

eager to write. We see and hear them die on the mountain. In his lecture on his operas, Auden wrote of this scene:

... [it] will not do at all, and must some day be completely rewritten [it wasn't]. For opera it is far too literary and complicated in the argument, far too dependent upon every word being heard to get across when set to music.

He was absolutely right, and what he says there applies to quite a lot more of the text. Where it doesn't, it coaxed out of Henze some of his most agreeable and inventive music.

Regular readers may be getting weary of my enthusiasm, always duly reported, for every production I see of Britten's great comedy *Albert Herring*. But it suits so wonderfully the schools of music which mount it that it never fails. Trinity College of Music put it on in Blackheath Halls, a cavernous, barrel-vaulted tube where words got lost, but it survived, thanks to the marvellously lyrical and relaxed conducting of Stuart Bedford, who made Sid and Nancy's scenes intensely erotic. Albert was too much the pretty boy, and Lady Billows yelped; but the spirit and Britten's prodigious creative flow were triumphant. It was very well worth the trip into an uncharted area of south London. □

## Cinema

# Metal fatigue

Deborah Ross

**Iron Man 2**  
12A, Nationwide

**I**ron Man 2 is a mighty dog's dinner, which would be OK — or, as my dog Mr Woofie puts it, 'Don't knock it till you've tried it' — but it is also fantastically boring. It's the sort of boredom that starts at pore level and then seeps its way, via the lymph system, down into the very marrow of your bones. It's the sort of boredom that makes you sad to be alive. It's the entire axis of boredom. It's the boredom that accrues when an incoherent plot, flimsy characters, a dumb script and an excess of CGI fighting nonsense all gang up on you. I think even Mr Woofie would have found *Iron Man 2* boring and his standards, when it comes to any kind of entertainment, are quite low. 'I'm happy just to bark at a bush,' he says. 'I'd even consider that a good day.'

The first *Iron Man*, which proved a box office hit two years ago, was reasonable enough, I suppose, but this is just the same again, only without bothering. If there were any new ideas, I failed to spot them, as did my bone marrow, which slept through most

of it anyhow. Lucky bone marrow. Robert Downey Jr reprises his role as Tony Stark, the billionaire, playboy weapons industrialist who was unmasked as Iron Man at the end of the last film, although it might have been more fun if he'd been unmasked as Iron Maiden. Even my bone marrow might have stayed awake for that. Directed by Jon Favreau, the opening scenes are peculiarly chaotic, with characters talking over each other — so irritating — while storylines come at you from all directions. I even felt a storyline go up my bottom, which was quite discombobulating. It was a boring storyline, at least, and not an explosive one. Just imagine the consequences of that!

I don't know why a film would want to bring in several dumb plots, instead of concentrating on just the one dumb plot, but there you have it. The US government is after Stark because they want his technology for the military. A nasty Russian (Mickey Rourke) with spooky tattoos is after Stark because ... something to do with his father? A rival tycoon (Sam Rockwell) is after Stark because ... oh, who cares. An army colonel (Don Cheadle) is not after Stark, but might have to betray him all the same (I think). Samuel L. Jackson comes by, says a few things, and then wanders off again. I never worked out who he was. Downey Jr, Rourke, Rockwell, Cheadle, Jackson: what did they do during tea breaks on set? Did they high five and whoop: 'I can't believe we're getting tons of money for this rubbish?' And: 'Nice work if you can get it, and we did!' I don't know if the girls were allowed to attend these tea breaks, but am thinking not. Probably, they had their own room, where they could quietly do face packs.

This is a solidly sexist piece of work, although, that said, whereas the Gwyneth Paltrow character, Pepper Potts, was servile eye candy in the first film, in this outing she's been promoted to a CEO so she is, at least, executive eye candy now. Meanwhile, her replacement as Tony's assistant comes in the form of Scarlett Johansson, who wears either low-cut dresses or all-in-one Lycra body suits. Is this how they teach you to carry on at secretarial college these days? In one scene, she changes clothes in the back of a car, although there is nothing gratuitous about it. It was important to the movie. How would they have got a shot of her in her bra otherwise? Sometimes, I truly wonder: did feminism actually happen or did I just dream it?

OK, it is glamorous. Stark lives in a *Thunderbirds*-style mansion perched on a cliff top. There are sports cars and private jets and talk of modern art. We travel to Malibu, New Mexico, Moscow, Monte Carlo, so the film has a chance to be no

good in several different locations. And the action? There are two set pieces: one during the Monte Carlo Grand Prix where Stark is driving a racing car — why? No idea — and the inevitable good v. evil battle at the end. Whether you enjoy them probably depends on how much you like to see men in metal suits crashing about. And then crashing about some more. It's all as dull as ditchwater, not that Mr Woofie would ever buy that. 'Hey, you leave ditchwater out of this. I love ditchwater. It's terrific.' □

## Television

# Money well spent

James Delingpole

**S**cience, you may have noticed, has been getting a bad press of late. Scientists losing raw data, scientists withholding data, scientists cherry-picking data, scientists torturing the evidence till it says what they want it to say, scientists acting more like political activists than scientists. And, of all the world's media institutions, none has been quite so shameless in justifying, excusing or covering up this appalling behaviour than that supposed bastion of neutrality and authority, the BBC.

Still, the BBC can't get everything wrong all the time, and its new series *The Story of Science* is a case in point. Within five minutes, the presenter Michael Mosley was at the court of Holy Roman Emperor Rudolph II in 16th-century Prague, praising what he considered one of the most important advances in the entire history of science: Tycho Brahe's painstaking astronomical observations, which ushered in an era of science based not merely on speculation, but also on scrupulously recorded data.

Tycho Brahe was a fascinating character: a Danish nobleman who wore a false nose because his real one had been chopped off in a youthful duel, who kept a clairvoyant dwarf and a pet moose that died after falling drunk downstairs, and who became the father of modern astronomy.

But, then, so too is Michael Mosley. After two years as a banker, he studied medicine at the Royal Free with a view to becoming a psychiatrist, decided he didn't want to do that either and ended up joining the BBC instead. The programme that made his name was a *Horizon* documentary about the proposed link between *Helicobacter pylori* and gastric ulcers. Afterwards, he received 20,000 letters from people whose supposedly incurable pain had disappeared after taking antibiotics. He was named Medical Journalist of the Year, and the programme was later named by doctors as the one that





had done more than any other to change their prescribing habits.

Weird, but though he's been doing this stuff since the mid-Eighties — including a stint as *The One Show's* in-house medical expert — I can't honestly say I've really noticed him before. This, I think, speaks volumes for his naturalness as a presenter. Almost everyone in the TV doc game has an annoying tic: Dan Cruickshank's breathlessness, Robert Winston's moustacheiness, David Starkey's cattiness, Simon Schama's old-womanliness, Michael Palin's insufferable niceness, Dan Snow's slightly-thick-oarsman heartiness, Tristram Hunt's rhyming slanginess; you could play this game for hours. Mosley, though, really doesn't. He's a bit lax with his glottal stops, my wife noticed, but other than that his performance is as precision-ground as one of those Venetian glass lenses Galileo personally made with a cannonball to use in his telescope.

Which is a lot more strained an analogy than you'd ever get from Mosley. Really, he's the business: emphatic hand gestures employed at exactly the right moments but never otherwise; strong, punchy scripts; evident understanding of the science; delivery cheery and amused, but not 'Hello, I'm doing a science programme which I fear may bore you so to compensate I'm going to talk like I'm Geoffrey from *Rainbow*'; understated



ed summer suits with nice pink shirts; even his sunglasses struck exactly the right balance between cool and unobtrusive.

Better still, almost, are all the walk-on extras he's managed to accumulate. I'm thinking not just of the foxy young woman his team persuaded to sit pretending to read a copy of Galileo's *Starry Messenger* at the edge of the shot in the Italian piazza, but of characters like the genial, *Harry Potter*-style old prof with the fluffy white hair he got at the beginning to show him how to use Tycho's Quadrant. Or the similarly eccentric one with the panama hat who'd dedicated 20 years of his life to recreating a mechanical device discovered in a 2,000-year-old Greek shipwreck, which the ancients had used to calculate the motion of the planets.

Clearly, a lot of money has gone into the

making of this series, as it flits from Prague to Florence to Venice to Delphi to the Mount Wilson Observatory in Pasadena, California, every location so lushly shot you think, 'God, that looks fantastic! I'd love to go there!' till you remember you have already, only the light wasn't so good and unlike the BBC you hadn't had the whole area cleared beforehand of teeming tourists. But it's definitely one of those cases where the licence fee has been well spent.

Finally, some thoughts on the new *Doctor Who*. I wasn't convinced by the episode involving Winston Churchill and a Dalek — too, too silly and Churchill wouldn't have been wearing a bow tie in his bunker, he would surely have been wearing a siren suit — but the new Doctor Matt Smith and his almost too-sexy assistant Karen Gillan are off to a generally splendid start. Already, I can spot two huge improvements over his predecessor David Tennant. First, he doesn't twinkle and mug in the nearly the same 'Ooh-get-me-I'm-playing-the-Doctor-and-aren't-I-great-and-isn't-this-the-best-job-in-the-world?' way. Second, you don't have to think every time you look at him, 'That man ACTUALLY thinks the country would be better off run by Ed Balls, Harriet Harman, Gordon Brown, the Miliband brothers, Peter Mandelson and Charlie Whelan.' □

"An idea as magnificent as democracy deserves a satire as magnificent as *Thick*" **THE TIMES**

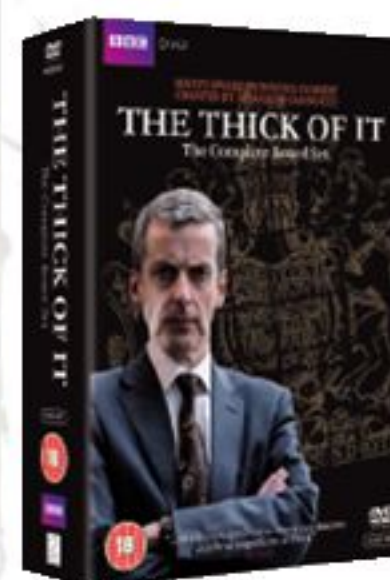
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