



SLICES OF LIFE? Jim Broadbent and Linda Bassett at the Cottesloe

PHOTOGRAPH DOUGLAS JEFFERY

Michael Billington finds universality missing in Fugard's new play

## Sty society

**A**TTHOL FUGARD describes *A Place with the Pigs* at the Cottesloe as "a personal parable." But the essence of a parable is that it gives an everyday story a universal application; and one of the problems I had with this uncomfortable, 110-minute play (no interval) was that I could not find in it the metaphor for mankind Mr Fugard clearly intended.

The play's genesis lay in a news story about a Soviet Army deserter from the Second World War who spent 41 years hiding in a pigsty; and, over four scenes and with some ingenuity, Mr Fugard sketches in a possible scenario. His hero, Pavel, stirred by memories of his flower-encrusted slippers, 10 years previously fled the trenches to return home.

Now, after a decade of self-imposed banishment, he plans to surrender as a village war-memorial is about to be unveiled. But his wife has torn up his uniform, he fears that his innocent trust in human for-

giveness may be misplaced and, to cap it all, he learns that he has been posthumously decorated a Hero of the People.

So he is doomed to a life with the pigs, Mr Fugard shows how his spirit rebels against the squalor of the sty; he seeks to codify his existence by enumerating every fly he has squashed and he savagely kills a pig who has eaten a beautiful butterfly. His hunger for freedom also takes the form of a midnight walk in which he dons moonoon stockings and his wife's dress and finds himself intoxicated by the scent of wild roses and the beauty of the stars. But it is only by arraigning himself before an imagined military court and by releasing the pigs from captivity that he is able to re-enter the world.

Mr Fugard rings the changes on what seems a defiantly static situation. He also invests the action with touches of Gogolian comedy such as Pavel's enforced assumption of the role of a dead military hero. But the play left me cold; and the prime reason is that it presents a situ-

ation that is too extreme, too aberrant, too peculiar, to work as a general allegory.

Mr Fugard's point seems to be that we are all susceptible to some form of private degradation; but a man who leaps into a pig-pen in abandonment of his humanity seems more a sad psychotic than a potent symbol. The obvious comparison is with Beckett who also deals with human imprisonment; but where *Winnie* in *Happy Days*, buried up to her neck in earth, embodies unflinching stoicism in adversity, Mr Fugard's hero represents a feverishly neurotic gull. Beckett offers an irreducible image; Fugard a tormented special case.

Inevitably, being Mr Fugard, there are moments of redeeming optimism. The scene of the midnight walk is good; a reminder of the beauty of the familiar. And the piece is given theatrical life by the energy of the performers. Jim Broadbent's Pavel has a wild, driven, hunted despair as he cries, "Like the pigs in here, all I do is eat, sleep and defecate."

There is even a touch of wry Broadbent humour as, preparing to face the world, he dons a dress and festively asks,

"Have you got a little brooch or something?" Linda Bassett also plays the wife with a fine esemplified affection and a peasant pragmatism that reminds you that the wife's toil subsidises the husband's agony.

Mr Fugard's production is adroit (particularly the sound-design, all grunts and squeals, by David Buxton) and there is something touching about Pavel's final homesickness for humanity. But I was reminded of Dr Johnson's less for his observation that "The pigs are a race unjustly calumniated" than for his same speech that "Nothing odd will do long."

What Mr Fugard has tried to do is discover an enduring metaphor for wacking, self-torturing guilt. But the chosen example of a Red Army deserter growing in the mire illuminates the particular without achieving the universal. As a parable, it is too personal to work.

## Billington On Pigs

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