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Clichés of Thatcher's Britain

Michael Church finds some exhilarating work behind the stereotyping in new regional productions at the National Theatre Studio.

GIANT dunbins, chicken wire, broken windows, an inner-city estate in Thatcher's Britain... Clichés to make the heart sink. Of the three plays staged last weekend by the National Theatre Studio, two tempted fate by beginning in this way. Result? A pallid but unsuccessful bid to transcend the genre, and a heart-wrenching, rather-raising triumph.

The central figures in Judith Johnson's *Somewhere* are teenage lovers who become respectively a soldier and a whore, but the emotions engendered in their relationship have the intensity of *Wuthering Heights*.

We first meet Lee in his foxhole, in the Gulf, nervously awaiting a night-time attack. We then flash back to a punk party in Liverpool — loud music, beer and bodies all over the carpet, not a parent in sight. Frightened of sex yet larkily obsessed by it, huddled together for comfort before their leap into the world of work (or did), Lee, Dawn and their friends seem an averagely boring bunch.

Then, one by one, they are held up to the light and we are hooked. Johnson weaves a spell in which comedy and tragedy do in real life. She writes with earthy wit, but her intention is seriously analytical.

'Mindless violence' is a substance we've seen on stage a thousand times, presented either patronisingly or as an excuse for cheap thrills. But Johnson shows us two boys kicking around on a parking lot, discussing girls and jealousy, until the conversation takes an innocently homosexual turn.

Danger! The words focus on their lips, and then, with a surge of comradery, they start overturning benches, breaking things, yelling as they would on the Kop. Her play, which catches up with its protagonists 10 years on in the red light area of Amsterdam, is full of such unsettling illuminations.

Directed by Polly Teale, this exhilarating production has already run for three weeks at Liverpool Playhouse. Translated to one of the smaller West End theatres, it would do roaring business. Is there an impresario in the house?

The central character of Mercedes Oakes's *The Neighbour* is a late-day Jude the Obscure plunked down in a sordid London hell-hole, where violent criminality is the norm. He perishes in a macabre attempt to both fit in and preserve his integrity. Oakes, however, does not have Johnson's gift for getting under her characters' skins. Her cockneys are sharply observed, but the action is too controlled, and the scenes too short, for real drama to take wing.

The Neighbour may be a strange blend of stereotyping and stark poetry, but it is nothing like so weird a mélange as the third play in this studio series, David Farr's *House*.

'Deviled' over a six-week period, this is a 'condition of Britain' essay crossed with *London*, engaging and maddening in equal measure. Curious but true, and amply borne out here: groups are less open to self-criticism than lone creators are. Somebody should have had the guts to call a halt when this show started to run off the rails into a morass of trichobiosis.

These interesting collaborations between the NT Studio and regional theatres concluded at the Cottesloe last week with Andrew Poppy's chamber opera, *Baby Doll*. Tennessee Williams meets Alban Berg and gets systematically throttled.

How could it possibly be otherwise? It's not just that Ella Kazan's film is perfect and unforgettable: it's a matter of the illustrious Poppy and his director Julia Bardsley have used Tennessee Williams as about human relationships poetically told; he's about sweat, sex and violence. He is, to put it another way, beyond the scope of the standard stonily which Poppy has chosen to espouse, and of the modernist modishness of the stage.

Fiona O'Neill and John Upperton look their part to perfection in this seduction-marathon, in which sex is merely the bait for revenge. And Simon Vincenzi has hit on some neat visual metaphors for cotton-gins and fire — his whole stage is paved with electric candles which glow redder as the action hot's up. But the character of Aunt Rose, which should sound a note of pathos, is here turned into a surreal Widow Twankey with a Fina Busch routine.

It is all so severe, so fastidiously stilled. Done like this, a story by Kafka would be less fine. But the Deep South? Forget it.



Fiona O'Neill and John Upperton in Andrew Poppy's 'Baby Doll'. Photograph by Neil Lihbert.

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