

Humble pie

February was a blaze of virtuosity musically and I was privileged to witness some extraordinary performances. But the abiding memories are from two deeply thought-provoking stage productions which led me to consider the nature of humility and humiliation. The words themselves are interesting. Humility suggests a self-induced state of diffidence, a modest unpretentiousness involving only an individual. Humiliation is active and implies the infliction of degradation and abasement by one person on another. The *Shorter OED* tends to confirm this distinction by showing as the immediate source of humility the Latin adjective *humilis*, meaning low or humble, whereas the root of humiliation, in a separate entry, is the late Latin verb *humiliare*. But each ultimately has the same root and the fine difference indicates the way in which a transitive verb emerged to signify the act of mortifying someone.

Measure for Measure is about the abuse of power but in the co-production by the National Theatre and Complicité we see an emphasis on sex, lies, and punishment in this dark, brooding staging which has just enjoyed a tour of India and Europe. In many ways the play is unsatisfactory because the last scene poses more questions than it answers. Shakespeare makes us think hard in this so-called comedy and we do not leave the theatre in a state of delight but pensive and disturbed. Angelo's hypocrisy as the Duke's pious deputy is perhaps understandable given the mixed messages sent out by the Duke at the start of the play. There is no such confusion in the director's intent in this modern dress, contemporary interpretation as we see images of presidential figures extolling war in a media-savvy, image-led, TV-personality society. I was reminded of Bob Garratt's book, *The Fish Rots from the Head*.

Angus Wright as Angelo disturbingly recalled someone I know in real life but cannot recall. In the crucial scene with Naomi Frederick's Isabella his weakness and her humiliation were manifest and a pin could have been heard dropping on the tired carpet in the Lyttleton Theatre. This was as squirmingly uncomfortable as Sidney Lumet's 2004 TV movie *Strip Search*, a post-9/11 examination of the balance between personal freedom and national security. Our distaste for Angelo is surpassed only by the bovine stupidity of Mariana (Anamaria Marinca) who having been cast aside by him, and seen the extent of his depravity in drooling over Isabella, forgives him in the last moments and



Measure for Measure



Measure for Measure: Angus Wright and Naomi Frederick



The Marriage of Figaro: Erwin Schrott and Miah Persson

Alan Frost is led to consider humility and humiliation.

could well be headed for a lifetime of domestic violence.

Mariana's inanity is matched by the bull-headed arrogance of the Duke, Simon McBurney, who having manipulated all and sundry expects Isabella to be at his beck and call despite leading her to believe, just five minutes earlier, that her brother was dead. The plot is complicated but the meaning is clear. Several of the characters spend their time lying, most are deeply interested in sex, all are chastened in one way or another and I suspect none lives happily ever after. The ambiguity of Isabella's last long pause was a suitable metaphor for the many loose ends.

Shakespeare's work is intertwined with Jacobean politics and the more rigid social structure of his time. Nearly 200 years later Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro* dealt with the new world order of the enlightenment and the emergence of the bourgeoisie. As storm clouds gather, especially in France, we note the Count's wish to exercise the ancient right of *droit du seigneur* as Susanna marries Figaro. The plot, as labyrinthine as *Measure for Measure*, sees this potential submission avoided by the comeuppance of the Count himself. The last act is in many ways as unsatisfactory as the Shakespeare in its plot twists, but who cares? We are there for the music. The Countess is shamed by a philandering husband but readily falls in his arms; the Count is chastened by Susanna but rapidly forgives her (allegedly); Figaro probably harbours a grudge but is too infatuated with Susanna to notice.

David McVicar's production at Covent Garden will be the staple diet of the 'corporates' for years to come. It's accessible, realistic, and a suitable foil for the singers. I closed my eyes during the overture as there was some pointless stage business happening and thereafter the players were of mixed quality. The Countess herself, Dorothea Röschmann, made me yearn for the creamy voice of Kiri Te Kanawa, who melted hearts in this role and made it inconceivable that the Count would have had a roving eye. This one had the opposite effect. Erwin Schrott as Figaro was excellent; Miah Persson a not very winsome Susanna; and Rinat Shaham brilliant as Cherubino. Philip Langridge seemed somewhat out of sorts as Don Basilio.

Mozart was what you expect – tune after tune after glorious tune. The music overcame all obstacles and this was a night of triumph for genius. Wherever he is, I hope he enjoyed his 250th birthday in January.