

THEATRE Hail to Christendom



Kate Kellaway enjoys a rich Irish steward, learns 'officespeak' and sends a **STIFF MEMORANDUM** to playwrights who split women in three

Max Stafford-Clark's production of Sebastian Barry's **The Steward of Christendom** at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs, is lucid and controlled – a serge background for a brilliant play. It is a triumph for Stafford-Clark's new company. Out of joint.

Sebastian Barry writes with lyrical authority. His play is so rooted in Irish history that it feels as if it is a classic, although never stale. Thomas Dunne – who is based on Barry's great-grandfather – was a superintendent in the Dublin Metropolitan Police in 1922, under Michael Collins.

Dunne's violent professional loyalty has distorted his family life, and the stress of the pulls on his heart has led him to madness and the asylum in Wicklow in which the play is set.

Donal McCann as Thomas Dunne is outstanding. He looks like a medieval saint with sad simian features and a mouth that opens to an O, then freezes in twisted contemplation of the story it tells.

He passes his hand over his shaven head, as if checking to see whether he still exists. This is the portrait of a man racked with shame, moving between elegy and declamation. He finds solace in his memory of nature, bathing his mind in what he calls 'the fled time', in a world scented with clover and filled with dragonflies. He resembles an Irish King Lear, although, he says, he is every inch a steward.

His daughters are carefully differentiated. Cara Kelly's Maud is nevy and vivacious. Tina Kellegher's hump-backed Annie sour but loyal, and Aislin McGuckin's Dolly looks like a fashion-plate of the Twenties with a heart-breaking face. The girls come and go like a chorus.

The strength of the play is its kindness. Take the asylum staff: Mrs O'Dea (Maggie McCarthy)

looks as if she has come straight out of Happy Families. When she measures Dunne for his uniform, he begs for a gold suit and to our amazed pleasure, she humours him by using yellow cotton. The play resembles the dark suit that she makes, lightened with unexpected gold.

Since seeing Vaclav Havel's **The Memorandum** at the Orange Tree Theatre, I have been practising Pydepe, an 'office language'. Even pidgin Pydepe is hard; there are many multi-syllabled words meaning 'boo' and the word for wombat is 319 characters long. At least I have grasped the thuggishly, cumbersome word 'zextraheight' which means point of view.

My zextraheight about this allegory for life under communism is that, seen now, it is safe. But in Prague in 1965, the jokes must have seemed dangerously close to home. The managing director's life is hell, an out-tray with him in it. But Sam Walters's production is fun.

Michel Tremblay and Edward Albee should put their heads together (or have them banged together) since both have produced loathsome plays splitting one woman's life into different stages. Albee's **Three Tall Women** was 'efficiently awful'; Tremblay's **Albertine in Five Times** is duff. The actresses do their skilful best to rescue it, but the only cause for celebration is the delightful Bridewell theatre itself.

The Steward of Christendom Until 22 April, Royal Court Theatre Upstairs, London SW1 (0171-730 2544);

The Memorandum Until 29 April, Orange Tree Theatre, Richmond, Surrey (0181-940 3633);

Albertine in Five Times Until 29 April, The Bridewell Theatre, London EC4 (0171-936 3456)

Kate Kellaway's review, Observer, 9 April 1995

Clipped By:



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