

Cottesloe

Michael Billington

The Rise And Fall Of Little Voice

JIM Cartwright's new Cottesloe play, *The Rise And Fall Of Little Voice*, is his cheeriest yet. It's a Bolton showbiz fairytale, a back-street Cinderella-story with a built-in kick. You can forgive its stop-go rhythm and its odd, overwrought passages because of its natural warmth and because it affords such generous opportunities to Jane Horrocks and Alison Steadman.

Ms Horrocks is the Little Voice of the title: a painfully shy, waif-like agoraphobe with a hidden talent for doing impressions of Garland and Piaf,

Cilla and Gracie in the privacy of her bedroom. Ms Steadman meanwhile is her coarse, boozy, widowed mum who is only woken up to her daughter's showbiz potential by her spivvy agent boyfriend.

The play is obviously full of echoes: *Pygmalion*, *A Taste Of Honey*, *Educating Rita* all spring to mind. That matters not a jot: more worrying is the way the story sometimes veers out of control as in a clumsy finale where both the mum and the agent get their come-uppance. But what keeps the play alive is the theatricality of the concept — the dormouse heroine with the freak talent — and the counterpoint between the fairy-tale structure and Mr Cartwright's lewd, salty, savoury language.

Sam Mendes's production needs to be faster and snappier: one scene should dissolve into the next instead of being punctuated by breaks for jazz-drum-

ming. But William Dudley's angled, wallpapered, split-level set is a triumph of bad taste and the two leads are impeccable. Jane Horrocks is like a frail, tiny vessel inhabited by some daemon she doesn't begin to understand: when she turns into Basseyy warbling Goldfinger or Gracie Fields yodeling *Sing As We Go*, she doesn't glow with showbiz unction but simply looks like a naive girl frighteningly possessed.

Ms Steadman's also subtly avoids turning the situation into a reprise of *Life Is Sweet* where Ms Horrocks was again her daughter. This mum is no good-natured scatterbrain but a wicked witch of the North-West without an ounce of maternal feeling. And there is sterling support from Pete Postlethwaite as the small-time agent, Annette Badland as an illiterate neighbour and George Rairick as a tatty club-owner in a dust-mop wig.

Billington on Little Voice

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