

A walking deception: Alan Bennett as Blunt. PHOTOGRAPH: SCOTLAND JEFFERS

Michael Billington hails the new Bennett double bill

Art of spying

I SUPPOSE Alan Bennett's *Single Spies* at the Lyricton will go down in history as the first play to represent the Queen as a major dramatic character. But the real function of this double bill in the way it questions our accepted notions of dramatic art, in different ways, makes a sympathetic case both for Guy Burgess and Anthony Blunt.

A *Question of Attribution* is much the weightier and more mainly serious of the two plays. It deals with Blunt in his triple role as survivor of the Queen's pictures, international art historian and Communist spy. But Bennett subtly links Blunt's profession and his political beliefs by suggesting that, just as attribution in no way explains the mysterious enigma of art, so the test of "truth" does nothing to solve the Blunt riddle. But Bennett goes further and demonstrates that, just as the restoration of a painting reveals hidden depths, so the process of uncovering the ultimate spy-master is futile and never-ending.


That, however, are only the main themes of a play that is so much a series of questions about art, aesthetics and respectability. What is extraordinary is that in 75 minutes Bennett manages to raise, with wit and gusto, a whole series of questions about art, aesthetics and respectability. His own performance as Blunt is still a shade tentative but Prunella Scales scores a small triumph as the Queen, radiating sharp-witted benevolence and possessive pride as she patters about the gallery mulling, "This portrait was a post-impromptu from society."

Simon Callow, who directs, also makes a fine performance as the MI6 officer.

Mr Callow appears as Guy Burgess in Bennett's own production of *An Englishman Abroad*, a revised version of his early Eighties TV play. It is still a touching, funny account of the pabos of exile, showing Coral Browne sitting in Blunt's specially post-faltered to old Jack Huchman records. According to Spycatcher, Blunt once observed to Peter Wright that Burgess was a great patriot and he here emerges as the epitome of the displaced person joining for London literary gossip and a new suit.

Bennett's humane sympathy for Burgess comes through here, like all work transferred from television, it seems a little flattened. You miss the location-work and, more specifically, John Schlesinger's unforgettable final image of an umbrella-wielding Burgess jauntily crossing a Marcovite bridge to the strains of *Il Mio Paese*. On stage, you get the moment but not the physical context.

Simon Callow makes Burgess himself come and see and Prunella Scales captures the behavioral ebullience of Coral Browne. But while this play now seems anecdotal, a *Question of Attribution* raises profound questions about the testing unfitness of both art and espionage and emerges as a minor masterpiece.



Simon Callow as Burgess

Billington on Single Spies

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