

LAURA GASCOIGNE

TURN DOWN THE VOLUME

In reinterpreting Claude's *Sermon on the Mount*, David Hockney cranks up the colour amp and floodlights Mount Tabor – but does the original really need the spring clean?

During David Hockney's student days at Bradford College of Art in the 1950s, his father, Kenneth, was a familiar sight on Foster Square preaching anti-war sermons from a soapbox. One rag-day parade, father and son were both spotted with placards, Kenneth's reading "STOP THE WAR – CHRISTIANS SHOULD NOT BOMB CHILDREN" and David's "CHARITY IS HUMBBUG IN A WELFARE STATE".

This intriguing little souvenir appears in Christopher Simon Sykes' new biography *Hockney: a rake's progress*, a mine of ingenious research that casts fascinating sidelights on the artist's work. Rebellion, we learn, was in the Hockney genes. As a hard-line conscientious objector in the war, Kenneth refused even to do fire-watching; when it cost him his job as an accounts clerk, he set up a pram-reconditioning workshop to support his five children. Proselytism is in the blood on both sides of the family: Kenneth's father was a Methodist lay preacher and both David's grandparents on his mother Laura's side were Salvationists. Before meeting Kenneth, Laura had thought of becoming a missionary. She continued to read the Bible every day.

The campaigning streak found other outlets in David. As a provocative young artist in the 1960s, he exposed the humbug of social attitudes to homosexuality; as an older artist, he campaigns against the lesser stigma of smoking. His art, meanwhile, has become less provocative. There's nothing particularly challenging about his Royal Academy exhibition of Yorkshire landscapes, "David Hockney: A Bigger Picture" (until 9 April), except its scale: 150 works from the past eight years, the largest of which – *The Arrival of Spring in Woldgate, East Yorkshire in 2011 (twenty eleven)* – is nearly 10m wide and extends over 32 canvases. For a 74-year-old this seems challenge enough, but Hockney has schoolboy reserves of energy: there's a jaunty stride to this show that speaks of an artist still on the road to discovery.

A river runs through Constable's landscapes; a road through Hockney's. An earlier Californian work, *Mulholland Drive: The Road to the Studio* (1980), reminds us that Hockney belongs to the post-Kerouac generation whose romantic view of landscape



The Sermon on the Mount II (after Claude), by David Hockney, 2010

was framed by a windscreen. The landscapes he has produced since moving studio from Santa Monica Boulevard to Bridlington are also road-orientated – in the case of the multi-screen films shot with DVR cameras mounted on his jeep, obviously so. But roads and tracks also feature in most of the paintings, whether iPad sketches or massed banks of conjoined canvases; when we can't see the road, he's parked in a lay-by. And that, for me, is why the landscapes don't work.

In the publicity for the show, much has been made of Hockney's return to his native landscape, but the truth is that his youthful acquaintance with the Yorkshire Wolds lasted a full 12 weeks of summer harvesting jobs in 1952–53. Unlike Constable, to whom he is being compared, Hockney is not a country boy; his roots in the rural landscape are shallow. In a Stour Valley landscape by Constable, you can identify every species of tree and every weed growing at its foot, but in a Hockney Yorkshire landscape the trees are generic, and you need a title to inform you that a carpet of white is Queen Anne's Lace.

Great landscape painters tend to be solitary souls, content to sit alone in front of their subjects for days and months. Claude Lorrain, the inventor of "ideal landscape", lay in the Roman Campagna from before dawn to after sunset, mixing his colours to match the changing light. Hockney's landscapes give us no impression of this sort of commitment to contemplation; their number and scale, and the technical demands of their multiple canvases, preclude it. Instead, like glimpses through a car window, they give us snapshots of the changing seasons without any sense of a process of growth and

decay. "He paints the passing moment," writes Margaret Drabble in the catalogue, "but he doesn't mourn its passing." He seems immune to Seasonal Affective Disorder. But landscape painting needs a tinge of melancholy to give it meaning; without it, it's just an arrangement of colours and shapes.

Which brings us to the anomaly of the exhibition: Hockney's reworkings of Claude's *The Sermon on the Mount* (c. 1636). On a visit to the Frick Collection in New York four years ago, he was struck by this mysterious canvas, darkened by fire damage, and decided it needed a spring clean. He got the Frick to send him a high-resolution scan and with the help of a tech-savvy assistant digitally "cleaned" it to reveal the colour and detail under the grime. Room 10 contains a series of increasingly bright images that take their starting point from that digital scan, culminating in a 30-canvas painting filling one wall. Called *A Bigger Message*, it glows with an inner light somewhere between a visionary glow and the backlit glare of an LED screen.

Tracing the evolution of this painting through its different stages reminds us of what Hockney is really good at: absorbing the lessons of art history and making them his own. He puts Claude's picture through the modern art mill, trying out different styles – Van Gogh, Picasso, Bomberg, Spencer – and playfully rejigging the compositional jigsaw. In one version, the letters L-O-V-E appear in the sky above the Preacher of the Beatitudes; in another, the Light of the World puts out golden rays.

In Sunday school, Hockney amused his classmates by drawing cartoons of Jesus walking on the water. Are we meant to take *A Bigger Message* more seriously? It's hard to tell. He claims that what attracted him to Claude's picture was its unusual composition and sense of space; as with his treescapes, he's more interested in shapes and colours than content. Content in painting is by nature contained, clothed in a certain mystery. Claude's Mount Tabor is veiled in chiaroscuro; Hockney's is floodlit, with the colour amp turned up. Big pictures and amplified colour make a big impact, but volume isn't everything. Instead of a bigger picture, I'd have preferred a closer look.

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THEATRE

Film firsts

Travelling Light

LYTTTELTON, NATIONAL THEATRE, LONDON, AND TOURING

If asked to name the living playwrights who have been performed most often at the National Theatre, most theatregoers would suggest Tom Stoppard, David Hare, Alan Bennett and Peter Shaffer. They might be surprised to learn that right up alongside them is Nicholas Wright. If both original plays and adaptations are included, *Travelling Light* is the tenth of his scripts to be staged at the NT, of which the most successful have been the historical bio-plays *Vincent in Brixton* and *Mrs Klein*. Nicholas Hytner, the building's boss, is enough of a fan to have directed this one himself but *Travelling Light*, which will tour from the South Bank to Salford, Leeds, Aylesbury and Newcastle, fails to make the case for Wright's inclusion in the front rank of National dramatists.

In a striking but unfortunate coincidence with two movies dominating the awards season – Martin Scorsese's *Hugo* and the French silent film *The Artist* – *Travelling Light* is a valentine to the beginnings of cinema. As the twentieth century begins, Motl Mendel (Damien Molony) travels to a small Jewish community in Eastern Europe for his uncle's funeral and discovers that his relative has created a primitive camera and projector. Motl sees the possibilities of these machines and, with commercial backing from the local timber merchant Jacob Bindel (Antony Sher), utilises the villagers first in documentaries and then in fiction.

This plot contains the basis of a potentially fascinating play because Jacob is unable to read and so seizes on cinema as a prospective antidote to literature. A subtle point about the power of the pictures is being made, but Wright regrettably abandons it in favour of a more crass agenda. The play's main tactic is to invite hindsight irony from the audience, who hold the advantage over the characters of a century's cinematic history. The tension

between Motl and Jacob, though not especially amusing in itself, is calculated to be funnier because viewers will appreciate that the characters have precociously anticipated the future power struggles of Hollywood. Such prophetic anachronisms abound. When a villager is abusive about an early Motl effort, we are invited to chortle at the invention of the job of film critic. When Jacob responds to that cruel review by suggesting that, next time, they have an advance screening for a few locals, it's theoretically hilarious because they have now pioneered the test screening. A scene in a Motl film doesn't make sense but luckily a bright young woman in the community comes up with the idea of editing. If there really had been an Eastern European genius who sketched out the art of cinema in a shtetl, then these laborious pay-offs might be justified, but as the playwright is making them up, the game of reverse historical engineering feels too easy.

Although dramatically inferior to both *Hugo* and *The Artist*, Wright's play notably overlaps with them not only in subject matter but also in tone. *Travelling Light* is feelgood to the point of sentimentality and the only explanation for its presence can be that the producer side of Hytner's mind calculated that the National schedule needed a winter warmer in these climatically and financial

Kitted out with bushy beard and even thicker accent, Antony Sher feels on the verge of bursting into 'If I Were a Rich Man'

bleak times. The play also collides, in a different way, with another current cinematic hit. If *The Iron Lady* sometimes feels like Evita without the songs, *Travelling Light* feels like a non-musical version of *Fiddler on the Roof*. Kitted out with bushy beard and even thicker accent, Antony Sher feels permanently on the verge of bursting into "If I Were a Rich Man".

Surprisingly heavy direction by Hytner – as if keen to show that he can also do the opposite of the manic pace of *One Man, Two Guvnors* – incorporates lengthy black-and-white film sequences projected on a screen above the stage. These are slick (video production designer Jon Driscoll) but have the effect of making you wonder why we are in

a theatre. Although, in truth, most other aspects of the play have already raised that question.

Mark Lawson



Damien Molony as Motl and Lauren O'Neil as Anna

TELEVISION

Love in a time of conflict

Birdsong

BBC1

Since its publication in 1993, Sebastian Faulks' *Birdsong* has become an acknowledged modern classic, with a secure place on reading lists and syllabuses. But its progress on to the screen has been less straightforward, with numerous false starts leading to repeated disappointment for fans and author alike.

Now though, the British film production company Working Title has created a version for television (22 January), in two 90-minute episodes, and very impressive it is. Screenwriter Abi Morgan has taken the wise decision to dump Faulks' framing device, in which a young woman in 1970s London researches her grandfather's First World War experiences, and concentrates on telling that man's story in two parallel narratives: we see Lieutenant Stephen Wraysford in the trenches in 1916, and as a young man spending an eventful summer in France six years earlier.

The contrast is intense. The pre-war scenes are achingly beautiful, a sumptuous vision of *haute-bourgeois* French family life, all picnics, boating, fine food, elegant clothes and splendid decor. In this first episode, we saw Stephen (Eddie Redmayne) arriving in France to spend some time as the house guest and temporary employee of a wealthy clothing manufacturer, René Azaire (Laurent Lafitte). The context was economically sketched: Azaire was installing new machinery and throwing men out of work. The men were striking and his young wife, Isabelle (Clémence Poésy), was secretly taking food parcels to their families.

It came as no surprise when Stephen, only 20, fell in love with this sad-eyed beauty, whom he heard crying in the night. Their mutual attraction grew – there was an erotically charged scene in a punt, when their feet touched while René, unaware, concentrated on steering the craft – and was finally consummated, with much ruffling of period undergarments, when the husband spent a night away.

The lovers' deception was discovered when René challenged his wife about a lesser betrayal, her humanitarian efforts to feed the hungry children of the strikers. Having found that rumour to be true, he immediately saw that another, about her having taken the young Englishman as a lover, was also based in fact. He ordered Stephen from the house, and Isabelle opted to go with him, leaving behind her stepchildren.

Interspersed with this love story was an account of Stephen's war, as grim and claustrophobic as the pre-war scenes were elegant and sunny. The Stephen we saw here was a



Eddie Redmayne as Stephen Wraysford

changed man. Six years older, he was now an embittered, aloof infantry lieutenant, attached to a group of tunnellers undermining the German trenches. It was terrible work, and the tense and dangerous conditions were powerfully evoked. One night, one of

the exhausted tunnellers, Jack Firebrace (Joseph Mawle), was put on watch and fell asleep. Stephen threatened to have him shot, but allowed his fate to be decided by the turn of a playing card. He was freed.

Firebrace was grateful for this capricious action. Later on, when a reluctant Stephen, ordered to go underground, was grievously wounded in a chaotic exchange of fire in the tunnel, Firebrace brought him to the surface. And then, when Stephen was laid out for burial, it was Firebrace who discovered him to be still clinging to life. As the first episode ended, the two separate narratives were nicely poised: in 1910, Stephen and Isabelle have run away together, ready to start a new life; in 1916, Stephen has come back from the dead, and seems destined to form a connection with the stoical Firebrace. But a big question is waiting to be resolved in part two: what happened back then to make Stephen the cold-hearted man he is now?

This was powerful drama. The love story in particular was beautifully told through glances and expressions as much as words, with Redmayne and Poésy entirely convincing as the lovers. The constant to and fro with the war scenes was confidently handled and Morgan skilfully trimmed the often sprawling source material back to its essentials. It's a shame this wonderful novel never made it on to the big screen, but this television version never feels like second best. **John Morrish**

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CINEMA

Life's ragged ends

The Descendants

DIRECTOR: ALEXANDER PAYNE

Hawaii is not paradise, protests Matt King (George Clooney), the central figure of *The Descendants*, in the film's opening sequence. The palm-fringed archipelago in azure waters has its share of disaster, deception and disappointment. As the film progresses, King encounters them all.

Despite his weary Mr Average demeanour, King is in effect island royalty. He is the sole executive of a family trust with control of a vital piece of coastal real estate, ready for extensive commercial development. And he is alone, too, in a new, unwelcome predicament: following a boating accident, his wife has lain unconscious for weeks in a hospital bed, leaving him in exclusive charge of two daughters, aged 10 and 17. Each in her individual way is a challenge for his dormant parenting skills.

The Descendants has the ingredients of melodrama – the handsome leading man and attractive blonde wife, the prolonged hospital sequences, the pathos of children who may lose their mother – yet its tone shifts swiftly. The first jolt comes from the daughters



George Clooney and Shailene Woodley in *The Descendants*

themselves, played by Shailene Woodley and Amara Miller, who are not taking grief quietly. Robustly angry, hurt and out of control, they are a puzzle to their father and yet totally believable. They alternate between absurd pragmatism towards their mother's plight and howling or silent sorrow. The strength of the film is an all too real depiction of how life is rarely shown in the movies as tragedy coexisting with farce. It goes beyond a simple Hollywood plot line to develop untidy ragged ends and contradictions that require real compromise and forgiveness.

Clooney is the heroically inadequate figure at the centre, muddling through a quagmire of pain, confusion and misunderstanding – trying to do the right thing but not always in the best order. Director Alexander Payne, who also wrote and directed *Sideways* and

About Schmidt, specialises in studies of flawed men, although here the women are allowed to be complicated too. He often shoots Clooney head on, running, emphasising a comically dogged mania as he lurches from one crisis to another. Around him, the Hawaiian sun shines weakly through teary mists or storm clouds glower. Shorts, flip-flops and patterned shirts have rarely looked so drab or miserable. Clooney has always excelled at comedy. The paradox of his handsome looks is that he is best when he plays ordinary. In this everyday tragedy, his reactions (and this may sound like faint praise but it's an accolade) are among the most sensitive and persuasive onscreen.

Sometimes, the tragic-comic switches are overplayed, turning individual scenes into little sketches where sadness descends into slapstick with a punch or an attack of hysteria. They work better when they emerge from character, like the excellent Beau Bridges as good old Cousin Hugh, whose sympathetic bonhomie cannot compensate for his narrowed eyes. Despite the dominance of Clooney's face on the posters, he does not hog the action: the film is strong because of the ensemble – relatives, friends, neighbours, doctors all contribute as they would in life. A scene where a doctor must break news to the younger daughter is played with restraint, largely keeping on the girl's face. Like so much in this film, it is all the more memorable.

Francine Stock

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