

One Touch of Venus

By [Douglas Milton](#)

Flora is, was, the Roman goddess of flowers, and in those good old pagan days her festival used to run from April 28th to May 3rd 2003. The Café Flore on the Boulevard St Germain is named after the statue of said goddess that used to stand outside, which makes it an ideal venue for the world premiere of Anthony Burgess's play "The Eve of Saint Venus." Because the action of the play is much concerned with statues of Roman deities, one of which (Venus, *bien sûr*) comes to life on the eve of a young man's wedding with chaotic results. April 28th was also the first night of this production, although as far as I'm aware that was a serendipitous choice on the part of the excellent Brava theatre company, whose play-readings upstairs at the Flore are now a firmly established part of Paris's cultural landscape.

"The Eve of Saint Venus" is one of Burgess's earliest works. Originally conceived as an opera libretto while he was working as a schoolteacher in Banbury in the late 40s, it then became a play and later, in the 60s, was rewritten as a novella. I first read it in the latter form about twenty years ago and thought it was a fairly blatant attempt to sidle up to Christopher Fry and the Eliot of "The Cocktail Party." Rather dated, rather pointless, and Burgess couldn't (then) do the upper classes for toffee. Last night I reread it on the métro on my way to the Flore and to my surprise laughed out loud at least once every paragraph. Of course the Fry/Eliot elements are still there, but now that all that terrible verse-drama stuff has fallen into oblivion (any chance of reviving the Apocalypics? -no, thought not), Burgess's wit and linguistic inventiveness leap off the page. I would defy anyone to read the book and not find something there to amuse them. Whether all the linguistic pyrotechnics make for a good play is another matter.

The main problem is that all the action takes place offstage. Ambrose, a bit of a sap, is about to marry Diana, daughter of Sir Benjamin Drayton. Sir B has a garden full of statues of Roman gods and goddesses, including Venus. Ambrose, in jokey mood, slips his wedding ring over Venus's finger. The finger crooks back, trapping the ring and, by implication, Ambrose. In the meantime Diana is herself under siege from Julia, a mischief-making lesbian (deliciously played by Christaine Bateman), and the local vicar who is due to officiate over the nuptials is plagued by Doubts, like Prenderghast in *Decline and Fall*. The vicar is wonderfully played by Peter Hudson, all buck-teeth and anodyne enthusiasm for the C of E, underneath which seethes an anarchic streak which craves for the manifestation of an evil or at least pagan power which will validate his vocation. "SIN is my hobby!" he exclaims at one point, his eyes gleaming

expectantly over half-moon spectacles. As dark forces begin to bubble and squeak, the English upper classes struggle to maintain *le bon ton*. Sir Benjamin, a man who can get nostalgic about something that happened half an hour ago, grumbles away in the corner. "The past is dead and the unblinking arc-light of the present takes over." His wife Lady Drayton (Catriona McColl) takes a brisk Joyce Grenfell line on life and somehow manages to maintain her sanity throughout. Yes, one's prospective son-in-law may have married a pagan goddess by mistake, but that's no reason for not keeping busy and cheerful. "Marriage is the only job that begins with a holiday. It's the only one you'll get and, believe me, you'll need it."

Diana, initially attracted by Julia's nihilism, takes a detour via a Proust-reading truck-driver (he likes Gide too: one suspects he's not really going to be much of a threat to Arnbrose) and finally accepts the honeyed fate of life with an fiancé whose previous silly-ass persona (Nicholas Meade acting like a bewildered and indignant escapee from a lunatic asylum run by Bertie Wooster) has been rendered suddenly more intriguing by the fact that she nearly lost him to a goddess. For a moment, it looked as if anarchy (embodied by the female principle) might reign. But the violent eruption of dark gods has been nothing if not life-affirming for all concerned. In a comedy, things must end up pretty well the same way they began, everybody learning a little something about themselves and others in the process. Burgess's "Eve of Saint Venus" conforms to the rule, but manages to be that bit more subversive of theatrical niceties along the way. I'm referring to a running gag about Venus's vaginal odour which would have shocked audiences in the 40s and 50s and still seems a little risqué even now.

Not least of the delights of this production is the disparity between the characters on the printed page and the actors who embody them. The MP and best man Crowther-Mason is wonderfully played by David Gasman, a very talented actor whose appearance (Bill Bailey working behind a record shop counter) is totally at odds with his plummy William Rushtonesque accent. Maddest of all is Alexis Kendrick's performance as the supposedly hideous old bag Spatchcock the maid. Alexis is a gorgeous blonde young beauty with a Deep South drawl which could have made even Tennessee Williams's trousers explode. Incongruous, but somehow it works.

All in all, yet another triumphant performance by Brava. They've already done David Mamet and Neil LaBute. Next week they tackle Sam Shepherd's "Fool For Love". One can only hope that Brava will take their particular brand of theatrical verve to a London stage before long. A wonderful evening.

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