

## THEATRE Words used as weapons

Michael Coveney on David Edgar's bold new play, Patricia Hodgkin's prime and ANTHONY HOPKINS' UNCLE VANYA

David Edgar's powerful, urgent and brilliant new play for the stage is the first serious response in the British theatre to the tragedy of Sarajevo. *Pentecost* is set in a ruined Byzantine church 'near the border of a south-east European country' where a local museum curator, Gabriela Peca (Jan Ravens), and a British art historian, Oliver Davenport (Charles Kay), consider the possibility that a partially revealed fresco is a lost masterpiece, 'the biggest art find since the unearthing of Pompeii'.

Gabriela's fractured English, with its imperfect grasp of idiom, and Oliver's stately indirect terms of artistic endowment mark out the wider analogues frameworks how we define ourselves in our language, and how words of art (and the possession of them) can either represent or undermine our political aspirations.

Sarajevo, where caravan trails converged, religions mingled, and learning prospered, is today an obscene symbol of the new Europe. Desecration and erasure are as much a legacy of the 1980 'turnaround' and the expiry of Marxism as are the rise of nationalism and the influx of Western materialism.

But change also begets new layers, new cultures. Edgar's play is a witty sustained attempt to discuss this phenomenon, and to investigate, in Stoppardian style, the treacherous of language itself: 'Is restoration, in this case, the same as conservation? Or is it a form of destruction?' The debate is joined by an American professor, Leo Katz (Liam Hadd), a creation worthy of Edgar's fellow Brummagem David Lodge, whom Oliver describes as an art historian 'in the sense that 'Pot Pot was an urban developer'.

The church has served as a museum, a torture chamber, a stable, a storehouse. Just when Katz's accusation that Oliver is motivated by sponsors' finances boils into a row over whether Giotto, or his imitator, could have painted in ultramarine at the date of the fresco, Edgar springs his biggest surprise: the scene is invaded by a motley crew of asylum-seekers led by a ruthless Palestinian guerrilla, Yasmin (Katharine Rogers).

Michael Attenborough's vivid, compelling production now changes gear as the hostages are regaled with stories and jokes that define their cultural backgrounds of the diaspora. But Edgar works hard to keep the plot going with some well disguised twists and a climactic sequence of riddle-solving as the police operation comes to a head outside. The

demonstration is both bitter and shocking, but all the questions have been answered, the final one hinging on the etymological detail of 'rock' in one language and 'star' in another. Rock stars rule OK.

There has been no more ambitious or rewarding play in the British theatre all year, and this, Edgar's companion piece to *The Shape of the Table* (top), his backroom ballad on the Velvet Revolution, confirms that he is entering a new phase of post-ideological creativity.

For a personal, satirical playwright like Doug Lacie, the problems are different: in *Samuel* (Stamsted), he is still talking about his generation of Oxford dope-heads, but their prospects are untouched and unimproved by the outside world.

On a Greek island Declan Moss (Tim McInnerny), an international drugs dealer, is on the lookout for the Drugs Enforcement Agency. Old chums arrive, including an ex-girlfriend, Stephanie (Phyllis Logan), a journalist to whom he is entrusting his story. Things have rarely gone from bad to worse for this lot. Declan's chinkish chum Spencer Tiplow (Dominic Jephcott) prospered briefly in the 1980s but has become a Tony Party reject and hopeless alcoholic; Spencer's wife, Louise (Kate Fahy), is a soft-centred therapist writing a self-help handbook for other victims of loveless, embittered marriages.

Lacie's first act is silted and attenuated, and this rather exposes the nastiness and unpleasantness of what is being said and going on. But, like Edgar, he hangs on to a good plot. A treacherous photographer (Grant Masters) becomes embroiled in a Death and the Maiden-like torture scene at the hands of Ibelean and his Romanian girlfriend, Jana (Julia Lane). In spite of a more gripping second act, and a magnificent polemical rant by Declan in the style of John Osborne, the play still feels like a first draft, and the theatre was surely unwise to allow Lacie to direct it himself.

The same applies to Anthony Hopkins in *Motel*, where the task of both playing Uncle Vanya and directing *Agamemnon*, Julian Mitchell's new version of Chekhov's play, proves self-defeating. The project has been filmed by Granada TV. Mitchell has placed the action in Caernarvonshire in the 1830s, claiming some neat parallels but failing, really, to liberate Chekhov from what he describes as a false British 'Russianness'. Instead, we have a false Welsh 'Russianness', almost the same thing.

No samovars, but teapots; no vodka, but whiskey. The old ruined landowner, Telenin, becomes a

## Coveney On Pentecost

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