

## Maggie Smith triumphs in Edward Albee's Three Tall Women at Wyndham's

# Caged by old age

### First night

Michael Billington

**F**IND Edward Albee's *Three Tall Women* grows on you even as you watch it. At first, in its focus on the aphasia, incontinence and quotidian humiliations of old age, it seems medically virtuosic rather than dramatically sustaining. But it opens out, in the second half, into a wise, mellow and humane acceptance of death that is as good as anything Albee has written in years.

When we first see the unnamed, heroines, in a quilted bedroom that reeks of privilege, they are separate and distinct. Maggie Smith dominates as a cranky, tetchy, dying nonagenarian attended by a wryly helpful companion (Frances de la Tour) and visited by a briskly unfeeling young lawyer (Anastasia Hille). And, in the absence of any strong dramatic tension, it is Smith's acting that holds us engrossed.

As this vain, autocratic old bird looks back over her past life in jagged, frenetic bursts, one is hooked by

the pinpoint accuracy of Smith's assumption of extreme age: the mental fuzziness, the spasms of clarity, the swift transitions from helpless vulnerability to murderous rage. It is a consummate piece of acting that reflects both the quixotic nature of antiquity and Albee's own complex compassion for his adoptive mother, on whom the character is based.

But the first half has the feeling of a solo character-study in which the other figures are attendant stooges. And, having given the lead character a climactic stroke, where is there for the play to go? The answer is into a richer and technically more audacious work in which the three women become fragments of a single self: aspects of the bedridden party at different stages of her life. And, with a light, dramatic irony that suggests *Our Town* crossed with *Merrily We Roll Along*, Albee shows how the blind optimism of youth gradually gives way to the shrugging resignation of old age.

Albee sets up marvellous cross-currents between the women: the 26-year-old's inquisitiveness about her future husband, for instance, is greeted with looks of weary complicity between her two seniors. But two



Maggie Smith . . . performance of pinpoint accuracy HENRIETTA BUTLER

themes movingly echo through this part of the play. One, piercingly articulated by de la Tour, is the inevitability of change in one's life-partner: something about which we are never warned. The other is the consolation of old age which is that "you can think about yourself in the third person without going crazy". It is this stoical acceptance of mortality, worthy of Marcus Aurelius, that finally gives the play its distinctive tone.

Albee has written plays of greater symphonic variety, but few of such quiet compassion. And, under Anthony Page's sympathetic direction, the second half is performed with musical precision. Hille has the bright-eyed impatience of youth; de la Tour, has all the rueful wisdom of middle-age; and Smith blends the gnarled sadness of old age with the sense that there is happiness "when we can stop". In a world that seeks to evade or cosmeticise death, it is Albee's direct confrontation with mortality that gives the play its tonic sense of resolution.

At Wyndham's (071-369-1736).

## Billington On Three Tall Women

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Mon, Jan 6, 2020