

Michael Billington welcomes David Hare's profound commentary on modern Britain in *The Secret Rapture* at the National

The Midas touch

DAVID HARE'S great gift as a dramatist is for relating private despair to the public world. But his astonishing new play at the Lyttelton, *The Secret Rapture*, touches profounder chords than anything he has written before. It is partly about the corrosive effect of the Thatcherite ethos on human relationships; but at a deeper, quasi-religious level (and the title refers to a nun's union with Christ) it is about pain, martyrdom and the idea of fulfilment through death.

The framework is clear even if the final meaning is tantalisingly elusive. Two sisters are brought together by the death of their father, a Gloucestershire bookseller (who seems, incidentally, to have lived in an incredibly baronial mansion). Marion is a Junior Tory Minister, cool, managerial, intelligent, but lacking any gift for empathy. Isobel is part of a small-scale design firm: she seems to have inherited her father's humanist tolerance and unimpeachable pre-Eighties integrity.

Two events trigger the dramatic crisis. One is the sisters' attempt to solve the problem of what to do with their stepmother, Katherine: a young alcoholic wreck whom their father had married late in life. Isobel is persuaded to give her a job in her firm with foreseeably disastrous consequences. The other key event is the

takeover of the firm by Marion's husband, the President of Christians in Business, which leads to rapid expansion and the ultimate ruination of a mildly thriving cottage-industry. But the thing that is really destroyed, by a combination of the anarchic stepmother and bruising capitalism, is Isobel's love for her partner, Irwin.

On one level the play is perfectly clear. Hare is saying (as he has done in every play and film he has written) that you cannot separate political and human values; that if you live in a society that sanctifies greed, worships money and excuses mendacity, it is bound to affect personal relationships.

But although Hare is a moralist, he is clever enough to see that few people are immune to the blandishments of capitalism. Irwin, a mildly talented designer and a nice guy, acquiesces in his firm's takeover when his salary is doubled. Hare doesn't condemn him; but the pay-off is that business expansion and incorporation kills off something that works.

As a portrait of our times, the play is lethal, accurate and witty. I know of no work that pins down so well the two-dimensionality of Thatcherism: the combination of sharp intelligence with limited vision. But I find it slightly harder to follow Hare's thinking when it comes to the subject of human pain. Through Tory Marion and her proselytising husband, he shows the impossibility of



Jill Baker as Isobel

immunising yourself against agony and keeping family for weekends; and through Irwin, Hare depicts, with aching realism, the sense of emptiness that accompanies a broken love affair.

The problem for me is the character of Isobel. Hare says in the programme he is trying to buck a trend by creating a heroine rather than another maligned villain. But I was never really clear what she represented. Does she embody a supine English tolerance that allows itself to be exploited? Is she a shining example of integrity? Or is she a born martyr half in love with easeful death? She may be all of those things but I find her fuzzy rather than complex. Under Hare the sharp satirist I suspect there lurks a romantic who sees suffering and pain as proof of the validity of existence and who wants us to celebrate the idea of Isobel as a secular bride of Christ.

Jill Baker plays her very well

as one of those women who measures everyone against the high standards of integrity they demand of themselves. But there is a dead giveaway when she says that you wouldn't think, to look at her, that she ever had a sense of fun: the truth is you wouldn't and that is because Hare has omitted to show that virtue can bring joy.

The other actors have an easier row to hoe. Penelope Wilton is superb as Marion whom she endows with a crisp, laundered sexiness and smug smiles of self-satisfaction at a delegation of Greens. Paul Shelley as her Christian husband, given to baptismal immersions in his swimming pool, is all-scrubbed certainty. There is also excellent work from Mick Ford as the emotionally devastated Irwin, Clare Higgins as the alkie stepmother embodying what Schopenhauer called "the tyranny of the weak" and from Arkie Whiteley as a silky young predator.

Howard Davies, after his work on *Williams and Boucicault*, caps a magnificent year at the National with a production that combines irony and heart even if John Gunter's designs, with their panelled walls and vast gardens, romanticise Gloucestershire bookselling. But, greatly as I admire Hare's ruthless analysis of the morality of modern Britain, I question his transcendental assumption that goodness can only triumph through death.

Billington on Secret Rapture

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