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|  |  | |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | | |  |  | | --- | --- | | http://www.spiked-online.com/images/DotsPage.gif | | | **Tuesday 23 February 2010** |  | | | | | http://www.spiked-online.com/images/pixel.gif | | | | |  | | --- | |  | | |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | | |  | | --- | | http://www.spiked-online.com/images/rylance.jpg | | |  |  | | --- | --- | | **Patrick Marmion** |  | | **An alternative green and pleasant land**  Jez Butterworth’s play *Jerusalem* celebrates a raucous, rebellious England over contemporary conformity. | | | | http://www.spiked-online.com/images/pixel.gif | |   **It’s a commonplace that William Blake’s poem ‘Jerusalem’ has been grievously appropriated by the British establishment. A poem that sprang from Blake’s visionary belief in revolution became an anthem that will swell the heart of ardent nationalists. The song based on Blake’s poem is belted out with pride by public-school boys up and down the land, and it is more associated with rugby matches than with the social and spiritual transformation of this Sceptred Isle. It is significant then that Jez Butterworth’s play, which has now transferred into London’s West End, attempts to reconnect with the lost soul of English radicalism.**  The story that unfolds in Butterworth’s *Jerusalem* is not an obvious call to arms. Directed by former Royal Court director Ian Rickson, it is the somewhat Chaucerian account of a middle-aged drug dealer and former motorbike stunt rider who is served with an eviction notice on his woodland caravan - a caravan proudly crested with loud speakers to pump up the volume during impromptu raves. In Ultz’s design, featuring real grass and trees stooping over the magnificent chrome trailer, you can practically smell the toadstools. Moreover, the setting - the Wiltshire west country - is a place where leylines go haywire and countercultural indolence bares its arse to aspirational conformism.  The central character, Rooster Byron – a combination of cockerel and romantic philanderer – is a teller of tall stories. For example, he prides himself on being born of a virgin thanks to the passage of a bullet discharged at the scene of adultery and subsequently making its way down the high street towards his unsuspecting mother’s fallopian tubes. As well as supplying cheap drugs to generations of local 15-year-olds, Rooster pursues a morning regime of dunking his head in a cattle trough, before breakfasting on a pint of milk mixed with raw egg and cheap vodka stirred together with a sachet of speed. Meanwhile, befuddled friends, loyal to this grandiloquent bum, pride themselves as a band of educationally subnormal outcasts.  This is not the kind of revolutionary archetype that would ever have won approval from the Politburo. Effective revolutionaries are not supposed to be feckless hedonists, devoid of rigour or discipline. There is something vaguely nostalgic about lauding such figures, especially against the background of a St George’s Day fair. The locals of this Wiltshire hinterland, young and old, grow misty-eyed for the days when they would line up to kick a hardy farmer in the nuts at the fair. Today, by contrast, they merely queue for yoga demonstrations. It is as though the play yearns for a vision of Englishness that holds a place for everyone and which puts everyone in their place.  And yet the play is too swashbuckling to be properly nostalgic in a sentimental way. It invokes a melting pot of English folklore, especially that of [Wayland the blacksmith](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wayland_Smith) who reeked terrible revenge on the king who enslaved him. Nor can you help thinking of the seditious sacrifice of [Wat Tyler and the Peasants’ Revolt](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peasant's_revolt). But most particularly, the character of Rooster Byron functions as a kind of Pan-like Green Man or Lord of Misrule, a classical scapegoat driven out by the community on May Day or Harvest festivals. It is at a village fair that Rooster offers to return the community to its roots by beheading the mayor and imprisoning the Rotary Club.  The genius of Jez Butterworth’s play is to update the myth so that it is more than just bucolic fantasy. Rooster Byron’s friends are a fabulous collection of modern-day Glastonbury casualties. They include Mackenzie Crook as a wannabe dj heading for middle age who cannot get a gig. The closest he gets to scratching records is simulating the sound of needle on vinyl with the zip on his hoodie. His sunken cheeks and lanky frame speak more of pharmacological highs than musical reverie.  Meanwhile, the Professor, who wanders in and out dressed in a linen suit, is a fond English eccentric who would normally be treated with anti-psychotics. Here, though, he fits in perfectly next to Lee, the gormless slacker who emerges from a mouldy sofa with plans to emigrate to Australia. His emergence meanwhile is followed by a brace of teenage girls of variant body mass index who roll out from under Byron’s trailer covered in the excrescence of badgers. There is no sign here of the healthy gym-membership self-discipline that sustains the modern, urban, shopping-mall hedonist.  Perhaps the most significant supporting role though is that played by Gerard Horan as the middle-aged publican who appears in morris dancing fatigues. His attire is at the behest of the brewery that now owns his pub. Although he has been forced to ban Rooster from his bar, he still depends on him for a regular supply of amphetamines. Judas-like, he betrays Rooster to the Kennet and Avon Council – a moment which confirms Rooster’s status in the play as a latter-day Messiah, rejected not only by the community he serves, but even by his disciples.  Mark Rylance as Rooster is the perfect sacrificial scapegoat, being both charismatic and unsavoury. His tattooed form is covered by an army-surplus vest, soiled combat trousers and 18-hole boots. His limp is a remnant of a legendary riding accident in which he died and was re-born in a beer tent. The way he enlivens people’s lives with his substances and stories is matched only by his questionable relationship with teenage girls and the neglect of his son – for which he pays dear. But there is a neat contradiction between the fictional rebel and the reality of the outsider: while the audience may be cheering him on, there can be few of them who would not sign a petition to have a character like Rooster removed if he lived in their own backyard.  People like Rooster Byron and his acolytes are considered a threat to themselves, our children and property prices. They are an affront to the universal dream of progress and aspiration. And that is what in the end makes Byron such a powerful figure, endowed with the sins of the community and roundly denounced for them. His pathos is a lament for something that has been ousted by the managerial culture of modern Britain. And that is why, when he beats his drum at the end to call giants to come and save him from the police and council bailiffs, we might well look to the past and to English legend to rekindle revolutionary fervour.  **Patrick Marmion** is a freelance journalist, playwright, founder of Soapbox debating forum and a part-time tutor at the University of Kent. | |  |  | |