



Urban misery, corporate corruption, despairing youth – a showcase of new theatre writing portrays a gruesome nation

## Visions of a cruel Britannia

**Michael Billington**

WHO said new writing was dead? Offering a splendid reprieve to dismal Jimmies like myself who wonder where the movement is heading, the Cottesloe stage of the National Theatre is currently offering a season called Springboards: five new pieces developed at the Royal National Theatre Studio and other small spaces with four more plays to follow around the country. It may not solve the problem of what to put on the big stages: it certainly proves new writing is alive and kicking.

Seeing three of the new shows on Saturday also dented some preconceptions. I have always believed strongly in the solo author. But, after 24 hours, I find the show that rattles around in my head is *Hove*, devised by Talking Tongues (who won the Guardian's Edinburgh Student Award in 1991) and developed by the actors in rehearsal. With its story of a seaside boarding house, a mysterious interloper, a celebratory rout, it has obvious echoes of Pinter's *The Birthday Party*. Directed by David Farr, it also emerges as a haunting evocation of the twilight sub-culture of the pseudo-genteel English guest house.

It starts with Rachel Joyce stripping off her City suit and donning tourist gear to infiltrate a boarding-house: a building she has targeted for re-development. Once inside, she finds the occupants are all locked into private dreams and desires. A local councillor and his mistress fantasise about being JFK and Marilyn; an ageing resident talks about low-land coastal erosion, while secretly fancying the landlady; and the landlady herself, with apparent contentment, sees her weirdo son sup-

planted by a female vagrant. At the climactic party the residents gaze fascinatedly — in an echo of Albee's *Tiny Alice* — at a model of the house which is then savagely demolished while the interloper poses its occupants like figures on a Grecian urn.

What on earth does it all signify? I guess that it is a lament for the decline of a part of old England. But Farr and his team do not so much make statements as explore mood: especially the comforting rituals of boarding-house life (with its echoes of school) and the sunlit melancholy of the genteel seaside resort. Well acted all round — especially by Joyce as the role-playing interloper and Alan David as the ecological old codger — it affirms the possibility of group-creation: four performances (now over) seem too few.

The other two plays by Judith Johnson and Meredith Oakes are lively, but occupy more familiar territory: the corrosive effects of the recession, the brutality of life on a London housing estate. Johnson's *Somewhere*, presented in association with Liverpool Playhouse, is about the dismal impact of the Thatcher revolution on the young. In the first half we see a group of Liverpool school leavers in the early eighties: scatty, chummy, energetic, they have no jobs and low prospects (though two get work as temporary pool attendants). In the second act we learn what has happened to three of them 10 years on: the rosy-fingered Dawn, a dominatrix, is now an Amsterdam window-whore torn between the claims of ex-lover Lee, a professional soldier, and nice guy Barry, a bartender who has become her *fidus Achates*.

The nervy, jazzy, high-flying first act turns into conventional romance — which guy will she choose? — in the second. But the writing captures

the desolation of a lost generation and there's some superb acting, under Polly Teale's direction, from Katrina Lévon as the wasted Dawn, from Karl Draper as a spider-legged, felt-hatted follower and from John Hannah as a professional hard man.

Mae West once saucily suggested that a hard man is good to find: not according to Meredith Oakes who, in *The Neighbour*, offers a sharp, acute, caustic study of a council estate bully and gangster's pofor. James, who destroys the life and career of his gentle, next-door furniture-stripper, John, like ear, Oakes enquires what it is in nature that makes these hard hearts; and her answer seems to be that it is a mixture of weakness, terror and fear of being known.

Oakes touches on some areas worthy of deeper exploration — in particular, the magnetic attraction James possesses for a middle-aged couple. But she has a Bond-like eye for the relation of character to environment ("You can hear the weeds growing. They're making fertile use of restricted space like the rest of us") without banging the point across.

She is also particularly well served, in John Burgess's production, by Lee Ross's electric performance as a stabbing council estate Richard III. The picture of Britain that emerges from these plays is not particularly pretty: it's one of urban decay, youthful despair, corporate takeover. But the mere fact that writers, all high on promise, are dissecting the British malaise gives one a shred of hope; and, as a season, *Springboards*, showcasing work from studio theatres, is of infinitely more significance to our culture than a whole army of money-sexy musicals.

The *Springboards* season continues on May 5 at the Cottesloe, and then tours nationally. Box office: 071 028 2033.

### Diary

ALICE FAYE will be giving the Guardian interview at the National Film Theatre at 8.45pm on May 5. This is known to be her birthday but reference

Spm. When she quit the studio she returned her dressing-room key with a note to Darryl Zanuck telling him where he could put it. She did make further films including *The Magic Of Lassie* with James Stewart and Mickey Rooney in 1978. Gershwin, Cole Porter and Ir-

known in this country for Woodman, Spare That Tree. Alice Faye's huge smile, wholesome looks and warm personality had her playing romantic roles with the likes of Cesar Romero, Don Ameche and Tyrone Power. In her autobiography-cum-keep-fit book *Growline Older*, Stavine Young

## Billington Springboards May 1993

Clipped By:



ianharris

Fri, Dec 27, 2019