

American scream

THEATRE

The Last Yankee

Young Vic

Michael Billington

AT THE age of 77, when most dramatists are either dead, silent or in decline, Arthur Miller has written a fine and moving play: *The Last Yankee*, getting its simultaneous premiere at the Young Vic and the Manhattan Theatre Club. Like all Miller's best work, it effortlessly links private and public worlds by connecting personal desperation to insane American values.

It's a short play — 80 minutes — but it packs in a lot. Two husbands are visiting their wives in a state mental hospital. Leroy Hamilton, the last Yankee of the title, is an obstinately independent jobbing carpenter; his wife Patricia is a depressive. John Frick is a thriving businessman; his spouse, Karen, is a solitary for whom tap-dancing offers escape.

Miller's focus is chiefly on the Hamiltons; and his main point is that equilibrium can be achieved only by rejecting everything that has turned the American Dream, with its belief in equality for all, into a shoddy triumphalism.

What makes this a first-rate play is that Miller allows the ideas to grow from the characters. You see this in the keynote opening scene. The two husbands are swapping notes in the

visiting-room. Gradually a chasm opens up between them. Frick cannot credit that Leroy, distantly related to one of the Founding Fathers, has failed to exploit his connections and has remained hard-up. At which point Leroy explodes that it's this kind of conversation — with its assumption that wealth equals dignity — that is driving the country crazy.

In short, this is a political play with a strong human texture. The scene in which Patricia and the uncertain Leroy stumble towards acceptance of each other's failings is unbearably moving.

Miller is positive without being sentimental: Patricia's ability to pull through is contrasted with Karen's despair. In most American plays the moment when Karen essays a tap-dance while her husband sings Swane River would be the cue for applause: instead Miller short-circuits our expectations to underline the sense of marital pain.

David Thacker also directs the play, staged on a frosted-glass set by Shelagh Keegan, with scrupulous attention to emotional nuance. Zoe Wanamaker invests Patricia with the right warring mixture of resilience and fear. Peter Davison's Leroy astutely hints at the stubbornness of the born freelance. And David Healy, all nervous bonhomie, and Helen Burns, touchingly sad-eyed, are perfect as the older couple.

In fact Ms Burns, feverishly inquisitive about stores, calls to mind a speech in *The Price* where the Jewish furniture-dealer says that shop-



Resilient: Zoe Wanamaker in *The Last Yankee* PHOTOGRAPH HENRIETTA BUTLER

ping is the one thing that keeps America sane. Here even that consolation seems to have gone: the only hope, Miller argues, lies in learning to love life as it is and going back to the roots of the American Dream.

TELEVISION

Snapshots, The Last Vampyre, The Detectives, Nancy Banks-Smith

SNAPSHOTS is one of those innocent, not to say inexpensive, little shows which blush unseen on Channel 4 while everyone else is watching ITV to see how this Vampyre thing comes out. I like little programmes. Sometimes they are

pearls and, if they are not, it is important to have somewhere on TV where people can make fools of themselves in privacy.

It is possible that no-one in the wide world watched *Snapshots* except Wallingford. Sheila Hancock was evacuated there during the war and returned for a little ramble and a remember.

Wallingford's most famous, only famous, resident, was Agatha Christie. "Max," she says in her autobiography, "there's a house advertised in Wallingford. You know how much we liked Wallingford?"

In which she differed from young Sheila, a cockney child with a bob like a bell, who was having seven bells knocked out of her in Wallingford by children with purple faces. Purple because they all had impetigo and were generously painted with gentian violet. In those days, erroneously thought of as a magic children's

Billington Last Yankee

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