

The Klein and then the fall

Michael Billington at the Cottesloe

THEATRE, Olivier said, is the first glamouriser of thought. One achievement of Nicholas Wright's *Mrs Klein* at the Cottesloe is that it both quickens the layman's interest in the theories of its psychoanalyst heroine and at the same time exposes her tragic flaws as a mother. It is this balance between fascination and scepticism that makes it quietly riveting.

Mr Wright is a guy who takes his time, and the first act consists of a good deal of necessary scene-setting. The year is 1934 and Melina Klein, the controversial explorer of the infant psyche, is off to Budapest for the funeral of her son Hans apparently killed in a climbing accident. She leaves a young acquaintance, Paula, in charge of some vital proof-reading; and no sooner has Mrs Klein departed than her daughter, Melitta, turns up desperately anxious to discover whether her mother has read a letter she has dispatched alleging that Hans committed suicide.

This is interesting stuff but tinged with melodrama. It doesn't take a genius to deduce that Mrs Klein is bound to return unexpectedly and discover the conspiratorially giggling Paula and Melitta in cahoots. And the way the drama hinges on unopened letters with explosive contents takes one back to the world of *Pinero* and Henry Arthur Jones.

But it is in the gripping second half that we come to the real meat of the drama: in particular, the gulf between what people profess and what they do and the incapacity of even the most intellectually aware to handle primal emotions. In the course of a long night's journey into day, we come to see Mrs Klein as both analytic pioneer and maternal destroyer.

Mr Wright pays due acknowledgment to his heroine's exploration of the love-hate impulse the infant feels towards its

mother: at the same time he exposes the private cost of her achievement and the permanent damage she has inflicted on her children by treating them as experimental guinea-pigs. Mr Wright is neither pro nor anti-Klein; his theme is the poignant personal failure of the public frontier-breaker.

It is, however, a tantalisingly elusive play that can yield many different meanings. It has echoes of O'Neill in its portrayal of family life as an endless source of unresolved bitterness. But it can also be seen as a Pinteresque study of power in which Paula — a divorced German refugee practising as an analyst in Bethnal Green — insidiously moves into the Klein household and becomes the substitute daughter. Like Pinter's *A Slight Ache*, it is a study in displacement in which Paula discovers the mother she needs and Mrs Klein makes reparation to her lost daughter.

Drama itself is psycho-analysis in action. But Mr Wright's play, laced with wit, shows that there is also drama to be found in the private lives of the analysts themselves. Peter Gill's typically lucid production also steers a delicate course between exposing the occasional absurdities of hunt-the-symbol analysts and suggesting that their mother-child problems are universally familiar.

Gillian Barge's Mrs Klein, all jangling beads and swooping vowels, has perhaps just a touch of Coward's *Madame Arcati* about her at first. But it is a performance of growing power that makes you understand the heroine's thought-processes.

Francesca Annis also reveals the gap between Melitta's stylish physical maturity and unresolved infantile passions. And there is an immensely subtle performance from Zoe Wannamaker as Paula who is both silent witness to a family crisis and a stealthy predator.

"Analyst, heal thyself" might seem to be the overriding theme except that Mr Wright has written a highly intelligent play that throughout preserves a delicate balance.



Zoe Wannamaker and Francesca Annis in *Mrs Klein*

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Buxton

Robin Thorner

Holmes And The Ripper

IF ONLY it was slightly better written and much better acted and produced this show would be a certain hit for the West End tourist trade, which is something the West End desperately needs at the moment. Setting Sherlock Holmes to investigate the contemporary Jack the Ripper murders in Whitechapel is one of those inevitable ideas that leave you

wondering why it wasn't done before. Of course the "glorious fiction" would have been called on to solve the "ghastly fact."

Relying on Stephen Knight's carefully researched book resolving the Ripper mystery, writer Brian Clemens has come up with an intricately crafted yarn, as you would expect from the creator of *The Avengers* and *The Professionals*.

Their preferred solution, intriguingly plausible, is a much subtler variation on the hoary rumour fingering a prince of the royal blood, but it cries out for Conan Doyle's finesse. Clemens's plotting is perfect but he hasn't mastered that mannered style. I couldn't believe that a loner

like Holmes would join the Freemasons or that his rationalism would let him consult a clairvoyant, however grudgingly.

And dialogue that lapses into anachronistic 1960s concepts like "ego massage" can't then use lines like "The game's afoot" without being risible.

There were some authentic allusions to the Holmes tradition — deducing that a man's valet is off because his cuff-links don't match — and some well-judged moments of melodrama.

But the convincing pastiche we began with became dangerously close to spoof send-up of the style. Clemens's accomplished tele-

visual storytelling, from a

lage, valley, pits, the miners at work, eating outside the local fish and chip shop and playing in the brass band, the mothers at home with the kids. The best of them are remarkable for the way they pinpoint the geographical and social character of a particular area and yet manage to avoid mere topographical scene painting or the kind of patronising sentimentality of many of today's artists-in-industry schemes.

Herman gets at the complex heart of the matter, using the significant drama of mining life, the people and landscape oppressed by dirt and darkness, without once falling off into the usual simplistic dignity-of-labour romanticising.

Billington on Mrs Klein

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