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THEATRE

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Out of his pram

An excellent play about Stanley Spencer and an overlong attempt at an old French classic

Love is in the air and among the artists this week in two major openings. *Les Enfants du Paradis* and *Stanley*, powered by two Renaissance men of our theatre, fortysomething friends and rivals Simon Callow and Antony Sher. Callow has made his mark on film as a 'personality' actor and in print as a biographer of Charles Laughton and Orson Welles, while Sher ticks off the great classical roles in between writing novels, drawing and painting.

Sher's oil and charcoal figures have always been lumpen and fleshy, hovering sensuously between the styles of Beryl Cook and Lucian Freud: his onstage impersonations often bear traces of his own drawing board. In another trick of physical transformation, he now becomes the priapic mystic of Cookham, Stanley Spencer. Pam Gems's excellent new play, *Stanley*, provides him with the outline of the bumpkin, bohemian artist who lives and breathes painting as convincingly as did Charles Laughton's Rembrandt or Kirk Douglas's Van Gogh.

The Cottesloe is transformed by designer Tim Hatley into a Spenserian chapel of the Cookham and Glasgow Resurrection scenes, the walls heaving with torsos and limbs, and scenes of Biblical moment, that characterise Spencer's imaginative and suburban torment. Sher as Spencer lies prostrate, squirming on top of his own erection, as he paints his wife Hilda's inner thighs. The beds into which Spencer climbs like a frisky squirrel finally confine Hilda after her nervous crisis and mastectomy. The newly knighted Stanley carries on talking to Hilda, and painting, in a Cookham idyll of deferential villagers.

Spencer's secondary love, the lesbian painter Patricia Preece, slinkily impersonated by Anna Chancellor, removes her clothes, or flaunts herself in black lingerie, as a forbidding counterpoint in Stanley's true devotion. Preece's aspirations are fascinatingly suspended between her devotion to Stanley and her own career motives. The actress lopes through Stanley's fantasies, her voice carefully conveying destructive devotion in a long, whining caress.

The play loses momentum, and some of its texture, in the second act, but John Caird's production, and Sher's wonderful performance, carry us through. Bits from the diaries and

letters (a treasure trove in the Tate archives) are cleverly stitched in - Patricia's breasts stand out like peeled comice pears; all other painters, says Stanley, are mere decorators, ducks, or daft in the head - but the piece never feels like a worthy arts *hommage*.

Deborah Findlay, sensual and touching as Hilda, and Chancellor herself (though her role is sustained in only one scene after the interval), see to that. Great support, too, from Selina Cadell as Patricia's butch inamorata, Dorothy Hepworth, who quietly fumes while other bottoms burn, and who delivers a critical defence of Spencer's unique talent which Patricia has first exploited and then derided.

Sher has acquired a convincing hairpiece, as well as the right spectacle frames, corduroy trousers and scuffed shoes. His inimitable style of busy, penetrative character acting brings the artist alive while suggesting another sort of volcanic, alien energy, the anguish behind Spencer that transcends Cookham and the Bible and invests him with a Blakean, visionary wildness. This comic innocent dreams of sexual gratification, but is submerged in his art; it is the dreams that count.

The romantic daisy chain in Marcel Carne's wartime masterpiece of the French cinema, *Les Enfants du Paradis*, prompts Simon Callow, making his RSC debut as a director, to follow John Caird (and Trevor Nunn) on the trail of *Nicholas Nickleby* and *Les Misérables*. He arrives, just about, at the end of a long evening - one hour longer than the great film itself. When Mike Alfreds and David Glass produced a stage version of *Les Enfants du Paradis* three years ago they attempted, with some success, to exploit the theatrical setting of the Funambule on the Boulevard du Temple.

Callow wants instead to liberate his actors into romantic excess, his performers operating as structural stanchions in their own story, not sleeping partners. Others have already highlighted the tactical errors in the execution: half an hour needs cutting, the abysmal lighting needs overhauling (when you can't see faces, you don't hear voices, unless the director is Giorgio Strehler) and the sightlines are insultingly bad. But Helen McCrory as Garance, and Joseph Fiennes as



Sher and Sher alike: Another uncanny transformation, this time into Stanley Spencer

Photograph by Neil Libbert

the poet assassin Lacenaire, give tremendous performances unfazed by inevitable comparisons with Arletty and Marcel Herrand.

Garance is the enigmatic beauty who has bewitched and enslaved two mimetic titans of the nineteenth-century French theatre, the sweet clown Baptiste Debureau, and the heroic tragedian Frederick Lemaitre. Here, the inevitable comparisons with Jean-Louis Barrault and Pierre Brasseur are not particularly flattering - how could they be? - to Rupert Graves and James Purefoy. The miming of the former - notably in the explanation of the pickpocketing incident - is not nearly precise enough, and the bombast of the latter insufficiently flamboyant. When Frederick plays Othello, you sense that Purefoy and Callow have been unable to decide whether to ridicule the actor or celebrate him, a fatal loss of nerve.

On the credit side, the romantic scenes between Baptiste and Garance are beautifully done, the music of John White is exciting and atmospheric. Robin Don's rapidly whirling, scaffolded set may upset those of a nervous disposition, but it does work well as a warren of backstage locations and Parisian streets as well as the Funambule, Baptiste's dream factory, itself.

The gaiety of nations is always enriched by the really bad musical, and in *The Fields of Ambrosia* ('where everyone knows ya') we have a genuine stinker to set alongside such splendidly awful speci-

mens of the genre as *Bernadette*, *Children of Eden* (directed by John Caird) and *Which Witch*. The story of Jonas Candide, a travelling state executioner in 1918 Mississippi, is based on a long-forgotten Stacy Keach film. There are more volts than Voltaire about this Candide: he falls in love with one of his female customers, comes to no good and finds himself strapped to his own chair. Hoist on his own petard, you might say, or fried in his own pan.

In such a week of romantic excess it is too easy to lose sight of the genuine merits of August Wilson's *Two Trains Running*, in which this wonderful American writer continues his twentieth-century saga of the black community in Pittsburgh. It is now 1969, and the denizens of a diner chew the fat on the eve of a rally to commemorate Malcolm X. Paulette Randall's production is beautifully played by a cast including Ray Shell, Tony Armatrading and Jenny Jules. In a reversal of the structural dynamic in *Stanley*, the play's texture grows and deepens, transforming what might have been a black *Cheers* into a rhythmic dramatic poem, vibrant with manners and mantras, reminiscent of Eugene O'Neill at his pipe-dreaming, saloon bar best.

Stanley RNT Cottesloe, London SE1 (0171-928 2252); *Les Enfants du Paradis* Barbican, London EC2 (0171-638 8891); *The Fields of Ambrosia* Aldwych, London WC2 (0171-379 3367); *Two Trains Running* Tricycle, London NW6 (0171-328 1000)