

A whale of an evening

THEATRE
O'Neill, Miller
and Kurt Weill
BLAKE MORRISON

IT'S like having a sick whale in the back yard; someone reminds of the foghorn in Long Day's Journey into Night (Theatre Royal, Haymarket). The same might be said of seeing O'Neill's greatest play, as this walloping, slapping, blubbery beast engulfs actors and audience alike in the drawn-out agonies of the Tyrone family. Written — 'in tears and blood' — in 1941, it was first staged 30 years ago, though if O'Neill had had his way, or his will, it wouldn't have been performed until the late 1970s, and for some critics it remains an unperformable masterpiece.

Enter Jenah, or Jonathan Miller, to try to master O'Neill's hulking monster. A 'disrespectful and fashy' (his phrase) energy (his phrase) is what Miller brings to production, and the way he sees about his task here makes for a swift and exciting first act. As the four Tyrone — high-walrus James, morphine-addicted Mary, acidulous James Jr, condescending Edmund — bicker and feud, their sentences drawn out, stack up on top into each other. They listen but they don't listen. They answer but they don't respond.

The acrophobic overlapping of speeches helps Miller to trim an hour or more off the play's usual running time, but this isn't his main purpose. What it emphasises is the gaudy happiness of the characters, locked into a script they heard yesterday and will hear again tomorrow, unable to escape their predetermined roles, doomed to repeat the same family text: 'I could see that line coming. I know you've heard me say this a thousand times. . . .'

The theatricality is there in the story (James and Jamie have been actors, after all) and this production brings it out superbly, not least by having Jack Lemmon at its centre. He's not a great actor for nothing, one of his sons says critically of James, and with Lemmon in the part this prompts a knowing laugh, reminding of his film roles as a kindly liberal flooding back. That's part of the trick, though: James Tyrone isn't the great patriarch he takes himself to be, but rather (as his name implies, and Lemmon soon makes us see) an Irish warren-cryant, fiercely obsessed with property and prepared to sacrifice his son's life rather than part with a dime.

Dodderly, irascible, maned with a shock (and quite a shock it is for us, too) of white hair, his 'go rising and falling in convulsions', Lemmon's is an authoritative performance, unobtrusively establishing that the real illness in this play isn't the alcoholism, consumption or morphine-addiction that afflicts the rest of the family, but James Tyrone's miserliness. The set, too, by Tony Stranges, subtly makes this point: rather chic and Seventies in its panelling, pull-blinds, wood-stain and bare floorboards, it's actually just mean, an expression of scrupling and scrooging.

The raptid with which Miller's production gets all this across is breathtaking: the epagnage of the Tyrone family, their pacts and winks and whappings, can rarely have been better done. But the drawback of the headlong opening is that it makes the play seem even more lopsided and disproportionate, even more of a sick whale, than usual. The second half, in which each of the characters must tell his or her own 'story', explains rather than develops what's been implied in the first, and weaknesses in the individual performances begin to show.

Bette L Leslie, convincing as the tense, spinily, paranoid Mary we first see, marinating and sniggering, nerves tightening through her body like bow-strings, is less persuasive (and too much the same) when she returns in a fog of morphine. And Peter Gallagher looks too healthy and pragmatic as the consumptive, poetic Fenwick. It's left to Kevin Spacey to provide the only real vigour in the final act with his raucous, blundering Jamie. The whale isn't mastered yet, though this is as close a shot as we're likely to see.

A good week for London theatre, in a supposedly dead month, and a good week, too, for another Miller, Arthur, whose *The American Clock* (Cottesloe) is his first new play to be staged in Britain for 13 years. The Depression, not depression, is its subject, and Miller's sense of the difference is what makes the play unrepentant. One of the main characters is a man who makes more money in the Slump than ever before, and though in many ways the piece is an attack on revisionism, Rossmore notices that times may not have been so hard back then after all, it's also about survival in the face of economic hardship.

Paper money and pawn shops, death-taps and dote queries, hunger and sager, 'we've been here countless times, of course, not least in films. Like Dennis Potter's *Passions from Heaven*, the play juxtaposes the period's social agonies with its jaunty optimistic songs; the brief mention from a dance marathon recall O'Neil's Patrick's film *'They Shot Horvath, Don't They?'* hobo rains like the one we see here have whistled through countless documentaries. Miller also acknowledges a debt to Studs Terkel's book, *'Hard Times'*, which helps give the play its sweep — North and South, black and white, rich and poor, city and farmhand. But the piece also has a strong vein of autobiography — in what happens to the Baum family, particularly those Lee — and for all the documentary solemnity there's more than a whiff of soap in its concentration on the ebbing fortunes of two middle-class families in Brooklyn.

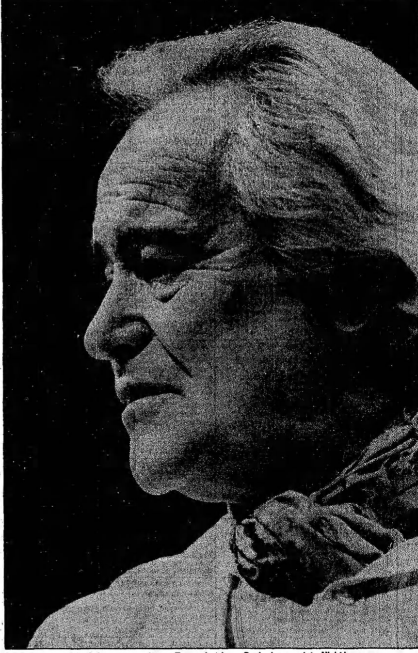
For the original 1960 production in New York, Miller intended 'the impression of surrounding westness, as though the whole country were the setting.' But this isn't what one gets at the Cottesloe, where the backdrop is the twisted-metal sculpture of a scrapheap. The confinement is all to the good. The action shrinks to a series of cartoon (vellate office, subway, back porch), the actors using the small space with the imaginative mobility one associates with the Cottesloe at its best.

Above all, it's a gloriously funny play, the jokes bearing out Miller's almost wifful conclusion about the indomitable spirit of ordinary folk; the patient lying on a shrink's couch, who declares the stock market to be 'nothing but a state of mind' ('When did you first have this thought?') or the student who 'saying endlessly on an odage because this will entice him to freedomal treatment.

In a large cast, directed by Peter Wood, there are many strong performances, notable among them Michael Bryant, Sara Kocoteman and Neil English as the Baum family, Barry James as a would-be composer, David Schofield as dance-crazed Company President Elect (a new part in the play since Miller revised it) and Martha Hunt as a hooker. If Miller's point about the American clock still ticking up to midnight remains fuzzy, this is nonetheless a brisk and entertaining evening with some excellent songs.

Long days and late clocks at the Almeida, too, where the second *'Not the RSC: Festival'* includes a number of British premieres, the most beloved of them Kurt Weill's *Johann Johansen*, a musical he composed in 1936 (shortly after his arrival in America) about a volunteer who goes off to fight 'the war to end all wars' in 1917 and who returns psychologically maimed. Though bitterly ironic in its treatment of militarism, Paul Green's script lacks the abstractionism Weill enjoyed when collaborating with Brecht. (It also, in this truncated production, lacks a key part of the plot, Johnny's courtship.) But John Owen Edwards's musical direction nearly makes up for this and there's one explosive scene involving laughing gas (Clive Mantle in commanding form) where pacifism gets the last laugh.

Among the other Almeida shows, a laurel or two are due to Arnold Yarrow who in writing, directing and acting in *Satchel* — about a day in the life of an ill-placed East End sweatshop — exhibits the spirit of enterprise which the play, in its more honestly modified moments before didacticism takes over, salutes as well as depicts.



Jack Lemmon as James Tyrone in 'Long Day's Journey into Night'

Blake Morrison's Observer Review

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