

**THEATRE Michael Coveney**

# Wicked war games

**ENGLISH** country house fiction in 1940, set below stairs, betrays from the inside a flashback structure and a poignant, climactic reunion of lovers who have missed the boat: this, surely, is a summary of the overblown Merchant Ivory film version of Isherwood's *The Remains of the Day*.

A summary, that, of the narrative of a play, *Unfinished Business* (P. Batsford), Michael Hastings' (Brampton) comedy piece for the Royal Shakespeare Company, based on Oronotini, who are in Hampton, where the country pile, having not been snuggled up by Christopher Reeve, has been turned into a nursing home. Here, old Brampton is a schoolteacher (Geoffrey Bradford) recalls his former life as the bustling, securing son of the household.

We cut to we-time and the 17-year-old Brampton, explicitly only child and cleverly played by Toby Stephens, making his way to the ante with the handsome maid Phoebe, or Fuchs (Monica Dolan). Their secret of homo sexuality is shared only by Douglas (Jasper Brown), the sinister, limping young butler, who might or might not be an undercover agent for the intelligence services in a host of faint fervour.

The play was written before the movie was released, but the coincidences are staggering. Douglas comes across as a younger variant of Anthony Hopkins, incorporating elements of Hugh Grant's steppin' informer, and Brampton himself is a curious mixture of James Fox's languid anti-Semite and Ben Chaplin's leading servant. His progress on the tennis court - he's an Embassy Junior champion - yields a strained symbolic link between bulls and hand grenades.

Hastings' top-level output of the Imperial League, an equivalent of Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists, is headed by Lord and Lady Sheffield, Brampton's parents, the Bishop of Devon (Ian Taylor) and a bank public commander (Stephen Jacob), cohesively analysing the German invasion. During the shattering over the punch and around the wine-jars, Brampton luminates Fuchs - having dated her to serve drinks without her knickers on - and shows an arm's crotch under the footboards.

The predictable plot developments involve under duress, the revelation of old Brampton's nurse's true identity, and the exposure of the treacherous cell. As a study in the psychology of Anglo-faction, Brampton is a virtual zoo-master, though Stephens movingly covers the anguish of forbidden love in the class war. Hastings is much happier writing jargonistic apparent dialogue for the Sheffield, whom Philip Voss and Gemma Jones, whom Philip Voss and Gemma Jones play with considerable relish, his silent heavy companion her 60th, glassy-eyed centennials.

I lacked-on information about Brampton's life after a period of detention on the Isle of Wight, and his marriage to a woman he forbade to spend any money, brands him a quirky misogynist comparable to Hastings' portrait of T S Elliot in *Tom and Viv*. Oronotini, Simon Pinner's production, designed with airy panache in a colourful, minimalist style by Ashley Martin-Davis, follows the diagrammatic writing as 'tidy' as it places the scenes on the indoor tennis court markings of the floor. Voss and Stephens have the best scenes - a fraught encounter on the brink of despair and suicide, which echoes their highly charged slanging matches in Scudder's *Walden*. Lord Brampton's butler eloquently distinguishes between 'wicked' and 'wickedly': they also serve who only stand and pest.

Men's unfinished business in *Unfinished Business* (Gate, Notting Hill), a libretto, includes scenes about four First World War deserters, the second part of a projected Mexican cycle discussing 'man's' entry into big cities'. Only the first play, in the *Band of the Gods*, a wonderful boozing-parable, hit the stage. Heiner Müller, newly installed at the Berliner Ensemble, has fashioned a performance script from the 550 pages he claims is Brecht's best text (written, significantly, over 30 years) because it contains the essence of his criminal preoccupation with evil.

That claim looks a little shaky in Marc von Heineking's 90-minute adaptation.

**Choices**

**Les Pieds dans l'Eau** (Royal Northern College of Music, Manchester, 01 202 2355). Flying visit to City of Drama by the couple, libretto by Gertrude Jerome Deuchamps. Thurs-Sat. Backing Deanna Library, Manchester, 01 234 1513). First regional revival of David Hare's religious comedy, opens Friday.

**The Three Lives of Lucie Cabaret** (Theatre Royal, Winchester, 0952 843434). Superb Thelma de Cornhill adaptation of John Berger's prose story. Thurs-Sat. Schiphol (Greenwich, 01 838 7755). Return of C P Taylor's version of Strindberg comedy about sex, morbidity and the singing plumber Lovvick production by Jeremy Sams, opens tomorrow.

tion from Miller. The narrative is condensed to show the four soldiers, led by the feisty, overbearing John-Farmer (Dan Jensen), deployed from their tank on to a diamond-shaped castron wasteland on the outskirts of the industrial town of Malmalm. The actors roasts with three anonymous who read from tapes at lecterns. They await the revolution.

Meanwhile, they fight for food, and farmers. Von Heineking creates a cabinet of vicious consumption, coating the ironic poetry and devices across with a veneer of impromptu success. 'The war will not butcher us, but in the tranquillity of a quiet room, we will butcher each other,' says one soldier, as Farmer imagines comrades in the meat queue digesting those people who have already filed their food. His prophetic vision is cramped by his own hesitations, and von Heineking turns the point home by projecting scenes of desensitized animal corpses, sucking and violence.

The *Father* settings provided Brecht's working notes for *Man is Man* (also about four soldiers hanging repeatedly), the *Assessment Table* (the authorized liquidation of an individual), and *State* (one of the *Stockyard* (entire trouble among the Chicago newspapers), *Father* himself is related to such other Brechtian studies in heroic sexuality as *Back*, *Andie*, *Pierpont Mauler* and *Pantula*.

Thus von Heineking's noisy presentation for his company, *Primitive Solos*, creates dramatic significance. In theatrical impact, however, it slips, offering only a few glancing shards of great poetry, a lot of hauffing and putting, and a final musical tableau denuded by a man with a pompous crescendo of something sounding ominously like the dead Gurech.

Another sort of apocalypse awakens five very different dependents down a mine shaft in *The Out* (South Theatre), a Glasgow-inspired from Wagoner Productions at the Tivoli. Fine-time playwright Mike Collier, who worked for eight years in the Billerica colliery near Edinburgh, reveals a viciously accurate ear for the rhythmic and dramatic in everyday speech ('I'll shove yer head so far up

## Coveney On Unfinished Business

Clipped By:



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Sun, Jan 5, 2020