

**Michael Billington** on a feisty National Theatre production of Strindberg's *The Father*

## Battle of the brains

**I**T IS over 20 years since the National Theatre gave us any Strindberg. They now make amends with a cracking revival of *The Father* in the Cottesloe in a feisty new version by John Osborne and directed by David Leveaux in much the same style as he did *Easter at Leicester Haymarket*; that is to say, he goes for intense psychological realism inside a visually Expressionist framework.

*The Father*, written in 1887, is not a fair play but it has a wonderfully demented single-mindedness, as Strindberg himself said, it is "a battle of brains, not a dagger-fight or poisoning with raspberry juice." Springing from the crack-up of Strindberg's own marriage to Siri von Essen and his fascination with hypnotism and suggestion, it depicts a duel to the death between an army captain and his wife, Laura. It starts from the captain's conviction that he has to rescue his daughter from his women-dominated household since she is his one means of securing an after-life. But when Laura casts doubt on his paternity and hints to a doctor that her husband is mad, the captain dwindles into second childishness and famously ends in a straitjacket lovingly secured by his old nurse.

Undeniably the play is sustained by a crazy, misogynist passion: Laura is a cunning schemer who intercepts her husband's letters to ruin his mineralogical studies and who propels him into madness to gain control of the child. But it is drama, not melodrama; and, although not many of us share Strindberg's fear of a return to a barbarous matriarchy, it still works because of the naked, ferocious intensity of the battle between the sexes. It is the ancestor of all plays that depict marriage as a corpse-strewn battlefield in which the spoils go to the victor, and what is fascinating is that the captain himself subscribes to the Darwinian proposition that the stronger party will win. "To eat or be eaten, that is the question," he cries; and Strindberg makes it perfectly clear that his paranoia and insecurity contribute to his own downfall.

John Osborne's version sticks close to Strindberg while sharpening the phrases ("In the old days you got married and

got yourself a wife — now you go into partnership with a career-woman"). And Mr Leveaux and his designer, Annie Smart, locate his ancestral sexual battle inside a suitably distorted world. Colour-contrasts are excellently used so that the captain inhabits an ashen study while Laura constantly emerges from a sloping, blood-red dining-room like a vengeful Clytemnestra (even her bottle-green dress opens out to reveal a scarlet lining). Bertha, the daughter, meanwhile springs out of a spotless, white-lit chamber like a virgin gazelle. Even the sound is Expressionist with the thud of an unseen axe finally sealing the captain's fate.

Within this setting the performances have total credibility. Alan Armstrong, with his rimless specs and hair like a nest of snakes, gives the impression of a man whose life is built round governing obsessions: the release of his daughter and the pursuit of his studies. Once these twin fixations are undermined, his whole nature is undone. He is particularly memorable in the calm, quiet way he accepts the straitjacket wrapping himself in death, as Strindberg suggested, as if it were a spider's web which he is impotent to tear asunder.

The danger with Laura is in making her seem too balefully villainous. Susan Fleetwood, however, finds extraordinary emotional variety in the role.

At first she is all moaning, wasp-waisted deference. Later she hits a vein of sardonic comedy when, having destroyed her husband by questioning his paternity, she delicately enquires, "There's nothing wrong is there?" And at the climax she hints that there is something echoingly hollow in her moment of spectacular triumph.

Jean Heywood as the devoted old nurse, Colin Stinton as the doctor unwillingly drawn into a poisonous domestic conspiracy, and Sarah-Jane Fenton as the fought-over daughter are all first-rate. At the conclusion I was reminded of Eric Bentley's remark that you recognise great dramatists by the quality of imagination with which they establish their own atmosphere and create their own world. We may not subscribe to Strindberg's beliefs. It is impossible, however, not to surrender to his power.



A memorable calm; Alan Armstrong in *The Father*

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