

Hope in Heartbreak House

Michael Billington
at the Lyric Studio

THE arrival of Stewart Parker's *Pentecost* at the Lyric Studio is both a sad and exhilarating occasion. Sad because it reminds us just what a fine dramatist was lost when Parker died two months ago at the shockingly early age of 47. Exhilarating because it addresses the subject of Northern Ireland not in a spirit of sectarian bitterness and hatred but in one of hope and affirmation.

It takes place in Belfast in 1974 in a working-class house that is, as one character puts it, "eloquent with the history of this city." Caught bang-slap in the firing-line between Protestants and Catholics, the house currently has four living occupants. There is Marian, a former antiques-dealer, who initially wishes to preserve the house as a monument to the past, her estranged husband Lenny who has long abandoned the law for the trombone; his friend Peter, now a Birmingham surveyor scornful of Northern Ireland's self-absorbed littleness; and Marian's old chum, Ruth, who has been beaten up by her psychopathic policeman husband.

Without a trace of self-consciousness, Parker also shows Catholic Marian communing with the ghost of the house's recently-deceased owner — a Protestant widow who died lacerated with guilt over her affair with an English airman.

Parker has clearly written a Belfast *Heartbreak House*: a play in which a home acquires a national symbolism. As in Shaw's fantasia, there is more conversation than plot. And Parker adds to the sense of history by locating the action during five months in 1974 when Brian Faulkner's power-sharing coalition was brought down by a Loyalist strike.

But there is a crucial difference between Parker's play and Shaw's. Where Shaw's English drifters welcome the Zeppelins that will destroy their meaningless existence, Mr Parker's Marian finally enters a heart-

felt and moving plea for spiritual regeneration and for the need to recognise the Christ that is in all of us.

I get uneasy in drama with symbolism that advertises itself rather than springing, almost unperceived, from the action; and in the final quarter-of-an-hour there are too many attempts to see Marian and her trio of lodgers as an archetypal Irish or Holy Family.

But what makes it an extraordinary play is how much of Belfast and of Northern Ireland Mr Parker manages to put on the stage: the politics, the religion, the tension between residents and exiles and, above all, the idea of a city and country haunted by its past and forever fuelled by a righteous anger.

What makes the play so moving is Parker's burning conviction that recrimination is not enough. Originally produced in Ireland by the Field Day Theatre Company, the play is now being given by the Tricycle Company for whom Nicolas Kent does a fine directorial job; you can tell

how good it is by the ease with which he integrates the ghostly revenant (played by Barbara Adair with a slowly-thawing, poker-backed frostiness) into the action.

Like her ghostly companion, Dearbhla Molloy as Marian undergoes a similar journey from a sullen, compacted, barren bitterness to a full acknowledgement of her humanity and there is particularly fine support from Adrian Dunbar as her shiftless, jazzman husband dreamily wondering what it was like in Northern Ireland before Christianity. Poppy Mitchell has also designed a fine set, with its cramped scullery and suffocating front-room, that gives the play the necessary anchor in reality.

Pentecost is not flawless: what animates it is Parker's own immense generosity of spirit and passionate belief that what unites us as human beings is infinitely more important than what divides us.

● *Pentecost* is at the Lyric Studio, Hammersmith (01-741-0824) until January 22.

THIS LAND IS OUR LAND
Aspects of Agriculture in Art
The Mall Galleries, London SW1
5th-29th January 1989

A unique and exciting exhibition which celebrates British Food and Farming Year and records five centuries of the English Countryside. Over 500 exhibits, many on public view for the first time, include paintings, books, ceramics and models.

10am-5pm Daily. Admission £2 (concessions £1.50) For further information please telephone 01-245 1088.

Sponsored by Phillips Fine Art Auctioneers and the Royal Agricultural Society of England.



Billington on Parker Pentecost

Clipped By:



ianharris

Mon, Feb 24, 2020