

reviews

Theatre

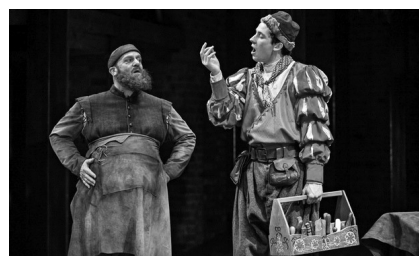
The Swan, Stratford-upon-Avon



The Shoemaker's Holiday

Michael Billington

- 1 One tends to think of Thomas Dekker's play as a jolly, red-nosed Elizabethan comedy celebrating the shoemaker's craft. But Phillip Breen's shrewdly intelligent Royal Shakespeare Company revival reminds us of the play's sombre background: when it was written in 1599, London workers lived in fear of being pressed into an army of 16,000 raised to crush the Irish.
- 2 You see signs of this early on in Breen's production: the shoemakers angrily rebel against one of their number, the newly married Ralph, being forcibly conscripted. The upshot is that Ralph goes off to fight in France (standing in for Ireland) and returns home badly maimed. Meanwhile Lacy, the posh boy who enlists him, dodges military action and spends his days disguised as a Dutch cordwainer and wooing a grocer's daughter. Having raised serious issues about class, Dekker ducks their implications and lets Lacy off lightly but there's a telling moment in this production when Josh O'Connor as the toffish deserter guiltily confronts the legless Ralph.
- 3 The play's humour chiefly emerges through the bombastic figure of Simon Eyre, who rises from shoemaker to be Lord Mayor and whom David Troughton invests with exactly the right word-spinning glee: you see both the good nature and self-satisfaction in a man who declares, as he caresses his mayoral robes, "it's a stirring life, a fine life, a velvet life". Troughton is also strongly supported by Vivien Parry as his ratty, socially pretentious wife and by Laura Cubitt as one of my favourite minor figures in Elizabethan drama, Cicely Bumtrinket, who "farts in her sleep".
- 4 Breen might have given us more signs of the cobblers at work but this is a first-rate revival that sets the play squarely in its period; and when, at the end, Jack Holden's amusingly fey king suddenly reintroduces the subject of war, we are reminded that working-class recruitment never stops.



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