



Hands-on: Michael Pennington as Bill, the impatient entrepreneur PHOTOGRAPH BY DOUGLAS JEFFERY

THEATRE: Michael Billington on the new Poliakkoff at the Pit

## Cutting corners

**F**IVE years ago, in *Breaking The Silence*, Stephen Poliakkoff wrote a very good play about a grandiose dreamer who sacrifices his family to his own unrealised inventions. Now, in *Flying With Trains*, he has written a very similar piece about a visionary engineer who can persuade neither government nor industry to back his pioneering projects. It has many vibrant scenes but cries out for a dramaturg prepared to hack away at passages of indulgent writing.

Mr Poliakkoff's central thesis comes across loud and clear: that the British genius for invention is not backed by a comparable talent for manufacturing exploitation. We are reminded that we allowed the jet engine, penicillin, computers and even Lego to be taken up by others.

And Mr Poliakkoff's hero, Bill, is an electrical engineer and self-publishing tycoon who makes a fortune out of the automatic gramophone-turntables but who ends up ruined both by an ill-advised libel action and the reluctance of British industry to back his ideas.

What is good about the play (spanning the period from 1867 to the present) is its ambivalent attitude to its hero. Bill is obviously a fliz-

ing ideas-man, selflessly prepared to back other people's inventions; when a protégé comes up with a futuristic road-rail vehicle he batters away at government research departments to get it off the ground. But he is also a complete wash-out as a father who treats his two children as if they were failed inventions: there is a very good, quintessentially Poliakkoffian scene when Bill uses his daughter's wedding reception to exhibit prototype heat-pumps and kidney-machines.

Like Balzac in *The Quest For The Absolute*, Mr Poliakkoff shows how inventive obsession can blind a man to personal relationships. But although the play is written with passion and energy it lacks the sinewy muscularity you find in Mr Poliakkoff's best work for the screen. To make the point that Bill's crusading fervour is accompanied by a show-off vanity, we get not one but two scenes of him spouting off on the plaintiff's stand during the libel case. And the final father-daughter confrontation, which is about the residual affection under the surface hostility, circles endlessly around like a plane in the stack waiting for a chance to land.

Plays are not written but re-written; and Ron Daniels,

as director, should have persuaded Mr Poliakkoff to tighten a potentially fine play. But the staging itself is admirably fluent and underscores Mr Poliakkoff's gift for writing scenes that exist at a slight tangent to reality.

Briefly back from his Shakespearean peregrinations, Michael Pennington also plays Bill with just the right mixture of enthusiasm for ideas and impatience with people. With his clenched hair and whippet-like body, he seems to be in a permanent hurry like a linen-suited White Rabbit: it is a performance that suggests Mr Pennington is moving fruitfully from classical heroes towards eccentric character-studies.

Lesley Sharp and Simon Russell Beale as his two children not only look incredibly like sister and brother but also capture extremely well the mischievous candour of the one and the nervous awkwardness of the other. Robert Demeger also puts in a notable appearance as a fish-eyed, sarcastic Judge. Everything the acting can do is done; but I still feel that Mr Poliakkoff, rather like his hero, has been carried away by the unrestrained exuberance of his own inventiveness.

● *In repertory at The Pit (01-636-8093).*

## Billington on Trains

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