

LAURA GASCOIGNE

DAYS OF PLAGUE AND ROSES

The anchorite St Rosalia, protector of seventeenth-century Palermo from pestilence, is the subject of a number of works by Van Dyck now reunited at London's Dulwich Picture Gallery

On the night the French celebrate the storming of the Bastille, the citizens of Palermo remember a different event in their history. Every 14 July, they process the statue of the city's patron St Rosalia from the cathedral to the sea, where she is greeted by a massive firework display. It's a rather noisy reception for a quiet ascetic who took herself off for 40 years to pray in the wilderness, but this solitary twelfth-century saint has a special place in Palermo's affections explored in a fascinating little exhibition at Dulwich Picture Gallery in south London, "Van Dyck in Sicily – Painting and the Plague 1624-1625" (until 27 May).

In 1624, while plague raged through Palermo, a hunter on Monte Pellegrino, the anchorite's old haunt, found some bones he believed belonged to her. The relics were authenticated and St Rosalia was promoted to the position of principal patron. Her bones, housed in a silver and crystal reliquary, were paraded through the streets and exposed in the cathedral to combat the plague, and to focus devotion, a painting was commissioned from a local artist. Vincenzo La Barbera's image shows the hermit saint kneeling on a hillside in a monastic habit, pointing out the stricken city below to the Virgin and the Trinity in the skies above. A cherub trips gaily down with a crown of roses – Rosalia's attribute – and a martyr's palm, while a lily for purity lies on the ground beside the usual hermitical baggage of book and skull.

The workmanship is primitive and the conception formulaic, but La Barbera's picture fulfilled its devotional function. And there the cult of St Rosalia might have ended, but for another accident of fortune that spread her fame far beyond her native city. A few months before the fatal ship from Tunis unloaded its plague rats on Palermo harbour, another ship had docked from Genoa bearing the young Flemish painter Anthony van Dyck. After making a splash in Genoa with his fabulous portraits of the local nobility, the 25-year-old Van Dyck had his first royal commission, to paint Emanuele Filiberto of Savoy, Spanish viceroy of Sicily. But no sooner had he immortalised the viceroy than his patron died of the plague. Van Dyck, stuck in the quarantined city, now found himself appointed image-maker to Palermo's new patron saint.

He created an image of such universal appeal that Palermo's football team still wears a rose-pink strip in the saint's honour.

During his 18 months in Palermo, Van Dyck received commissions for a number of devotional subjects, including a *Stoning of St Stephen* and a *St John the Baptist in the Wilderness* in this exhibition. But none had such immediate relevance as St Rosalia, and none was better suited to the artist's taste. Van Dyck had a bit of a thing about saints in



Van Dyck's *St Rosalia in Glory interceding for Palermo, 1624* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York)

wildernesses. As a young Catholic artist in his native Antwerp, he produced no fewer than nine paintings of St Jerome, an ascetic semi-naked anti-bourgeois figure who, for a moody Counter-Reformation teenager, may have fulfilled the role of a modern rock star.

In Sicily he painted five images of St Rosalia, all now reunited at Dulwich. His first, *St Rosalia Interceding for Palermo*, stuck fairly closely to La Barbera's formula but was darker and more dramatic in mood. Gone were the heavenly audience and Interflora cherub, leav-

ing the saint alone with the skull and a scattering of bones in the mouth of her cave. Camouflaged against the rock in a grey habit and thin veil covering her chestnut hair, she is illuminated only by the faint shaft of light that draws her imploring gaze heavenwards.

By version two, she has had a makeover. The humble brown worsted of her habit is subtly set off by a diaphanous wrap of russet silk that mingles tantalisingly with her long, wavy Titian hair, while her strawberries-and-cream complexion is charmingly echoed in the scrubbed pink skin of the cherub who flutters down with a wreath of roses in one hand and a lily in the other. By version five, *St Rosalia in Glory Interceding for Palermo*, she has left the ground herself, borne up above the distant city on a frothy carpet of fluffy white clouds and frolicking cherubs, one of whom is carrying the skull while his friend downwind holds his nose. Without this detail the picture could be mistaken for an assumption of the Virgin, which for a time it was.

These pictures were all painted for private devotion, but St Rosalia also makes an appearance in a *Madonna of the Rosary* altarpiece painted for Palermo's Oratorio del Santissimo Rosario after Van Dyck's return to Genoa. Here, Rosalia is just one of a crush of saints looking up at vision of the Virgin, partly obscured by a nose-holding putto but instantly identifiable by her glorious red hair. An inspired stylist, Van Dyck created a "look" for the saint that is recognisable even from behind.

It was not his last goodbye to Rosalia. The Jesuits were promoting her cult in Flanders and Antwerp's Confraternity of Bachelors, which Van Dyck joined on his return from Italy, acquired some relics. Who better to paint the altarpiece to go above them than an artist who had lived through the plague under her protection? In *The Virgin and Child with Sts Peter, Paul and Rosalia*, Van Dyck replaced her monastic worsted with red satin and gold brocade and had the Christ Child himself crown her with roses.

Van Dyck had a guilty secret: to get out of Sicily while the plague still raged, he had broken the quarantine. Perhaps he couldn't summon sufficient faith in the protection of devotional images he had himself painted. For that discourtesy he owed the saint an apology, and he made it in style.

'There are loud and repeated screams from the audience during the throat-slitting sequences,' PAGE 29

RADIO

Still burning

Alvin Hall in the Bonfire of the Vanities

BBC RADIO FOUR

A quarter of a century on from the publication of Tom Wolfe's *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, somebody had the bright idea of sending the American journalist Alvin Hall to New York to see how things had changed in the interim. Hall, who clearly found the commission greatly to his taste, practically bubbled with enthusiasm, conducted most of his interviews in a state of full-frontal exuberance and gave the impression of being in permanent transit either from Bronx tenement to suburban courthouse or from Wall Street money box to Manhattan watering hole.

Beneath this high-octane delivery there lurked the sense of a cultural divide. A British writer given this assignment – Anthony Haden-Guest, for example, supposedly the model for Wolfe's Peter Fallow, and here a

notably languid interviewee – would have drenched everything in world-weary irony. Hall, by contrast, bustled about, using his five 15-minute slots (12-16 March) to stake out the Bronx, chat to the Wall Street estate agents, cast an eye over the judicial system, survey the cult of the hard-drinking English journalist and consider the state of racial politics. A quarter of an hour wasn't long enough but you had to admire his indefatigability.

Change was ever relative, of course, and one or two of the environments in which Hall found himself betrayed an uneasy sense of having officially altered out of all recognition while remaining essentially the same. The old-style Bronx, where murdered corpses lay in the street for hours on end, had given way to new housing developments. Even so, there was a feeling that a modern version of Wolfe's hero Sherman McCoy, whose arraignment on a hit-and-run charge sets the book in motion, still mightn't have cared to find himself there at 3 a.m.

If the jury was out on the Bronx, then other aspects of New York had undergone spectacular transformations. Wall Street, where Wolfe's "masters of the universe" plied their trade, was

thought to resemble "a movie set" full of "tourists and cops". The hedge-fund traders had moved on to upper Park Avenue or out to Connecticut. Worse, old blue-blooded money had lost its stranglehold on the top-level apartments. The trading floor, meanwhile, was "a much harder place to be", all certainty about livelihood and prospects gone. Set against these grim despatches from the financial front line, Hall's pursuit of the ghost of Peter Fallow seemed the merest frippery.

By far the best part of Hall's report, though, was his analysis of the judicial arrangements of the Bronx. In the late 1980s, an estimated 7,000 people appeared in its courthouse annually, most of them young black men. A conspicuous fall in the crime rate was attributed to the area's notably tough police force. But those at the bottom of the social pile still found it hard to extricate themselves. Kenneth Montgomery, an eloquent black lawyer, maintained that all the district's much-trumpeted advances were cosmetic. What kept him going, Hall wondered. Montgomery replied that it was "the enormity of how unfair things are" that impelled him to do his job: "I just want to right the wrongs." **D.J. Taylor**

ESSAY COMPETITION FOR SIXTH-FORM AND UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

CO-SPONSORED BY *THE TABLET* AND THE DIGBY STUART RESEARCH CENTRE FOR CATHOLIC STUDIES, UNIVERSITY OF ROEHAMPTON, LONDON

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Entrants are invited to write a 1,500-word essay, of a style and standard suitable for publication in *The Tablet*, on the above topic. There will be two separate categories for entries, one for sixth-form students, and the other for university students. Prizes in each category will be – First prize: £250 plus a one-year subscription to *The Tablet*. Runners-up (two in each category): £50 each plus a one-year subscription to *The Tablet*. The winning essay will be considered for publication in *The Tablet*, and a selection of the best essays will be published on the *Tablet* website.

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Entries should be submitted by post or as email attachments to the address below, to arrive not later than Friday 13 July 2012.

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I confirm that this essay is my own original work and that it has not been previously published.

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Competition results will be published in *The Tablet* and on the *Tablet* website in September 2012.

CINEMA

Trial by television

The Hunger Games

DIRECTOR: GARY ROSS

Two films this week portray young people struggling to survive in a hostile system. The first, big-budget action picture *The Hunger Games*, may appear more sophisticated in visual terms and the breadth of its critique. Based on Suzanne Collins' young-adult fiction series which has shifted 26 million copies around the world, its central character is 16-year-old Katniss Everdeen, the kind of self-reliant yet principled heroine who takes on obdurate authorities.

The story is set in a dystopian future of dis-united states of America where a totalitarian government lives in luxury off the labours of underprivileged provinces. Katniss, from the coal-mining Appalachians, finds herself forced to compete in the national sport, the Hunger Games of the title, an interstate survivalist contest. Before these televised trials to the death, contestants must perform on a chat-show contest of "personality".

Given the privations, the contenders all look surprisingly well nourished. Dramatically, we are never in doubt that Katniss has a good chance of winning (not least because she has two more films to dominate). So it's just as well that Jennifer Lawrence, who plays her, is one of the most persuasive young actresses



Jennifer Lawrence in *The Hunger Games*

novelty false eyelashes do prove more effective?

The staple of the teen narrative is that young people appear more principled than their parents' generation. Cyril, *The Kid with a Bike* yearning for his absent dad, certainly seems hard done by for family support. Yet nothing can be taken for granted in this latest film by the Belgian directors Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne, which

around and that director Gary Ross can deliver action and immediacy. The question becomes instead – how bad does she have to be to remain the last one alive? An impressive roster of character actors – Stanley Tucci, Woody Harrelson and Donald Sutherland among them – attempt to bolster the plot.

Although more interesting than the "Twilight" series, this vision is still derivative: even Katniss' surname has echoes of Hardy. The public competition draws on depictions of fascism and fantasy entertainments from *Rollerball* to *The Truman Show*. It may satirise reality television and fashionistas (this dystopia has a very 1980s look, perhaps the worst the current generation of stylists can imagine) but it also wants to eat the very confection it has baked up. If packaging instant celebrity for slaving audiences is vacuous, then why should the stylist be Katniss' greatest ally, more important even than the survival-skills expert? Maybe the right frock and some

won the Grand Prize of the Jury at Cannes last spring. A deceptively simple narrative freewheels along much like Cyril through the streets of the town. On the run from a care home, the boy literally crashes into Samantha, a hairdresser (Cécile de France), as she waits in a doctor's surgery. He clutches her in what the Dardennes concede is a "reverse" pieta and a connection of sorts begins.

Psychology is not wasted here – we don't know why Samantha decides to foster him or whether he is grateful or exploits her kindness. We can only guess that, like a boy travelling fast on two wheels, it doesn't take much to upset the equilibrium. The Dardennes are often compared to their friend Ken Loach, but this is the most Loachian of their films as the audience wills a spark of good into a flame to illuminate a dark predicament. Here is a film, unlike *The Hunger Games*, where the outcome is always in doubt and the risk is very real. **Francine Stock**

CLASSICAL CDS

Lenten indulgence

How are we to know it's Lent during an age of austerity? By the CDs which come out, because music is still governed by church seasons. Reflecting the times, it's a stern, unsentimental Evangelist that tenor Charles Daniels gives us in Bach's *St John Passion* (Avie AV2236) with the Portland Baroque Orchestra directed from her gut-strung violin by Monica Huggett. Daniels is no cat-up-a-tree news-reader, softening the tragic for the nervously disposed. His eerily prominent line "Denn es war kalt" – "For it was cold" – sends a shiver through the recording. Money-saving local soloists include Canadian soprano Shannon Mercer who sings an ice-clear "Ich folge dir" with the usual obbligato flute replaced by Huggett's fiddle. The note argues a Bach precedent for this economy. The soloists double the chorus to intensify the drama of the crowd scenes and beef up the opening number which ripples with anticipation for the forthcoming story.

Meanwhile, the Sixteen's Easter CD *The Earth Resounds* (Coro COR16097) has works by Lassus, Josquin and the less well known Brumel. The latter's Mass "Et Ecce Terraemotus" – "Lo,

the earth shook" (in the post-Crucifixion earthquake) – is impressively advanced for its time. Brumel tumbles repeated plainsong snippets into each other like a minimalist. These have the effect of seismic aftershocks. Strangely, conductor Harry Christophers was injured in recording and handed over to his associate, Eamonn Dougan. The joins don't show.

No joins of any sort upset the beautiful lines of new choir Voces8 on *A Choral Tapestry* (Signum SIG283). Here is singing of exceptional smoothness with a top line of two sopranos who absolutely sparkle. They show off a varied programme from Byrd to spirituals, applying equal precision and dynamic contrast to all. Gibbons' "O Clap Your Hands" is exceptionally quick and with perfect diction. Their articulation in Byrd's "Vigilate" is clean, and their mastery of the challenging chromatic harmonies in the Reger tames a turbulent episode in music history. Their shaping of the long Brahms motet "Warum ist das Licht gegeben" gives almost symphonic impact to the genre of unaccompanied singing.

The lack of instruments is traditionally Lenten and the a capella form can make even the profane sound sacred. This is the case with the Danish National Vocal Ensemble's Poulenc CD *Half Monk Half Rascal* (OUR Recordings 8226906), which juxtaposes the composer's settings of prayers by Sts Francis and Anthony and the "Ave verum corpus" with

the often erotic images of surrealist poets Guillaume Apollinaire and Paul Eluard. Under conductor Stephen Layton, the Danes tune well Poulenc's piquant chords, although the extreme height of the soprano line in the Eluard lyric "Luire" is uncomfortable.

The Choir of St John's Cambridge has kept costs down by hiring its excellent associate orchestra St John's Sinfonia on its all-Mozart disc (Chaconne CHAN0786). The tracks are laid out liturgically, the sections of the "Coronation" Mass interspersed with two instrumental church sonatas composed for the purpose. The bright-voiced trebles sustain interest in their robust continental timbre even at conductor Andrew Nethsingha's daringly slow speed in the "Ave verum corpus", while guest soprano Susan Gritton concludes with "Exsultate jubilate" ping-pong out a top C with easy radiance.

The age of relative plenty is summoned by the re-released *Passiontide at St Paul's* (Hyperion CDH55436). The choir of 1990s vintage is rich-toned in the sumptuous echo. It performs Bairstow's "The Lamentation" with increasing intensity and makes absolute sense of contemporary settings of "The Reproaches" and "Ecce lignum". Lotti's "Crucifixus" floats into the dome, the dissonances flashing like struck nails, a reminder more vivid than any of where we are in the ecclesiastical calendar.

Rick Jones

THEATRE

Razor sharp

Sweeney Todd

ADELPHI THEATRE, LONDON

It's instructive for reviewers and reassuring for producers to note that the initial judgement on a piece of theatre is not always definitive. The production of Kander and Ebb's *Chicago* that has been running in London and New York for more than a decade is actually the second, staged several years after the relative failure of the premiere. And there has been a similar shift in the fortunes of another now key American musical. Stephen Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd*, declared a flop in London in 1980, has been revived with success several times in London and New York and even moved into the opera-house repertoire.

Following a five-star reception at Chichester, Jonathan Kent's new version has transferred to London, with Michael Ball as the East End barber back from transportation to Australia and Imelda Staunton as Mrs Lovett who, with a business acumen that would be admired in the modern City of London, realises that the results of Sweeney's murderous revenges can lift the profits of her pie shop through a new range of fillings including, in one of Sondheim's funni-



Robert Burt in *Sweeney Todd*

est lines, "shepherd's pie peppered with actual shepherd on top".

The explanation commonly given for the delayed success of *Sweeney Todd* and *Chicago* is that the darkness of their themes – each has a murderer as the central character – was too off-putting for audiences at the beginning of the Thatcher and Reagan eras. Now, though, it would be no great surprise if *Hannibal Lecter: The Musical* were announced in the next Broadway season, and Sondheim's own cannibalistic serial killer feels like a welcome antidote to the numerous current song-and-dance shows adapted from children's films.

Sweeney, however, remains strong meat: Tim Burton's movie version received an 18 certificate and this theatre production is being advertised as suitable only for over-12s. There are loud and repeated screams from the audience during the throat-slitting sequences.

But the daring of this show is to combine horror – and the ominous chords of the opening "Ballad of Sweeney Todd" are as chilling as anything in Mozart's and Verdi's Requiems – with comedy and romance, both occurring at moments that other composers would consider inappropriate.

Two of Sondheim's sweetest love songs – "Johanna" and "Pretty Women" – are sung as an unexpected interruption from cutting throats while the funniest song he has ever written is the one that contains that shepherd's-pie gag: "A Little Priest", in which Todd and Mrs Lovett

speculate about potential tastes: "If you're British and loyal / You might enjoy royal marine / Anyway, it's clean. / Though of course it tastes of wherever it's been." And, in a second level of daring, this is also a love song, or at least a seduction one, in which the shop-owner makes clear that she is as keen on Sweeney's flesh as on that of his customers.

Ball and Staunton perform this song as well as it has even been done. A lyric which is a virtuoso feat of rhythm and rhyming tempts some performers to deliver it quickly, as if they know what's coming next. But this duo slows it down, allowing pauses in which the characters are visibly thinking of the next scenario and challenging the other to find an outrageous rhyme. And, whereas some interpretations have used Mrs Lovett as the comic relief, Staunton, as a great character actress, suggests that the pie lady has found a man whose evil and ambition match her own.

The neon flashing outside the shop in Anthony Ward's design comes as a shock and perhaps the one questionable decision in this staging is to update the action to the 1930s. The motive was presumably to distance the Cockney setting from *Oliver!*-ish knees-up and perky urchins and to suggest that the urge to consume other human beings lasted well beyond the initial 1849 setting.

There's no need, though, to emphasise the timelessness of the piece. Ahead of its audience 30 years ago, *Sweeney Todd* looks set to have theatregoers behind it for decades to come. Along with recent revivals of *A Little Night Music* and *Company*, this production confirms that Sondheim will stand in the musical pantheon alongside Irving Berlin, Cole Porter and Rodgers and Hammerstein.

Mark Lawson

TELEVISION

Against the odds

Falklands' Most Daring Raid

CHANNEL 4

The thirtieth anniversary of the Falklands conflict is almost upon us, so we can expect a string of commemorative programmes. First off the blocks was Channel 4, with *Falklands' Most Daring Raid* (18 March), a lively attempt to appeal to the plane-spotter in all of us. ITV followed with *Return to the Falklands* (20 March).

Channel 4's programme told the story of one of the most audacious airborne adventures of recent years, the Vulcan bomber strike against the airfield at Port Stanley. This was a stirring tale of British ingenuity and courage succeeding against the odds, told with the help of all the key participants and some atmospheric re-enactments.

"Against the odds" is an understatement. The creaking Vulcan fleet was three months away from being scrapped, having never – thankfully – seen combat. The aircraft had

been designed in the late 1940s to drop a single atomic weapon somewhere in the general vicinity of Moscow. Now it was being asked to unload 21 conventional bombs on a narrow runway on a small island.

The 8,000-mile round trip from the RAF base on Ascension Island would be the longest bombing run in history and would require frequent mid-air refuelling, a task so difficult and dangerous that the Vulcans had stopped doing it 20 years earlier. "Like shoving warm spaghetti up a cat's backside," said one pilot. The airmen were engaging company: laconic, nonchalant, modest and funny. When the call came, they didn't hesitate. If it was a choice between this and "having a go at Leningrad", said one, he'd choose Port Stanley every time.

It was nonetheless a very risky enterprise. The first Vulcan had to turn back because its cabin depressurised: they tried plugging the hole with the plastic bags their sandwiches came in, but to no avail. The second was in constant danger of running out of fuel, which would have meant ditching in the South Atlantic with little chance of being rescued. And then there was the Argentine air force to worry about.

As they flew over the airfield, the crew looked down and saw the explosions they left

in their wake. "Now I felt a bit sorry for the people on the ground," said one crewman. It was the one note of regret in the programme, and wasn't followed up: if anyone knows how many died on the ground, we weren't told.

Only one bomb hit the runway, but the programme did not let that stand in the way of its triumphalism. The first military action of the conflict, it was, said one squadron leader, "a huge statement that we were not going to give up the Falklands". The Argentines, now unable to land their fighters on the islands, took them home to defend the mainland, just in case the RAF sent the awe-inspiring "tin triangle" in that direction.

ITV's programme, meanwhile, was a more sombre affair. It took three men back to the scene of the conflict: Simon Weston, the well-known "face of the Falklands"; ITN's Michael Nicholson; and Royal Marine Nick Taylor. There they visited cemeteries, met the grateful locals and were dazzled by the beauty of the islands in the chilly summer sunshine. Taylor was introduced to one of the Argentine soldiers he had fought against, and, as we knew they would, they got on famously. Part therapeutic exercise, part travelogue, this was a well-intentioned programme whose elements were sadly over-familiar. **John Morrish**