



MODERNISM took another few unconvincing, crotchety knocks from Paul Johnson on BBC TV's *The Late Show* on Tuesday night, but recovered in time

for the safe and glamorous revival of Harold Pinter's first play, **The Birthday Party** (RNT, Lyttelton).

With Dora Bryan gurgling away brilliantly as Meg, the seaside landlady, Sam Mendes's production was never going to be all that disturbing. The anti-Modernists might even now claim the piece as their own.

Tom Piper's grubby living room emerges from a painted canvas street and a warm glow of *Workers' Playtime* wireless music. Anton Lesser's hapless Stanley Webber, the former pianist who drew the crowd to Lower Edmonton but found the concert doors locked against him second time out, is a highly controlled picture of whey-faced, distracted edginess.

His persecuting visitors, Goldberg, the nattily suited Jew, and McCann, the explosive Irishman, are given a powerful, but slightly inauthentic ethnic gloss, by Bob Peck and Nicholas Woodeson. Peck mixes flatulent oratory with quickfire patter in a tremendous third-act crescendo, while Woodeson scuttles, furtive and simian, between his outbursts.

The scenes of interrogation and brain-washing ('Who watered the wicker at Melbourne?'; 'We'll renew your season ticket') work as well as the climactic scenes of the drum-beating and the framing of Stanley's putative rape of the triumphantly buxom next-door neighbour Lulu (Emma Amos). But you sense that the revival is weighed down by authorial approval.

Coveney On the Birthday Party

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Sun, Jan 5, 2020