

Theatre

# Rebecca

Benedict Nightingale

at Raimund Theatre, Vienna

Here's the theatrical counterpart of Sachertorte at one of Vienna's great cafés: a new musical of Rebecca that's more faithful to Daphne du Maurier's novel than the Hitchcock film and, with America's Francesca Zambello directing and our own Peter J. Davison designing, is up to the most lavish West End visual standards. Don't be surprised if some impresario gets it translated from the German and brings it to its obvious home, meaning Britain.

There would be no need to tamper greatly with the narrative flow. Michael Kunze's libretto opens in 1930s Monte Carlo, where "Ich" or "I", as du Maurier's self-effacing and apparently nameless protagonist is identified in the programme, gets swept off her feet and married by the widowed Max de Winter while she's working as a rich American's companion-cum-skivvy. Then it's off to Cornwall and Manderley, where poor Ich succumbs to the insidious malice of the housekeeper, Mrs Danvers. Until Max's confession of murder she believes herself a worthless replacement for his first wife, the superficially gorgeous, quietly evil Rebecca.

With its blend of romance and high-toned melodrama, plus opportunities galore for spectacle, the novel would seem custom-built for musical reworking. And so it proves when Davison evokes the grandeur of Manderley or the humiliation of Ich during the pivotal fancy-dress ball that occurs beneath its curved staircase or, indeed, the fire which destroys it. Only the shipwreck that leads to the discovery of Rebecca's body disappoints — and only a gallumphingly Wodehousean golfing number (*Wir Sind Britisch*) needs excising.

Forgivably, the musical's ending is a bit more upbeat than the novel's. Less forgivably, the dancing is dull and Sylvester Levay's music seldom harsh or imaginative enough. But there's a terrific central song, a soaring, grieving tribute to her late mistress, friend and (perhaps) lover by Susan Rigvava-Dumas's mesmeric Danvers, a haughty obsessive who fingers Rebecca's art objects and cradles her lingerie as she glides like a black-clad, white-faced Hecate beneath Manderley's chandeliers or through its lacy bedrooms.

The evening I saw the show, an understudy was playing Ich and, though pretty and sweet, seemed too arch and winsome. Moreover, Uwe Kroger's Max, though white-hot at moments of crisis, hasn't quite the mix of brooding inwardness and outer sang froid the character needs. A chance, perhaps, for a British actor to show our national traits.