

# Reviews

## THEATRE Throwing out the blasted hatred bag



**THE DESIRE TO SHOCK** is not enough, says *Kate Kellaway*, as Strindberg gives a lesson in emotional extremity

In *The Dance of Death*, Edgar, the old soldier, tells us that when he was young, he had a 'humiliation bag' into which he thrust all shameful incidents before throwing it into the sea. Strindberg's play could be called a 'hatred bag' – but no one knows what to do with the hate, let alone how to throw it overboard.

When Alice and Edgar pledged themselves to each other, boredom and loathing got married with them. For a director, the challenge is to avoid making the production itself either hateful or dull. Peter Stormare's solution is to make it popular, to speed up despair – by nature slow – and to make boredom frisky. He also gives us only Part One of the play. This dance of death is a quick step.

We first encounter Alice and Edgar as cross clowns, picking their teeth and guffing at each other. Edgar wonders: is life serious or is it a farce? Do laughter and tears amount to much the same thing? Here he do, and it's an approach justified by the text which is full of black, cockroach jokes (though Michael Meyer's translation is unsuitably jaunty and modern, using words like 'scumbag').

As Alice, Gemma Jones's face works hard for her, tacitly showing fixed despair, then toxic gloom. She can appear compliant while undermining this with a look of liquid danger. And she has a gesture that is almost a landmark: a heavy throwing of hands in air that would suggest surrender if performed with less speed. As it is, it's both a protest and a yielding – like her marriage. Later, the same gesture converts itself electrifyingly into something different, erotic sacrifice. By the end, she's washed up. She looks like an ageing Fragonard, an unquiet bride on her knees at the prospect of a silver wedding anniversary instead of a funeral. By ending the play where he does, Stormare leaves us with the bitter business of life going on and turns Strindberg into Chekhov.

John Neville's Edgar is a fine-looking military man, generally unkind and, even in his terminal decline, almost indelicately fit. But he's too sympathetic to be at any point thrilling or fearful. There can be a prison when Edgar first appears in full uniform, it's a sly proof of madness. But when this Edgar shows up in a regimental helmet with a horrible healthy-looking horseshit pony tail, we are merely diverted by his fancy dress.

Edgar and his wife show a loneliness within marriage, each claiming, without irony, that they know how to be alone as they sit together. The production brings out their aggressive affinity, but makes them almost sympathetic.

Kurt, a friend from the past, at first encourages a misplaced relief in the audience: he seems a good spokesman for our feelings. But Anthony O'Donnell reveals him to be as glibly as his friends. He's played with eloquent reserve, his actions exclaim for him. He springs to his feet to express dissent, knocks over a chair to release his rage, he bites into Alice's neck, a confused monster at last.

The evening is admirable and there must be many a worse place to be unhappily married in than Patrick Watkinson's decorous drawing room with orange chaise longue, its piano and its drinks cabinet. But, in the end, this production spares its audience too much and sacrifices tragedy to pace. For *The Dance of Death* is a drama of extremity, an emotional marathon. Often, Stormare (one of Sweden's leading actors) positioned his cast at the edge of the stage. But there was never enough of a sense of being on the extreme verges of life.

Twenty-three year old Sarah Kane's *Blasted* makes Strindberg seem like *The Teddy Bear's Picnic*.

**It does not deserve attention, but it demands it. It made me feel sick and giggly with shock**

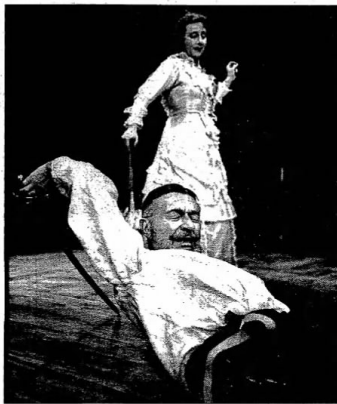
It does not deserve attention, but it demands it. It made me feel sick, and giggly with shock. After the press night, strangers were talking to each other. Sarah Kane will hope that this is an inverted tribute to the piece. I see it more as the sudden solidarity that descends when people have been involved in the same calamity.

Cate (Kate Ashfield) is a retarded teenager who has got involved with Ian, a tabloid journalist (Pip Donaghy). It's clear from the start that Ian is a sicko, bigoted, sadistic, a boozier and an abuser of everyone, including himself. His one remaining lung isiddled with cancer. He wears a gun slung over his unbuttoned nylon shirt at all times. He rapes Cate in a soul-destroying hotel room in Leeds (disguised by Franziska Wislizen) with astigmatic wallpaper. (If only it could stop us seeing altogether.)

In the second half, the play turns into a war-torn fantasy in which Leeds is, interplanably, under siege. A foreign soldier breaks into the hotel room. He buggers and blinds Ian and then eats his eyeballs. Cate comes in with a dying baby. She offers up a redundant prayer that the dead baby will not come to any harm. Ian picks up the baby and starts to eat it. If the play has any message it is that death is preferable to life.

James Macdonald's production serves the play all too well: the actors are courageous and Sarah Kane does know how to write. I hope that she wakes up out of the nightmare of her own imagination.

By comparison, *Dangerous Corner*, J B Priestley's first play, written in 1918, seems sedately safe and almost absurdly well crafted. What a tonic for a sick



John Neville and Gemma Jones in *The Dance of Death*. Photograph: Neil Libbert

on a single evening for Robert (Keith Barber, who also directs) to have his life wrecked by hearing the 'truth'. Though I wasn't timing it, I calculate that there is one revelation every ten minutes (like trainees crossing into a station: betrayals, passions, accidents with guns).

The company is in evening dress, and, no matter how wounding their infidelities, they make big talk sound small. They have a pass-the-olive patina occasionally interrupted by sobbing, or a mass outbreak of headaches. This woodenness works – suggesting self-consciousness at the public recitation of past sins.

Gayle Hannicutt's Freda, in games-coloured evening dress, even sees to it that her crack-up is brief and elegant. Her hair-do remains undisturbed at all times. Robert looks like a handsome peapkin, sturdily indignant and padding about. Emotion is most fiercely conveyed by the routines way in which this story lot circle the low, cream coffee table as if it were an object of prey.

But most enjoyable is the end of the play. This is where J B Priestley used his skills most magically: to do in the theatre what can't be done in life, to go back, to do it all again – but differently.

*The Dance of Death* until 4 March at the Almeida Theatre, London N1 (0171 359 4404); *Blasted* until 4 Feb at the Theatre Upstairs, Royal Court, London SW1 (0171 750 1749); *Dangerous Corner* until 11 March at the Whitehall Theatre, London SW1 (0171 369 1730)

# Kate Kellaway On Dance Of Death

Clipped By:



ianharris  
Wed, Jan 8, 2020