

THEATRE Prime of Miss Hellman



Scaremongering and witch-hunting in 'The Children's Hour' still has a **CHILLING SEXUAL TOPICALITY** says *Michael Coveney*

Sixty years after its New York premiere, Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour* receives its first major public performance in London. After a sticky, slightly irritating start as a girls' schoolroom melodrama — *Detay Pulls It Off* without, alas, gymnastics — the play's flame burns bright and strong as a vicious witch-hunt uncannily prophetic of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* and, ultimately, a moving and unexpected tragedy.

Patience is rewarded in Howard Davies's production, with Harriet Walter and Clare Higgins scaling the heights as the slandered teachers, Karen Wright and Martha Debie. An unlikable, destructive student, Mary Tilford (Emily Watson), whispers in her grandmother's ear that the women are lovers and the town recoils in righteous horror.

A Lillian Hellman of today would write a proud-to-be-gay, defiant last act. Instead, Karen and Martha sue for libel, lose their case, and their school, and a lot more.

In a magnificent, gracefully written climax, Karen's doctor boyfriend (William Gaminara) wrestles with his confused affections and leaves. Martha admits that she does feel physically drawn towards Karen. When the situation is beyond recall, the persecuting grandmother (Gillian Barge) withdraws her allegations, and knuckles down to a long-penitent haul in the town. Martha's old aunt, Lily Mortar (Alison Fiske in a brisk, highly comic), an excessive actress who has been teaching elocution classes and avoiding the court case by going on tour, remains helpless.

For a first play, *The Children's Hour*, based on a Scottish trial of 1910, is remarkable enough. But its treatment of scaremongering over sexual abuse in schools, the fingering of teachers' private lives, and the tenderness with which the two main roles are written, lend the piece a reverberation way beyond its period value.

Clare Higgins plays with a toughness and a mounting terror at what is happening to her, while Ms Walter embarks on a journey of emotional discovery that suggests the play is only beginning at the end. Ashley Martin-Davis's timbered, airy design switches between sealed-up small town cleanliness and empty desolation,

and Jason Carr's underpinning music, with good trumpet writing, strikes the right balance between portentousness and danger.

Bill Bryden's *The Big Picnic* in the huge Hatfield and Wolff shed in Govan is the *Straitlight Barges* of the First World War: Spielbergian lighting effects and environmental staging, with the audience as close to the trenches as they are to Lloyd Webber's roller-skating action; a carefully sifted quota of 'human interest'; and an apocalyptic finale, with the Angel of Mons leading the risen dead of the killed Glasgow battalion back home to Govan where they form a memorial tableau in the style of Charles Sargent Jagger's public sculptures.

The rocky musical has three races, each less exciting than its predecessor. *The Big Picnic* (A few sandwiches short of a *Big Picnic*) averted one grumpy Scottish front-page story last weekend) mobilises the seated section of the audience no less than 15 (count 'em) times on track-bound terracing from Govan to the Front Lines on the other side of designer William Dudley's mud-brown Flanders Field, the promenaders flit among a scaffolded three-tiered gantry and invade the edge of the action.

An amusing French lesson before the lads march off to war is followed by a spirited comic spat about sporrans and weaponry. One of the soldiers is revealed to be illiterate during a 'letters home' sequence. And nurses and griffins occupy the battlefield like spectral incarnations complementary to the soothing ministrations of the gliding Angel (eloquently gestured, upside down until the last scene, by a flame-wigged Deborah Pope, who was Bryden's spirit of the cunning little vixen at Covent Garden).

Bryden's production makes something both sensual and pathetic of the soldiers' fate, their slow march to oblivion, as we track alongside them through Chris Ellis's light show of coloured lasers, strobos and tracer bullets, and snuggle down in the almost cosy, enveloping fog of mustard gas at the Battle of the Somme.

The band on the moving platform in the sky picks out the piper's tune and sidles, seductively, into another blast of amplified 'Jock-Rock'. For all the show's flaws, it is impossible to quibble the power and the glory of such moments.

Coveney On The Children's Hour

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