

The Showman at the Almeida

Savage style

Michael Billington



Alan Bates . . . quick, sharp, mercurial

PHOTOGRAPH: HENRIETTA BUTLER

THOMAS BERNHARD, that Austrian Thersites who died in 1989, is slowly gaining a toehold in Britain. After the success of *Elisabeth II* at the Gate, we now have *The Showman* (1983) at the Almeida; another misanthropic near-monologue leading to a catastrophic conclusion. It's tough going at times but it's sustained by the intensity of Bernhard's bile and by Alan Bates's savage panache as the actor-manager hero.

Bernhard is similar in many ways to John Osborne. Both show scant regard for conventional structure. Even more significantly, both use their heroes' outpourings to attack existing society and to offer proof of a badly damaged soul. Here Bernhard's protagonist, Bruscon, is an actor-dramatist reduced to touring his palpably ridiculous play, *The*

Wheel Of History, featuring everyone from Caesar to Churchill, round the Austrian sticks. Winding up in a tatty pub-hall in Utzbach, he vents his spleen on his family, the landlord, state-companies, the theatre itself, left-wing progressives and his country's residual national socialism.

You wish occasionally someone would interrupt him to give us the red meat of dialectic. But, gradually, you realise that the real conflict lies in the author's own complex attitude to Bruscon himself. Bernhard obviously shares his hero's hatred of, amongst other things, noisy actors, pig-infested taverns and national degeneracy. But he also sees him as a tragic figure who attacks others to conceal his own inadequacy.

I find myself yearning at times for external challenge and conflict but Alan Bates's Bruscon is riveting. The great Ulrich Wildgruber,

whom I saw play it in Hamburg three seasons ago, was like a rumbling, run-down Lear: Bates is quicker, sharper, more mercurial. With his cascading black locks, and gold-knobbed cane, he carries with him the unmistakable whiff of the greasepaint. Bates also conveys the desperation of a man who writes a satiric play about history's supermen but who sees himself as a heroic descendant of Shakespeare and Voltaire. It is a mesmeric performance well served by Paul Brown's mouldering set, Jonathan Kent's atmospheric production and a faithful translation by Peter Jansen and Kenneth Northcott.

The Showman doesn't offer the normal satisfactions of drama — you get instead is a knock-down star performance from Bates and a glimpse not just of the unhealed divisions in Austria but also of those inside Bernhard's soul.

Billington On the Showman

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