

**THEATRE**

**Landscape**

Cottesloe Theatre

Michael Billington

**H**AROLD Pinter's own production of *Landscape*, first seen at the Gate Theatre Dublin in May, has now moved to the Cottesloe for 18 performances. It is not to be missed. The play itself packs into 38 minutes a whole marital history of love, betrayal, exclusion; and Penelope Wilton and Ian Holm not only give performances of infinite subtlety but open up the meaning of the play.

Beth and Duff — interesting that they both imply the prefix Mac — sit on either side of a kitchen table; two domestic servants left alone in an empty house. Beth, staring out front, seems enmeshed in memories of a rhapsodic seaside encounter and speaks in soft lyrical tones. Duff, facing her, seeks to penetrate her solitude with his own recollections of an admitted infidelity, with stories of their employer, Mr Sykes, and with a show of technical expertise about the art of the cellarman. All to no avail.

In Peter Hall's original production there seemed a genuine thread of doubt: was Beth recalling Duff as he once was or re-living some passionate affair with their employer? Pinter's own production is much less ambiguous: Beth has chosen to lock herself into an idealised memory of her husband while Duff is driven to anguished desperation by her impenetrability.

Wilton, totally still in a print frock through which her slipstily shows, seems irradiated by recollections of her husband's past tendresse. Holm, hands fiercely clenched round a cup, is like a man trying out a series of tactical manoeuvres to get through to his wife: only at the end does his voice crack as he tells Beth of his remembered hope that "you would come into my arms and kiss me, even . . . offer yourself to me" and rise to a crescent of wounded fury and despair.

Everything rests on counterpoint: past and present, ecstasy and betrayal, her mellifluous phrases against his harsh, coarse, brutal monosyllables. Pinter catches perfectly the collapse of a marriage into story separation and his two performers, through precise tonal contrasts, play it like an exquisite sonata that lingers in the mind long after one has quit the scene.

Daytimes and early evening at the Cottesloe stage of the National Theatre (box-office: 071-928 2252) until December 6.

## Billington On Landscape

Clipped By:



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