

# Agitprop lite and big hearts in the South

Jimmy McGovern has trouble at t'mill, but the Young Vic is transfixed by one of the performances of the year

**SUSANNAH CLAPP**

## King Cotton

The Lowry, Salford

## The Member of the Wedding

Young Vic, London SE1

## Moonwalking in Chinatown

Soho, London W1

IT'S 25 YEARS since Jimmy McGovern wrote for the stage. After a critical pasting for his epic of working-class life, *City Echoes*, he went on to telly glory – with *Brookside*, *Cracker* and *The Lakes*. But now he's back in the theatre with *King Cotton*, set at the time of the American Civil War, in the cotton-picking Deep South and the cotton-producing Lancashire mills. It has gospel and brass bands; it has, thanks to director Jude Kelly, a naval battle which takes place on a giant adventure playground of bars and ropes and ladders; it has a thundering moral message (clue: it doesn't come out for mill-owners and slave-whippers). This is the McGovern of *Brookside* and *The Street* all right, but not, quite, as we know him. It's got the ideology; it doesn't have the idiom.

Which means that *King Cotton* is a warm-hearted piece of agit-prop. It has gorgeous singers – particularly Wendy Mae Brown and Israel Oyelumade – and it has impeccable sentiments: 'There's always blood on the cotton – you just don't normally see it.' But the

jokes are hokey (God is anti-Scouser) and the dramatic surprises are few: as soon as you see a mother crooning sweetly over a wicker cradle, you know the babe is going to cop it.

It's amazing that *The Member of the Wedding*, one of the most shaded and peculiar novels – so idiosyncratically, innerly revolving – should become theatrically effective. But so it proves when directed by Matthew Dunster. Carson McCullers adapted her own novel for the stage, and in doing so shifted the focus – from a gawky, eloquent, alienated girl to a clever black maid. It was a canny shift, turning a psychological study into a dramatic example of social exclusion, and this is skilfully realised in Dunster's production which is full of the shadows and glow, the flare and depression, of the South.

Flora Spencer-Longhurst is impressive as the gifted, awkward hoyden who bursts in and out of herself. As the wispy child companion, James Wilson is extraordinary. Spindly, tiny-voiced and arresting, he reveals everything by seeming to retreat; when he puts a tea towel over his head and slumps, it manages to suggest he's giving you a close-up of his soul. And as Berenice the maid, who busts the novelistic convention that a big heart and a sharp tongue don't coexist, the American actress Portia (who doesn't use a surname) gives one of the most powerful performances of the year. She rolls on the tragedy, psychological weirdness and caustic humour of the play like a seal on a wave. She is dry, languid, juicy, savvy, resigned. She



'Gorgeous singer': Israel Oyelumade in *King Cotton*. Donald Cooper

suggests a lifetime of dismay with the drop of a digit.

There's true local theatre in *Moonwalking in Chinatown*, part-amble, part-festival, in which the audience, led through the streets of Soho, are shown, through dramatic fragments, the little-examined life of English Chinese.

The cast are – bar one – all of Chinese extraction. The oldest is a woman who slips easily into Cantonese, and tells traditional legends about the moon; the youngest is a tot in bunches and Chinese pyjamas who speaks only English and is looking for a lost rabbit called Sean. A group of teenagers bandy the biggest term of abuse for their peers: 'banana' (yellow on the outside, white within).

Chinatown's mix of ersatz and authentic provides the scenery: a glitzy, pointless pagoda (the setting for a pill-pop and passport scam); a real Mandarin sign-painter's shop down a whiffy alley (in which a Chinese waiter warbles Lloyd Webber). There's a real subject, and there's charm – enough to overcome unevenness of acting. And there's a beautiful concluding scene, in the totally surprising world of a communal courtyard, where stories are tied neatly together, to the sounds of Chinese song, to the sight of shadow-puppets, under a swaying line of paper lanterns. There's warmth, fragrance and excitement here. And truth. We have no bananas today.