

first night

theatre

Linck & Mühlahn
Hampstead Theatre, NW3

★ ★ ★ ★ ☆
The last time the young writer and actress Ruby Thomas had a play at Hampstead, in the downstairs studio, she gave us *The Animal Kingdom*, a thoughtful and beautifully acted sequence of family therapy sessions. For her latest offering, she has been promoted to the main stage. It turns out to be the latest in a run of substandard pieces there.

Thomas has found inspiration in the obscure 18th-century trial in Saxony of Anastasius Linck and Catharina Margaretha Mühlahn, who lived as husband and wife though Linck was, apparently, a woman. The authorities were outraged. Convicted of sodomy, Linck — who had previously served in the army — was sentenced to death and executed in 1721.

There's potentially rich material here, but Thomas's freely invented portrait of two happy-go-lucky nonconformists is very much a 21st-century morality play about intolerance, ignorance and the evils of the patriarchy. The RSC director Owen Horsley gives us an arch and glossy production with a touch of *Moll Flanders* humour, interrupted by bursts of the Sex Pistols.

The flourishes can't camouflage the thinness of the writing. Most of the nuances and ambiguities have been ironed out; this is history as viewed through the prism of an Adam Ant video. Maggie Bain and Helena Wilson are winning enough as Linck and Mühlahn, yet the characters are never more than one-dimensional. In another twist, Mühlahn, whose earthy language outrages her prim mother (the resourceful Lucy Black is the play's star turn), abruptly decides to turn herself into a feminist pamphleteer.

Simon Wells's revolving set looks as though it has been borrowed from Habitat. And in the climactic courtroom scene, full of ghouly characters out of a Hogarth painting, Thomas and Horsley opt for a broad brand of comedy that trivialises the couple's plight. By the time Linck faces execution we have long since ceased to care.

Clive Davis
To March 4, hampsteadtheatre.com



Nicole Cooper is tremendous playing the maligne queen

Lady Macbeth's big moment

Zinnie Harris's witty, radical rewrite places women centre stage. By Allan Radcliffe

theatre

Macbeth (an undoing)

Lyceum, Edinburgh
★ ★ ★ ★ ☆

Zinnie Harris, the writer and director of this audacious take on the Scottish play, is not out to ingratiate herself with Shakespeare purists.

From the opening scene we find ourselves in unsettling territory. The play begins not with the entrance of three wyrd sisters but a wry monologue from a female chorus (played by Liz Kettle), who calls attention to the bare stage, the paucity of sound effects, the lack even of a "bit of the Highlands painted on a cloth",

warning us to park our expectations. It takes time to settle into the rhythm of Harris's text, which splices the original with a soapish contemporary register. One minute Lady Macbeth (Nicole Cooper) is entreating her husband to "screw your courage to the sticking place", only for Macbeth (Adam Best) to come back at her with: "Don't bother my head with this now." At points the two modes are tightly entwined, at others the shifts feel deliberately jarring, while the famous soliloquies often flow naturally out of the updated version.

What emerges is a disconcerting, witty exploration of Lady Macbeth's role in this story and, eventually, a

“Why, the play asks, has she been so traduced as controlling?”

commentary on the representation of women in drama generally. Why, Harris asks, has Lady Macbeth been so traduced as controlling, unwomanly and, finally, wandering and pathetic, while Macbeth, the murderous tyrant, is depicted as the instrument of supernatural prophecies and his lady wife's ambition? Harris casts both characters in a more ambivalent light, as well as bringing greater ambiguity to the roles of the witches and Lady Macduff (a fine Jade Ogugua).

The play is at its most haunting in the first half, when the slow build to the murder of Duncan takes place in an atmosphere of foreboding, made all the chillier by Oguz Kaplangi and Pippa Murphy's soundscape, and the interplay between Lizzie Powell's lighting and the deceptively simple set design by Tom Piper, all distorted mirrors and shadowy corners.

Harris cannot resist a late slide into exposition bordering on hectoring as the action fragments and the characters attempt to escape the bonds imposed on them by their creators. Mystery and ambiguity slip away as the show becomes more overtly meta-theatrical, but the delicate balance of wit and horror in the script is sustained throughout by Cooper, who is tremendous in the role of the maligne queen.

To February 25, lyceum.org.uk

classical

Bournemouth SO/Karabits
Lighthouse, Poole

★ ★ ★ ★ ☆

Recreating the impact of famously shocking pieces isn't easy. Orchestras find the notes settling into their fingers. Audiences know

what's coming and how the story ends. I think that's why this performance of Shostakovich's ferocious Fourth Symphony made such an impact on me and, clearly, on the notably large crowd. It had not been played in Poole before, and I would bet that many players in the expanded Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra hadn't played it anywhere else. So there were rough edges, and passages where my clenched knuckles went white.

That, though, is surely how it should be. This is the last work Shostakovich wrote as an enfant terrible, battering his audiences with dissonances and dazzling them with passages demanding such virtuosity that they have become the stuff of musicians' nightmares.

Except that his intended audience never got to hear it. Terrified of Stalin's reaction, he withdrew the symphony until after the dictator's death. Probably wise. Even today it speaks of rage, terror, gallows humour and finally exhaustion or even nihilism. After the Fourth Symphony, Shostakovich decided to cloak his symphonies in codes and enigmas.

Kirill Karabits conducted it with compelling authority and determined precision, which the work needs, but also with an instinct for the macabre and melodramatic, so that the spine-shuddering percussion climaxes, and that screaming brass refrain in the finale, hit one like sandbags across the head. He prefaced the work cleverly, with music by the Russian composers Alexander Glazunov and Sergei Taneyev and the Ukrainian Feodor Akimenko.

Taneyev's funereal cantata *John of Damascus* was the most striking. It weaves the familiar Russian Kontakion melody into sombre polyphony but includes a rampant choral fugue. The Bournemouth Symphony Chorus kept perfect intonation in the hushed unaccompanied passages.

Richard Morrison
On demand for 30 days, bsolive.com

visual art

Labyrinth: Knossos, Myth & Reality

Ashmolean Museum, Oxford
★ ★ ★ ★ ☆

Step into the maze of myth. Make your way through the labyrinth that King Minos constructed at Knossos in Crete. Meet its bloodthirsty inhabitant, the bellowing half-man, half-bull Minotaur.

The Ashmolean Museum's latest show takes its visitors on an enthralling adventure. Bringing together more than 100 objects — many never seen before in the UK — it follows the 9,000-year history of a spot where Minos is believed to have built his fabulous palace.

Actually, the Minotaur that first greets you in the form of a Roman marble looks rather more peaceably bovine than you may have imagined. It takes flanking etchings by Michael Ayrton and Pablo Picasso to add a bit of hype. And this rather sets the tone of the show.

Step onto the stage Sir Arthur Evans, director of the Ashmolean from

1884 to 1908. First visiting Knossos during this period, he leapfrogged his way over the local archaeologist — who, having put in the real groundwork, had discovered beneath a patch of bare landscape what he believed to be the mythical palace — and snatched for himself all the academic fame.

Evans, using his own money, purchased part of this site and set about excavating. He wasn't one to let lack of clear evidence get in the way of a good story. The "mysterious complication of passages" was, he declared, the labyrinth that travellers and scholars had wondered about for centuries.

Now, for the first time in a century, the documents that record Evans's dig — the diaries, letters, sketchbooks and floorplans that make up the unique archive he left to the Ashmolean — are displayed alongside the artefacts that he unearthed. He



A replica of a bull's head fresco from the palace of Knossos in Crete

remained doggedly hopeful and perhaps wilfully deluded. The finest pottery must have been used by the royal family, he suggested, though there is no evidence of a royal family.

The curators of this show take a leaf from Evans's book. They soup up the show. How do you make rows of pots seem exciting to the ordinary museum visitor? Cretan bovines help a great deal. They rampage through the pottery. Octopuses are also eye-catching: among the show's highlights are cephalopod-entwined jugs. For children there are, among other enticements, a cartoon recap of the Minotaur's story and a computer-game encounter. For the rest of us there is the sheer thrill of discovery. And, with a subject this exciting, that feels like more than enough.

Rachel Campbell-Johnston
To July 30, ashmolean.org