

Critical Responses to Northern Broadsides

The Financial Times – 3 September 2006

The Man with Two Gaffers

Theatre Royal, York

'Ave yer not 'eard t'news? Since Goldoni wrote several of his plays in Venetian dialect, Northern Broadsides' Barrie Rutter had the brainwave to commission Blake Morrison to translate *The Servant of Two Masters* into Northern dialect, title and all. As one of the characters says (maybe my favourite line), it's an arsy-versy world.

We're in some *Last of the Corrie Squeers* soundworld, and this, in a way that Goldoni may not have intended, is part of the comedy. The audience laughs out loud just to hear these characters talk of Skipton, Wigan, Liverpool, and it gurgles at the breadth of the dialect (and its occasional bawdiness), the more so as Rutter's production is in Victorian costume. When Clarice protests that, if she married her fiancé tomorrow, it might seem common, her father says: "Bugger common! Let's get yer 'itched afore 'e gets yer up duff." Finally, when Duff realises that his gaffer Charles is actually Charlotte, he simply says "Alas! or rather "A lass!": the biggest laugh of all.

Among other virtues, this company has the best diction I've heard in months: every consonant landed in the back row of the circle without once sounding forced. Rutter directs himself in the title role, but, though he sets the tone, he never steals the show. Its abundant charm lies in the twinkling energy of all nine actors, each of whom becomes distinct to us as a glorious comic type without staleness.

The Servant of Two Masters reminds you of umpteen other plays – and the familiarity is part of the delight – but the light it gives off is all its own. By the time you've reached the classic dinner scene when the servant is trying to deliver food to his different masters (but which courses to which masters?) while grabbing some food himself, you're right in the heart of one of the most adorable comedies ever written.

Rutter's production has three different swing doors here, with different servants charging through them all and mastering the art of not banging into the next one. The swing-swing-bang fun of it all is very bliss.

The Times - 1 September 2006

The Man with Two Gaffers

Theatre Royal, York

★★★★☆

Ten years ago Blake Morrison came up with a wonderfully funny version of Kleist's comedy *The Broken Jug* – said to be the only German comedy of its time – which he relocated to the Yorkshire Dales and re-titled *The Cracked Pot*. I remember Barry Rutter, in the role of the rascally judge who brings disasters upon himself, playing it with a progressively cracked and plastered pate.

Morrison has since translated two Greek tragedies for Rutter's Northern BroadSides and now returns to the 18th century for this excellent version of Goldoni's *The Servant of Two Masters* – relocated to Yorkshire again, to Skipton in the 1850s, where Venice's Grand Canal becomes the Liverpool- Leeds Canal and there is genial mockery of any Yorkshire town that has the misfortune not to be Skipton.

I don't know why the stage is strewn with oriental rugs, but the symmetrical heaps of coal and limestone chunks on top of them make sense, since these were carried on the canal. Above them hangs a constellation of miner's lamps like stars.

Morrison has delved into dictionaries of period slang for his characters' colourful exchanges, adding some coarse puns of his own. He also has fun with elisions, as when a maid dusts t'house from t'attic t' t'cellar, or when Rutter's Dodge, the man of the title searching for one of his gaffers, exclaims: "He i'n't in t'inn."

The intricacies of the plot begin with the arrival from Bradford of Charlotte disguised as her recently dead twin Charles, who was accidentally killed by her lover outside a pie shop in Wigan. Since Charles was betrothed to a local sheep-farmer's daughter, subsequently re-betrothed to the vicar's son, she has to be re-re-betrothed back to Charles, who of course isn't who she thinks he is. Add the lover fleeing from police, and Dodge, who sees a way of earning double wages and eating double meals by serving two masters, and the fruits of confusion are ready to burst.

The famous scene where he brings a four-course meal to the two of them, in separate rooms but at the same time, usually done as a hectic race, is more ingeniously played here as a miracle of timing with swing doors. A likeable cast, led by Rutter's dippy Dodge, nimbly captures the mixture of panic and bombast. Recommended.

The Observer - 3 September 2006

The Man with Two Gaffers

Theatre Royal, York

The great Italian dramatist Carlo Goldoni would not have liked it. His aim was to restrain the 'gross and lewd' actions of actors on the 18th-century Italian stage by tightly scripting comedies so the actors could not just use them as a jumping-off point for their favourite gags. Although, in the Venice of his day, the action wasn't just on the stage - the goings-on in the boxes, said one scandalised theatre-goer, turned them into 'temples to Venus'. His early plays, especially, were fast, funny and fabulously complicated and *A Servant of Two Masters* is one of the best. They were also, as Goldoni himself complained, extremely difficult to translate. Not, though, for Blake Morrison.

In *A Man With Two Gaffers*, performed by Northern Broadsides, Morrison follows Goldoni's advice to make free with the translation, but stay true to the comedy. Morrison moves the action to the 'Venice of the north' - Skipton - just as the railway is being built. He follows the original plot involving a farmer wanting to marry his daughter who is in love with the vicar's son to a woman dressed as a man who is in love with the man who thinks he killed her brother. Confused? You won't be.

The production hurtles along. Richly vivid and comic, the strong Yorkshire dialect is fully comprehensible. The actors perform as if in a cross between farce and pantomime (Barrie Rutter is masterly in the title role). This is the right approach, but the Goldoni's genius was to weave serious points into the action and never lose a laugh. Servants starve because their masters are preoccupied with their own affairs; masters are ruined because servants are distracted by their own affairs. Northern Broadsides's bright comedy lacks only such shades of darkness.

The Guardian - 4 September 2006

The Man with Two Gaffers

Theatre Royal, York

★★★★☆

Say what you will about Yorkshire men, but they do breed a better class of insult. "Mashtub", "ragabash", "fussylugs", "yonderly old sconcehead" are but some of the invectives that spice up Blake Morrison's treatment of Goldoni's *Servant of Two Masters*.

Eighteenth-century Venice and 19th-century Skipton might not appear to have much in common (except that both relied heavily on canals), yet Goldoni was criticised for writing in the local vernacular, and expressed frustration with translators who missed the point. "I would have wished them to have taken greater freedoms," he said, "for the phrases and style must be adapted to the taste of the nation into whose language the translation is made."

Morrison recognises that Venice, for all its reputation as a world power, was essentially a small town characterised by municipal insularity, chauvinism and gossip. It's remarkable to see how snugly Goldoni's *Commedia*-derived archetypes apply to the standard market-town populace of pompous mill-owner, pedantic clergyman, fatuous farmer and the like.

Northern Broadside's chief, Barrie Rutter, gives a characteristically robust performance as the overstretched servant whose ineptitude is invariably rewarded with a "skelping" from his master. And since avarice has led him to hire himself out twice, this generally leads to a double helping of skelping.

Kate Ambler and Simon Holland Roberts provide spirited support as the rival employers who manage to spend the night in the same inn without realising they are engaged to each other.

Morrison's adaptation keeps the comedy spinning along nicely though, call me an old fussylugs, there's an occasional lapse into needless Carry-On crudity. It's unlikely that Goldoni himself would be able to make head-nor-tail of it - in which case, he would probably approve.