

Fascism's unfinished business

Michael Hastings's new play at the Pit traces fascism's contemporary roots

Michael Billington

MICHAEL Hastings's last play was about pensions. His new one, *Unfinished Business* at the Barbican's Pit, is about fascism. It is not perfect but it is consistently interesting and makes a valid moral point: that the spirit of wartime fascism, based on an appropriation of the past and a purblind rural nostalgia, is very much alive in Britain today. Hastings reinforces his argument by switching between past and present. The pivotal figure is one Beamish: a reminiscent denizen of a West Country retirement home that, somewhat improbably, is the self-same manor house in which he grew up. Reliving the events of 1940, he recalls his passionate affair with a housemaid, the clandestine meetings of Hitlerian sympathisers awaiting a German invasion and the death both of the equivocal butler and his own aristocratic father. Beamish may now be ailing but he unrepentantly dreams, in the post-communist world, of fascism's re-emergence. It would be easy to list the play's faults. Hastings over-exploits the long arm of coincidence: even the nurse to whom Beamish pours out his heart turns out to be a blood connection. He sometimes signals the parallels with the past too glibly, with people in 1940 talking of a classless society, lamenting moral decay and dreaming of traditional English values. And echoes of *The Remains Of The Day* are insistent without Ishiguro's ironic perspective.



Philip Voss as Alfred . . . 'an aristocratic Hitlerite cocooned in a world of treacherous fantasy' HENRIETTA BUTLER

Yet Hastings's play still says something important about the cruelty and sentimentalism at the heart of fascism. The boy Beamish ruthlessly exploits the housemaid and implicates the butler in gun theft even as he envisions a Saxon England where you live in barns and hunt your own food. "Every time you bring up the past as if you owned it," his older self is told by his returning lover. And Hastings nails very precisely the proprietorial romanticism of fascism

which finds its echo today in Europe's resurgent nationalism and the yearning, expressed recently in the German opinion polls, for a "strong leader".

In short, I can forgive Hastings's play its technical flaws for its attempt to grapple with the emotional basis of fascism. Steven Pimlott's production also renders the time-switches with great clarity aided by Ashley Martin-Davis's design which uses a traverse curtain to unveil a

vision of 1940 manor house England. And there are fully achieved performances from Geoffrey Bayldon and Toby Stephens as the older and younger Beamish, from Jasper Britton as the misunderstood butler whose only desire is to serve and from Philip Voss and Gemma Jones as the aristocratic Hitlerites cocooned in their own world of treacherous fantasy.

At The Pit (071-638-8891) till Feb 24.

Billington On Unfinished Business

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