

LOST HERO, HUMAN SAVIOUR

Michael Coveney

Some new and devastating political spark lights up T.S.Eliot's staid and sanctimonious verse play *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935) in the Romanian production that has visited Almeida. The old piece shivers and shakes as if the very lives of the actors depended on it: maybe they do.

This is a moving and compelling production of a strangely cerebral play struck in the visceral, modern, Eastern European style of Robert Sturua's Rustaveli company at their peak, or of Lyubimov's Moscow Taganka 20 years ago. The characteristic features of such work are: a consummate theatricality tempered in a climate of stark political opposition; faultless and powerful gestural declamation; and unarguable intellectual commitment, blended with the toughest, most fearless set of acting which is both individually marked and endemic to an ensemble ideal of selfless dedication.

The Eliot play was banned in the communist regime. This is its first Romanian language production and it re-casts the story of Thomas à Becket defying the State as one of contemporary political heroism. The appeal of martyrdom is only the slightest diversion in this reading. Marcel Iureş, tremendous as the doomed archbishop, is tracked by a dogged chorus leader, who doubles as his tortured conscience and his chief critic. His dilemma is one of a man whose religious calling is undermined by the evidence on his doorstep. This is not Eliot's dilemma, but one that is dragged from his text by the rumbustious Romanians. And who can blame them?

The tensions reverberate as the desperate women of the chorus, spraying red beads like paltry corn and

scrabbling for water, register religious scepticism over pastoral sympathy.

Each twisting suggestion of Thomas's plight is fully expressed by the women themselves; the thurible clicking priests in their mumbled Pater Nosters; tempters (writhing chappies in black leather), and the killer knights, who arrive in scarves, masks and high-shouldered greatcoats. Thomas dies a lost hero, not a new saint. The chalice is raised and blessed, by trickery, into a fatal knife: there flows the blood of a human saviour.

THOMAS

End will be simple, sudden, God-given. Meanwhile the substance of our first act WILL be shadowy, and the style with shadows. (Murder in the Cathedral, part D)

