

## ARTS GUARDIAN

Michael Billington welcomes  
Jack Lemmon to the London stage  
in Long Day's Journey Into Night  
at the Haymarket

# Beauty in a poem of despair

JONATHAN MILLER'S production of Long Day's Journey Into Night has gained half an hour in running time since I saw it in Washington four months ago. Length adds to the pain in this poem of desperation. But although this is a perfectly creditable version of O'Neill's autobiographical masterpiece — and worth seeing for the performances of Jack Lemmon and Kevin Spacey — it doesn't have the potexing quality of Michael Blakemore's famous production for the National.

The reason is that Miller, in swathing the text in a detailed behavioural realism, misses something of the play's calculated artificiality. This really was O'Neill's bid for classic status. It is no accident that he preserves the unities of classical tragedy by compressing the whole history of the Tyrone family into a single day in August, 1912. And he harks back to Ibsen — and even further in time to Sophocles — by his technique of exhumation in which the family skeletons are dug up one by one at the same time as the drama inches forwards. To vary the metaphor, it is a play packed with psychological clues each one of which leads to a tragic destination. What Miller gives us is the realistic texture of family

life. In the first half especially, the Tyrone family interrupt each other, talk over each other, allow sentences to overlap. This is exactly how families behave; and it leads towards moments of exhilarating realism, such as the way Edmund's recounting of a neighbourly conflict about trespassing pigs leads almost imperceptibly into a recriminatory row.

You sense this is all part of a cyclical pattern. But what you lose in the process is O'Neill's careful planting of the evidence, such as the suggestion that Mary Tyrone's dope-taking was a direct consequence of her son Edmund's birth. Information like this is all part of the family's continuing psychological warfare, but here it gets subsumed in the overlapping, intertwined dialogue.

There is also calculated symbolism in the play's progress from bright, confident morning to the final fogbound, midnight descent into hell. But here Tony Straiges's dark-oaked American summer home is surrounded by permanent blackness as if it is always night with the Tyrones: what one misses is the move from precarious optimism over Mary's apparent recovery into the stark realisation that the family's fate is forever sealed. Miller's production is excellent at tensions of family life; but



Bethel Leslie and Jack Lemmon: Haymarket. Picture by Douglas Jeffery

O'Neill's careful use of light and dark, sun and mist is blurred by a certain physical sameness.

But the production has certainly gained in raw, naked pain since I first saw it; and Jack Lemmon's performance as James Tyrone is better than ever. Mr Lemmon sports a shaggy mane of white hair that gives him the look of an ageing lion (I like the hint of Tyrone's vanity in his constant combing of his locks). But what is remarkable is Lemmon's emotional volatility that enables him to

change course in mid-sentence. Trying to calm Mary down when she is on a morphine-jag, he actually starts one sentence in teeth-gritting anger and then switches to placatory sweetness. And this is a key to a performance beautifully pitched between agonised frustration at her unreachability and a despairing love. When Mr Lemmon says she is the most beautiful girl he had ever seen, you believe him; and his final cry as she is locked into her sad dream penetrates the heart.

The other fine performance is from Kevin Spacey as the wastrel, rakehell elder son: one of the best scenes in the evening is his midnight confrontation with Edmund to which Mr Spacey brings a frenzied, whisky-sodden envy and rage at his brother's superior talent and a societal frustration at her unreachability. I have been rebuked for suggesting that Peter Gallagher as Edmund looks insufficiently tubercular (though O'Neill's stage-directions talk of feverish

eyes and sunken cheeks): what I really miss is the character's poetic intensity. And Bethel Leslie's Mary, while commendable, blurs the crucial distinction between the woman before and after she is on the morphine.

In short, this is a mixed evening: provocative, intelligent but lacking the final punch to the solar plexus by its disregard of O'Neill's classic artifice. But a masterpiece, which this play is, has a way of overcoming directorial impositions.

## Michael Billington On Long Day's Journey

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