

by Graham Kirby

While he fought on the side of America during the war of independence, was a deputy after the French revolution and carved some of the most visceral, enduring prose in the name of freedom and liberty, Thomas Paine has remained an elusive, enigmatic and undeservedly obscure figure

After two hundred years' disregard, Trevor Griffiths' *A New World* is a brave attempt to rescue Paine from anonymity with a three-hour bioplay which covers Paine's journey from American revolutionary war through revolutionary France to his funeral in New York some thirty five years later in 1809. A lot of ground is covered and it is an almost impossible task that Griffiths has set himself.

To help the task Benjamin Franklin (Keith Bartlett) is placed in the role of narrator to give the play some ballast and fill in the necessary gaps. He is aided by a chorus of assorted citizens, who mill around the Globe's yard, infecting the play with passion and verve. It is a great use of space and forces the audience to become co-conspirators in Paine's fervoured passion. Keith Barratt's performance is also one to be noted. For large parts of the play he carries the play and the audience through key moments of history and Paine's life. Humour is injected with anachronistic jokes. Unfortunately this reliance on humour becomes a little tedious and suggests a curious but fundamental lack of confidence in the play's intended construct.

There is also the problem of Paine himself. John Light's performance is understated to say the least; he broods too much and infuses the role with little discernible passion. Moreover the character of Paine suffers from a lack of doubt and inner conflict which so often is the stuff of memorable theatre. The most charged moment was when Paine's mistress discovers that he is already married. For a moment there is an intensity as the two stand opposed and irreconcilable, each incapable of accepting the others' point. But the scene is not explored in any depths and is just allowed to fade away as narrative history, once again, takes over.

Dominic Dromgoole's inventive but simple direction cannot cut through the play's gaping weaknesses which is the lack of conflict and context. Here is the lack is any opposing arguments to those of Paine's and his fellow revolutionaries. While Paine's "evergreen youth" stands firm against the moral meanderings of his original bedfellows, there is no social context, no conflicting reason put against them, no consequence of their action. Thus they are left isolated and therefore only partly investigated. The play's greatest instances came when Paine's words themselves were read out to the audience. They were exhilarating moments that sent an agitated thrill through the audience but ultimately only served to highlight the inferiority of Griffith's artificial recreation.

*A New World runs until 9 October at Shakespeare's Globe, London*