

Bed and bawd

recently rang the local health centre to make an appointment with my GP and was told that she and all the other doctors in the practice were fully booked for the day. It was early on a Friday and I'm grateful it was not a life-threatening situation as I might not have been able to fend off the Grim Reaper until Monday morning. Fifty years ago it was at least an hour or so of waiting before I consulted the fearsome Dr Hogg but I knew that she would in due course transfix me with her steely Scottish eyes and deal with the latest infestation of hormonal pimples. Progress, eh! It was about then that I first flicked through my father's copy of *The Canterbury Tales* looking for the saucy bits and I recalled this fond memory when I saw the Royal Shakespeare Company's reworking of the book recently.

Adaptation

Productions of books for the stage are an interesting phenomenon. At one extreme are attempts to act out *Jamaica Inn*, for example, as at Salisbury Playhouse in 2004. The scenery was atmospheric and the action sped along but it lacked the fulfilment of a good read. A book requires one's own imagination to furnish the settings and, furthermore, a good author spends much time describing characters and motives which cannot easily be imparted in a two-hour distillation. The director of an adaptation must rely on pace and mood to create satisfaction whereas a playwright writes his original text specifically to communicate background emotions.

At the other end of the spectrum are operas in which, for example, Beaumarchais' stage comedy *La Folle Journée* transmogrifies via da Ponte's libretto into Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro* or Dumas' *La Dame aux Camélias* pupates from words by Piave into Verdi's *La Traviata*. In these cases we are so far removed from the text that it is a new medium entirely. Between these two end points is the musical and Lionel Bart's *Oliver!* or Hugo's *Les Misérables* as staged by Claude-Michel Schönberg and Alain Boublil are good examples of another distinct art form which also does not bear comparison with the original.

Real genius

As it happened my Stratford visit encompassed not just Chaucer but the RSC's version of *Great Expectations* and I assume that it must at



The Canterbury Tales



Great Expectations



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The Canterbury Tales



Joyce DiDonato

Alan Frost starts the year off fine – and continues to enjoy the saucy bits.

present be a set book in schools as there were an uncommon number of adolescents in the audience. The treatment by Nick Ormerod and Declan Donnellan has minimal scenery and relies on all members of the cast to narrate parts of the action with pivotal scenes acted between. It did not work for me and I was continually thinking of David Lean's classic 1946 film. The good news is that the female youngsters loved it and Pip received a rousing welcome at the end which seemed almost to overwhelm young Samuel Roukin, in his debut season with the RSC.

The two parts of *Canterbury Tales* were seen by a full house with a median age of 55 and not a child to be seen. There had been a warning about explicit content but I suspect the teenagers would have been in seventh heaven had they been able to attend. This production adapted for the stage by Mike Poulton is glorious and as it is travelling in the UK from mid-February everyone from Dumfries to St Austell will be able to see it. The bawdy stories are rib-tickling (especially the bed scene in the Reeve's Tale); the noble moments full of pathos; the ensemble faultless; and the inner humour subtle and clever. The prologue (only) is delivered in Chaucer's English and just for a moment I thought my ears were playing up. It was rather like hearing someone speak Dutch – you're momentarily not sure if it's English with an accent or another language. After this mood-setting and a reversion to modern speech the pace never slackens. The Tale of Sir Thopas delivered in the style of a rap singer and the chicken chorus in the Nun's Priest's Tale are but two of the priceless gems. Do not miss this celebration of genius.

Diva

Miss Cecilia Bartoli must look to her laurels. The latest Rosina at Covent Garden, Joyce DiDonato, has temporarily supplanted the great Italian diva in my affections. Radio 3 was recording this production of *The Barber of Seville* on the evening I was there. If you heard it you will understand but I can tell you that she's a great stage actress also. What a good start to the year!