

**Theatre** Michael Coveney

## Spouses to add spice to quest

THE reputation of Arthur Miller has become confused in a debate about the state of Broadway; Miller, always his own chief advocate, attributes his American decline to the dispersal of his old Times Square constituency and the arrival of Andrew Lloyd Webber.

In Britain, an academically sponsored campaign has reclaimed Miller in a series of worthy books and articles and has even raised a building in his honour at the University of East Anglia. One cautious critic, happily identifying the familiar Miller themes, last week declared Miller's notes more welcome than the 'reedy tunes' of our own dramatists. Well, I don't think they are.

Miller's sententious brand of liberal humanism is terribly old hat. And the plainer truth is that Miller, now 77, has not written a really impressive full-length play since the bumpy exorcism of Marilyn Monroe in *After the Fall* more than 30 years ago.

The *Last Yankee* at the Young Vic, Miller's unofficial London home, is certainly his best for some time and a vast improvement on *The Ride Down Mt Morgan* two years ago. But it is a minor piece. Playing at 90 minutes, it is portentously strung out in David Thacker's inspirationally cast production. Intellectually coherent and neatly constructed, the play is at once short-winded and too dense.

Not for nothing is it set in a psychiatric ward of a New England institution. The metaphor hits you on the head:

human relationships, destroyed by the American dream, can only be perceived in supervised glimpses. Two depressive inmates on either side of middle age are estranged in limbo from their respective husbands.

Patricia (Zoë Wanamaker), mother of seven, is of suicidal Swedish stock; older Karen (Helen Burns) has been failing to interest her racist, Chevy-dealing redneck hubby in her musical hobby. The slightly embarrassing and bizarre climax is a dodgy tap-dance by Karen in top hat and tails to the strains of Gershwin's first and biggest hit song, 'Swanee'.

The play opens with a tentative encounter between the two spouses in the waiting room. The writing is taut and funny, perfectly pitched before detonating under the subsequent quartet in the ward, where a third female patient lies anonymous and ignored.

Young Leroy (Peter Davison) is a carpenter descended from one of America's oldest families. He has just built an altar (Patricia later declares that 'the church I'd really love hasn't been invented yet'). Goaded by John Frick's (David Healy) nosiness, ignorance and snobbery, he explodes into defining himself, he hopes, as the play's title.

Not only does Miller keep us on a moral knife-edge. He also queries an official definition of sanity by producing supple, touching dialogue that continuously switches the characters around on the shifting sand of delicate misunderstanding and



Zoë Wanamaker: Note perfect.

uncontrollable anger. And, as usual in Miller, it all hinges on the difficulty we find in granting our fellows their rights of dignity and fallibility.

Thacker's cast does not miss a trick. The acting is uniformly superb. Helen Burns is finally convulsed in sadness, while Zoë Wanamaker's Patricia hits every note with unflinching tact and humour, dropping half a scale to growl out the funniest lines. Talking vegetables, she jogs Helen's memory on kale: 'You might as well salt your shower curtain and chop it up with a tomato.' Shelagh Keegan's chic design of an illuminated raised floor and oh-so-slowly descending beds

adds the required, but off-putting, mythic dimension.

At which point it would be convenient to announce a new homegrown play of devastating quality. No can do. *The Ash Fire* (Tricycle, Kilburn) by Gavin Kostick, presented by the Pigsback company of Dublin, is an awkward, undernourished treatment of a promising subject: the arrival of a small number of Eastern European Jews in Ireland before the last war. From Lublin to Dublin, as the programme has it.

Kostick's three brothers, the first of them a Milleresque cabinet maker with a stern, Orthodox outlook, are fictional equivalents of his own Polish antecedents. The central off-stage event, the anti-semitic arson attack which destroys Nat's timber yard, is crudely symbolic of the Holocaust. Nat (Peter Hanly) is appalled by his brothers' pat assimilation with two Irish girls, one the landlady's daughter, the other a political activist. He receives a vision of the new Jerusalem and departs with his wife (Kathy Downes) and baby Padraic (named after Pearse) to the non-existent homeland.

It is all rather like Neil Simon by numbers, without any jokes. Jewish domestic ritual is contrasted with Catholic flirtatiousness, the kaddish and the wedding dance with the songs of Count McCormack and the romantic foxtrot, schnapps and herring stew with Jameson's whiskey and a visit to the Abbey. But these antithetical references amount only to an

## Coveney On The Last Yankee

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