

threat to national stability. There are scenes of joy and release — Redgrave waltzing around in a floral print dress, and looking great, Robertson huskily intoning a tradition of European civilisation in flight — that are highly enjoyable and indeed moving.

In New York, David Mamet's *Oleanna* (Royal Court) was a provocative fire-bomb about political correctness on an American campus: the student, Carol, seeks advice from her professor, John. He is distracted by a telephone conversation with his wife about the purchase of a new house. They become enmeshed in an argument about language and power. Carol brings a rape charge, the professor is ruined.

At the Court, Harold Pinter's hushed, controlled production pins the protagonists in a room of elegant austerity designed by Eileen Diss. They are like the ghostly figures in Edward Hopper's painting of a boss and his secretary in an office by night. Their conversation is tentative, the atmosphere ambiguous, until the final bloodrush. The pace is slow, deliberate. Pinter inserts an interval. An event becomes a drama.

Carol was first played as a pinched, bespectacled pain, a warped virgin perhaps. This Carol is pretty much a zombie, but you feel she has been exploited by the polluted discourse of the age. Lia Williams does not wear spectacles and allows her long hair to fall

sensuously below her shoulders. David Suchet adds a leavening of vanity to John, a thin smile, an ineradicable air of smugness about his book and his son and his career. This restores an equilibrium to the drama.

Whereas the off-Broadway John was a complete wreck in the last scene, Suchet has merely removed his jacket and is more stunned than desperate. Pinter reinstates Mamet's original final lines in which John reads the statement he will be compelled to make by Carol and 'her group' as a condition of provisional employment: 'I have failed in my responsibilities to the young.'

In seeking to validate the piece as drama, Pinter exposes its weaknesses as a polemic. The

characters appear stupid, their reality suspect. The debate on the tyranny of PC and the role of the teacher in a society suspicious of authority is tinny next to the magisterial exposure of current hypocrisy and modish cant in Robert Hughes's new book, *Culture of Complaint*.

John's surprising mistake is to participate in the corruption and timidity of the education system: he offers Carol an unequivocal A-grade if she will come back and continue their discussion. The shifting, secretive encounters are like those between Angelo and Isabella in *Measure For Measure*.

Carol thinks of teaching as therapy and accuses John of seeking power. She herself assumes power when Pinter's careful choreography eventually brings her round to sit on the desk. But until the gut-wrenching explosion (greeted at the Court on Wednesday night with shocking cheers from the back stalls; a message from our sponsors, perhaps?), the audience has run away with the ideas long before the actors properly elucidate them.

Oleanna is not about physical rape, but the tragedy of misinterpretation in an environment where the abuse of language is, as Orwell said, 'designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind'.

Another powerful, short American play, Sam Shepard's *States of Shock*, closed last night at the Salisbury Playhouse. Deborah Paige's production revealed a poetic lament for an imperial nation in a surreal coffee shop. Lucy Hall's design of a huge white canopy decorated with torn family photographs was a brilliant summation. David Burke's Col-



Lia Williams and David Suchet in David Mamet's *Oleanna*./Photograph: Douglas H. Jeffery.

Michael Coveney On *Oleanna*

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