

Hubble-bubble bewitches court

by John Shirley

MR JUSTICE Michael Davies had an invigorating time at Winchester Crown Court last week. He met his first self-confessed sex-change witch and his first round-the-world yachts-woman. He heard testimony spiced with quotations from Shakespeare and Oscar Wilde. For good measure, he condemned the British press to be "boiled in oil."

On his own admission, the judge was dealing with "an exceedingly unusual case." It concerns the alleged attempts by the international sailor Aileen Elizabeth Rose Swale (known as Rosie) and Bernard (otherwise known as Tracey) Stamp to administer cytosine—an obscure poisonous extract of laburnum seed—to Stamp's former boyfriend, Southampton docker Keith Vincent. The couple are also alleged to have committed perjury and attempted to pervert the course of justice. They deny all charges.

Tomorrow the jury of six men and five women retire to consider their verdict. (The twelfth jury member, a man, went sick early in the case.) Last week they heard a bizarre tale of witchcraft curses and superstitious brews.

The first question sets the tone. What is the gender of Tracey Stamp? Prosecuting counsel Roger Titheridge, QC, explains that Stamp was born a man. Twenty years ago, he says, Stamp had a sex change operation: she has since lived as a woman and a witch.

In the dock, Tracey is plainly



Rosie Swale: vivacious

not enjoying the ordeal. A stooped, pale figure, looking older than her 45 years, she stares blankly into the court. She does not look well. Occasionally she mops her brow and sips a cup of water. At one point she asks to leave the courtroom. Leaning heavily on a stick, she is assisted by a nurse. "I'm so sorry," she says quietly to a court usher as she passes.

Titheridge continues. He says that in November 1977, Stamp and Vincent met Swale and her husband. In August 1978 the Swales' marriage broke up, and two months later Tracey and Rosie went to live together in an isolated National Trust cottage near Guildford, Surrey. Earlier that year, says Titheridge, Vincent suffered stomach pains, vomiting and diarrhoea. A witness testifies that as she stirred the potion, Stamp muttered the witches' chant from Macbeth: "Hubble, bubble, toil and trouble."

If the jury is bemused by this, the defendant Swale is not at all put out. A vivacious, 31-year-old

brunette, swathed in her black cloak and pink headscarf, she is better-looking than the newspaper photographs suggest. She takes an enthusiastic interest in the proceedings, frequently raising her hand to address Mr Justice Davies, and passing notes to her counsel, Patrick Bac, QC.

There is the question of a wreath sent to Stamp in January 1979. The prosecution claims it was ordered by Miss Stamp herself, in Vincent's name, as an attempt to get him jailed for breaching a High Court order.

Mrs Doreen Ralls, a florist's van-driver, is called. She rang the Stamp home to get instructions on where to deliver the wreath, and she described the voice she spoke to. "It was," she says "a low, deep, rich husky voice." She elaborates: "You know, it was like the woman in the play who says 'a handbag!'"

Titheridge: "You mean The Importance of Being Earnest?" Mrs Ralls: "Yes, it was the film version—I think it was Margaret Rutherford."

Titheridge: "No, it was not. It was Edith Evans."

Across the courtroom the press corps is disgruntled: all week, they have been smarting from the rebukes of Mr Justice Davies, who said on Tuesday that we should "be boiled in oil."

As we depart on Friday, Mr Justice Davies warns us about our standards of reporting over the weekend. If we transgress, he'll have us before him first thing on Monday, he says. We hacks must watch our step: if the court don't get us, then magic might.