

David Hare has transformed Brecht's Galileo into a fast-paced topical parable

Speed of the Hare

Michael Billington

DAVID HARE is right: it's absurd to argue Brecht is old hat because Communism is in decline. But while I welcome Hare's sharpened, speeded-up new version of *The Life Of Galileo*, I have a few qualms about Jonathan Kent's production: what with Tobias Hoheisel's endlessly mobile, towering pine-panelled sets and the deletion of the choric interludes there is little sense of place or time. What matters, however, is the polyphonic richness of the play: one that yields new meanings with each decade. Brecht's 1938 version was a defence of freedom against tyranny. Post-Hiroshima in 1947, he amended the play to stress the social responsibility of the scientist against the idea of truth as an end in itself. Now, in Hare's version, the play seems like a highly topical parable about the struggle of reason and knowledge against, on the one hand, the commercial vulgarity of the market place and, on the other, the heavy-handed intervention of the state.

Both ideas are, of course, already present in Brecht's play, the story of Galileo's research into the Copernican solar system which challenges

the idea that the Church is at the centre of the universe. But Hare's version highlights the notion that disinterested rational enquiry is always politically subversive. "Knowledge," argues the Thatcherite Paduan University Chancellor, "is a commodity. It must profit the person who buys it." But equally the Holy Office's pressure on Galileo to recant now seems like a paradigm of the authoritarianism of the iron state: even Galileo's final gesture of smuggling out a copy of his *Discorsi* reminds you of the furtive guile of the modern beleaguered artist or intellectual.

Hare has cut a couple of scenes entirely, shortened some speeches and turned the riotous Italian carnival into a puppet show celebrating "Galileo the Bible-buster". But what comes across is the idea that reason is always dangerous and that the scientist (or artist) has a duty "to relieve the hardship of life". But I also see the play as a powerful self-portrait in which Brecht, who never risked his neck in Moscow and who denied his communism in Washington, makes Galileo a tormented embodiment of his own guilt.

Richard Griffiths, an instinctively sympathetic actor, excellently suggests the multi-facetedness of Galileo.

Billington On Galileo

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