

Peter Sellars's dark  
while *Michael Ratcliffe*  
can is becoming a pit

house, you can't help but fear that this is the beginning of a doomed ménage à trois.

**Three Tall Women** (Wyndhams) is Edward Albee's 23rd and most autobiographical play, the winner of the 1994 Pulitzer prize and a portrait of his adoptive mother, whom — he makes no secret of it — he loathed. Writing the play was, he has said, a way of understanding and purging himself of her. But understanding is not the same as forgiveness, nor is purging always redemptive. *Three Tall Women* is written with possessed intensity, spry stylishness and astringent wit. But it should not be a surprise to find a play inspired by hate a hateful thing: unforgetting, odious.

For what occasion has the old lady dressed up? For the misremembering of her past, perhaps. She sits in a bedroom painted in cold, varicose vein blue. She wears tangled chignon. She has hard triangles of rouge on her cheeks and her mouth is a half-moon, down-turned. But her face is tilted upwards as if the past were a hanging lamp above her head which might illuminate everything if only she could see it straight. Maggie Smith is outstanding as a senile old woman who has lost her wits but not — quite — her wit.

The old lady's audience, a nurse (Frances de la Tour) and a lawyer (Anastasia Hille) are paid to listen; her larger audience may wonder, throughout the first half, why they have paid to hear her slipknot of a mind loosen. She offers a monologue built on the tragi-comic illogicality of non-sequitur. She emerges as bigoted, awful. But her distress is distressing. Lethé, the lawyer points out, tartly, has its attractions. 'Lethé? I don't know her,' says the old lady. It's a great line and there are many great lines. ('A good cry lets it all out,' says the nurse. 'What does a bad one do?' the old lady answers, quick as a knife.)

The first half ends in a stroke. The second half is more dramatic and coherent. While the old lady dies in bed, three versions of herself — young, middle-aged, old — talk. They're like candles on a birthday cake waiting to be blown out.

The lawyer has become the old lady's youngest self at 26, the nurse her 52-year-old self and there is a third figure, still old but not yet senile, and queenly in grey velvet.

Are we seeing the old woman's dying fancy made flesh? It's a wonderful idea to divide a life in this way, but wasted on this character. Occasionally wicked laughter is passed from one woman to another like a talisman down the years, but on the whole her maturing is a depressingly unsurprising journey from ignorance to cynical experience.

The production is cleanly directed by Anthony Page and the three actresses are superb. Anastasia Hille is wonderfully creepy as the young girl. Her partial innocence seems indefensible. Frances de la Tour is in cracking form as the gruffly cynical middle-aged woman, capable of being more distressed than her other selves about the gay son with whom she has parted so acrimoniously.

Perhaps the degree of dislike I felt for *Three Tall Women* is an inverted compliment: it may be that this play is a furious admonition. It rubs our noses in mortality and uses the character of the old lady to outrage us into out-facing viciousness, bigotry and a mean spirit. The son comes home to watch his mother die. He's an unspeaking figure on stage but he's had his say in life.

**The Danube** (The Gate), by Maria Irene Fornes, is a different sort of cautionary tale, set in Budapest, about nuclear pollution. Language has been polluted to the purpose: the dialogue is shaped to sound as if it were lifted from a Hungarian phrase book. ('On Thursday he likes to cook goulashi' etc.)

It's just one of the distancing devices in Nancy Meckler's brilliantly awful production for Shared Experience. She makes the gradual decline of her characters more shocking by placing us at several removes from their suffering (even using tiny model figures at one stage to enact their roles).

In the most terrible scene, two men meet for a cup of coffee. They are dying, their faces red and spilt, like stewed rhubarb; they sit with a silver percolator between them. They do not know how to make their small talk grow.

The characters in **Pancho** (Theatre Upstaris) have the same problem for a different reason: they are short of things to say. But you have to be skilful to make inarticulacy as expressive as Nick Grosso succeeds in doing in his deft, funny first play. When Cherry (Holly Aird) in a Leeds nightclub (the whirling lights look like a storm of cowrie shells) tells Frank (Ben Chaplin) that she fancies him, he can only think of one thing to say: 'You're joking.' But by the end he's stopped

## Kate Kellaway On Three Tall Women

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