

ARTS

Easter rising to redemption

MICHAEL BILLINGTON on August Strindberg's strange, wonderful religious revival at the Pit

If you want proof of Strindberg's contradictory genius, consider the fact that he wrote *The Dance Of Death* and *Easter* in the same month in 1900. The former posits the idea of a meaningless universe; the latter is based on the principle of Christian charity.

And Katie Mitchell's revival of *Easter* at The Pit, filled with the sound of the St Matthew Passion and religious images from the Old Masters, moves one deeply with its presentation of salvation through suffering.

Set in the Heyst family home between Maundy Thursday and Easter eve, the play is a Parsifal-like study in redemption. The hero, Elis Heyst, is a tormented teacher racked by doubts about his fiancée's fidelity, guilt over his father's imprisonment for embezzlement and fear that his family will be destroyed by their chief creditor, Lindkvist.

But the hapless Heyst is saved in two ways: by the arrival of his sister Eleanora — a refugee from a mental asylum — who radiates holy innocence and, more practically, by the discovery that Lindkvist represents the spirit of the New Testament rather than the Old and is prepared to offer mercy rather than justice.

One suspects Strindberg wrote the play as a form of self-chastisement: the overwhelming climactic scene where Elis

finds it almost impossible to make the gesture of forgiveness that will save his family from penury and ruin is a flagellating rebuke to the author's own pettiness and vanity. But what gives the play its mythic appeal is that it answers some need in ourselves for the idea of salvation.

Even in a secular age, the notion of the holy fool who takes on the sufferings of others, of the expected monster who turns

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out to be a saviour and of the principle of death and resurrection appeals to some residual longing. On one level it's a realistic play about family angst; on another, it's a dream play about renewal and rebirth.

Although Mitchell's production takes its time — it runs a good half-hour longer than David Leveaux's revival at the Leicester Haymarket in 1988 — it gets across that peculiar Strindbergian mix of the material and the numinous. Rosa Maggiora's design uses the full space of *The Pit* to suggest bare-

walled bankruptcy relieved by religious iconography. Chris Davey's lighting shifts from muted darkness — Mrs Heyst even puts money in the meter — to shafts of symbolic sunlight. And the soundscape (by Steff Langley and Terry Giles) blends barking dogs and the swish of the creditor's stick with humming telephone wires and the distant bass notes of the church organ. As always, Mitchell — one of the best directors in Britain — shows a zealous attention to detail that allows the production to inhabit two worlds at once.

The acting — from a largely scratch team — also has an ensemble feel. Adrian Rawlins's Elis, with the wild-haired look of Strindberg himself — is clearly a man in need of salvation. At one point he bathes in the sun almost invoking it to saturate his body.

Lucy Whybrow manages to give the Myshkin-like Eleanora the suggestion she has dropped in from another planet. And, most remarkably of all, Philip Locke plays Lindkvist as a bearded mountain giant out of a children's fairy story who happens to be hedged around with divinity. It is a strange, wonderful play — one that pierces our rational defences to fulfil some deep-seated need for reconciliation and hope.

At The Pit (071-638 8891) until March 4



Passion play . . . Adrian Rawlins and Heather Ackroyd in *Easter* PHOTOGRAPH HENRIETTA BUTLER

Billington On Easter

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