

**Michael Billington**

**T**HEY used to cry "O, rare Ben Jonson." But the adjective could equally well apply to Harold Pinter. His first new play in four years, *Mountain Language*, had its premiere on Thursday in the Lyttelton only to be followed half an hour later by Richard Eyre's new production of *Bartholomew Fair* in the Olivier. The contrast was startling. Where the Pinter was sharp, precise and committed, the Jonson was long, diffuse and somewhat strenuous fun.

Pinter's new play lasts 25 minutes, occupies four scenes and, like *One For the Road*, deals with physical and psychological tortures in an unnamed military state. A group of women, dubbed mountain people, are lined up waiting to see their imprisoned male relatives. Abused by a foul-mouthed Sergeant, they are told they must not speak their mountain language in the camp.

A young woman, who does not speak the patois anyway, hears that her husband is in the wrong batch and that she can gain access to him only by sleeping with an official. An elderly woman is permitted to visit her son and is brutally instructed to speak the language of the capital. By the time the rules have changed and the mountain language is officially accepted, she is unable to communicate with her tortured, trembling, beaten son.



Katherine Schlessinger in *Bartholomew Fair*

What is astonishing is how much Pinter packs into a short space. He deals with the use of language as a repressive instrument, the arbitrary cruelty of military states which make up new rules as they go along, the brutish incompetence of totalitarian societies which shut the wrong prisoners into the wrong places.

Directing the play himself, Pinter also makes his points — like late Beckett — through a series of resonant images. The simple sight of mother and son confronting each other in helpless non-communication across a table in a bleak, brick office ("I'm in the Blue Room," the Guard announces over the phone) is indelibly moving. Pinter distils the daily barbarism of military societies with

painterly precision. Michael Gambon (the paunchy Sergeant in pebble-spots), Tony Haycraft (the tortured son), Simon Atkins (his frozen, terrified mother), Miranda Richardson (the mutinous younger woman) suggest a whole world beyond the confines of the action: the result is a mastery of compressed suffering.

After this Richard Eyre's production of Ben Jonson's rumbustious 1614 comedy, *Bartholomew Fair*, seems heavy-handed. The great virtue of Jonson's play is that it gives us a patently vivid picture of Jacobean London. Centering on the great Smithfield August fair, it records the smells, sights, sounds, private humiliations and verbal exuberance of the time: the programme even comes equipped with a mouth-watering glossary explaining the meaning of a big-glomler, a hedge-hind, an incubus and a jordan.

Given the play's Jacobean documentary vivacity, it seems pointless to transpose it to Victorian times. At first Mr Eyre cunningly updates Jonson's characters. Thus proctor Lidewit and his pregnant wife are pure Pinter; the nouveau riche Bartholomew Cooke is a boisterous, blarneyed silly-son. Justice Overdo becomes a Sherlockian investigator in a deerstalker and the Barbary port-tan, Zeal-of-the-Land Busy, is even equipped by David Burke with an authentic Ian Paisley accent.

But laughter is slow to come because the fun seems routine. When the pig-woman Ursula (medically played by a man) cries, "Do you sneeze, you dog's head, you treacle-tail? You look as you were beotten atop of a cart in harvest — time when the whip was hot and eager," you hear the surging vivacity of Jacobean invective rather than the mere south tones of Victorian England. Jonson's belief in dominating humours — a temperamental klunk due to the excess of one of the four bodily fluids — also seems alien in a society grown so alert to complex psychology.

The chief compensations are William Dudley's spectacular designs — with rotating Ferris wheels suddenly turning into ornately decorated fairground booths — and a clutch of good performances. Michael Bryant as a wandering madman, looking like a battered clochard with the crown of his head poking through a fragile topper, is superbly obsessive in his quest for a judicial warrant. Anthony O'Donnell as the ill-tempered Humphrey Wisp resembles a constantly exploding fire-cracker. And John Wells brings to the disguised Justice, at one point appearing as a rotting Smithfield porter, a fine puzzled coherence. But it is typical of the heavy jokiness that David Burke's otherwise excellent paritrian busybody is finally revealed to be wearing pink frilly drawers. Jonson was lacking monomaniacal zealotry, and sexual aberration.

The evening is fitfully rather than consecutively funny. But after this and *The Changing*, one wonders if Mr Eyre is going to transpose every classic he does at the National. A change of period can sometimes liberate a play; it can also, as in this case of this Victorianised *Bartholomew Fair*, corset it.

# Billington on Mountain Language

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