

Plays in Performance

ROSMERSHOLM by Henrik Ibsen, in a new version by Frank McGuinness. Cottesloe Theatre, National Theatre of Great Britain, London, England. July 6, 1987 (Production opened on May 6, 1987).

The National Theatre of Great Britain's somber production of Frank McGuinness' new, and highly faithful, translation of Henrik Ibsen's *Rosmersholm* reaps mixed results. There are several fine performances, but also one particularly weak one in a major role. The staging, by Sarah Pia Anderson, is spare and economic, and although the production is periodically gripping, it ultimately fails to take wing.

The play itself walks a fine and difficult line between near-tragedy and melodrama, with its strongest passages generating an intensity of emotion that manages to elevate several of the weaker scenes. McGuinness' eminently stage-worthy translation offers clarity without undermining the more lyrical passages of a work that often seems less a play than an emotional score. Ibsen sets up a fascinating dilemma for Rebecca West (well played by Suzanne Bertish) who has, for the love of John Rosmer (Roger Lloyd Pack), willfully encouraged the suicide of Rosmer's unstable wife, Beata. The play begins after Beata's death and traces the mounting guilt in Rebecca as she races, like the symbolic and tormenting white horses ("The white horses. I may have glimpsed them . . . day and night, they're here. The white horses at Rosmersholm"), to her death, in a double suicide with Rosmer, from the same footbridge where Beata met her end.

Bertish is a commanding Rebecca West, with a steely beauty and strong presence. She barrels forward with a self-confident and insistent sense of righteousness until, tormented by the knowledge of her guilt ("I am in Rosmersholm. I'm at its mercy. Where I've done great wrong, it's right I seek my penance."), she makes her choice of suicide with Rosmer seem the only possible penance for a woman who could never survive the shattering of her sense of right, the loss of her independence, and the poisoning of her passion. In a role that has

challenged the greatest of modern actresses, Bertish delivers a performance marked by distinction.

Bertish's skillful Rebecca is severely undermined by the thoroughly inadequate performance of Pack, who offers only the clichéd view of the ethereal and poetic weakling dominated by an iron-willed woman. His ghostly complexion, quivering hands, and eye-popping expressions create only an absurd caricature of what is admittedly a treacherously troublesome role.

Among the supporting cast, Robert Eddison gives a movingly resonant performance as Ulrick Brendl and impressively enlivens the play in his one extended scene. Not surprisingly, Bertish has her best scenes with Eddison, and with David Ryall as Kroll, Beata's brother, who suspects Rebecca's involvement in Beata's suicide. Ken Drury is a wooden Peder Mortensgaard, but Heather Tobias is excellent as a much more vigorous and youthful Mrs. Helseth than is traditional.

Robert Glossop's simple and stark three-quarter arena setting in the National's tiny Cottesloe Theatre is an effective playing space, featuring a raked wooden floor with rows of sinister portraits of Rosmer's ancestors on two invisible side walls and a bleak sky at the back. The moody lighting by Paul Denby and discordant music by Mike Figgis complement Glossop's environment. Anderson employs only a few simple furnishings and props, and although she might be faulted for a few overly melodramatic moments, she manages to create a sense of impending doom that pervades the atmosphere. Refreshingly, Anderson demurs from any obvious theatrical device in an attempt to make the play "relevant" to contemporary audiences. But at times the production seems to unintentionally mock the relentlessly down beat and neurotic tension considered typical of Ibsen's most florid plays. As a result, the production falls into self-parody, which is unfortunately heightened by Pack's flawed performance.

Not seen in today's theatres with the regularity of *A Doll's House*, *Hedda Gabler*, or even *Ghosts*, *Rosmersholm* is nonetheless among Ibsen's most powerful dramas. It is unfortunate indeed that despite Bertish's fine Rebecca and Anderson's solid staging, Pack's inept performance may prevent this generally intelligent production from finding an appreciative audience.

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