

The Voysey Inheritance, splendidly staged at the Cottesloe, is a landmark in English political drama, writes **Michael Billington**

The money trick

HARLEY Granville Barker's *The Voysey Inheritance* (1905) is one of the great English plays of the century: an Atrean family drama written from a socialist standpoint. My only reservation about Richard Eyre's new production is that he has chosen to stage it in the Cottesloe rather than in one of the National's larger auditoria where it could both breathe more easily and be seen by bigger audiences.

Margery Morgan in the programme relates the play to Shaw's *Mrs Warren's Profession*. Actually I was reminded of Ibsen's *Ghosts* in that the subject is a poisoned inheritance: this being England, however, the transmitted disease is financial rather than sexual. The shock revelation comes early on when young Edward Voysey discovers that his solicitor father has been using clients' trust funds for speculation and personal profit. Far from being criminally shamed, his father refers to his fraudulent business (which he claims to have inherited from his father in turn) as "a great edifice". The question is whether priggish Edward will carry on the family tradition.

On one level the play is a voyage of self-discovery. Like a lot of Barker's heroes, Edward is a detached idealist who comes to terms with the world. His initial instinct is to put the firm into bankruptcy and stand trial himself. But gradually he turns into a Lincoln's Inn Robin

Hood, fiddling the accounts so as to pay off the smaller clients at the expense of the larger. By the suavest of ironies, Barker shows Edward achieving heroic status by illegal means.

But Barker is not merely exploring the individual conscience and (through the teeming Voysey clan seemingly secure in their Chiselhurst fastness) the hypocrisies of middle class life. He is also writing the first Marxist drama in English. His real theme is money and his play offers a sharp, running critique of capitalism. Challenged about his own grandiose lifestyle, Voysey senior explains it was precisely that which carried him to victory since "business is now a day's run on the lines of the confidence trick". And Alice Maitland, Edward's eventual wife, candidly admits that since she has neither earned nor deserved the £400 a year on which she lives, she has no moral right to her wealth. Barker seems to have written a well-upholstered Edwardian family drama: in fact, he is attacking the foundations on which the whole society rests.

Richard Eyre's production, played in the round with minimal revolving flats by William Dudley which whisk us from Lincoln's Inn to Chiselhurst, is both economical and suggestive. What it captures especially well is the ritualised smugness of middle class life. Voysey senior prides himself as much on his chicanery and, sure enough, the former proudly appears on his

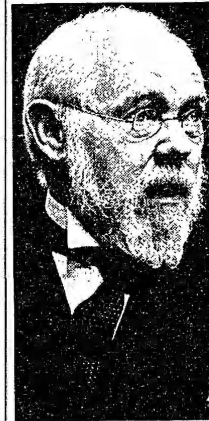
dining table. The male clubbiness of this world is also shown by the way the women silently withdraw at the beginning of the family scenes. And (following Barker's stage direction) Eyre at the last spotlights the family portrait of the swindling old Voysey implying that it may be another generation before his values are overturned.

David Burke as Voysey senior is, in fact, throughout wonderfully wreathed in self-

satisfaction seeing himself not as a petty crook but as a buccaneering Napoleon of commerce. Jeremy Northam as Edward, however, misses some of the character's initial hot-headed self-righteousness: only if Edward begins as an interperate prig you get a sense of his moral growth. But (not before time) the Eyre regime seems at last to be producing an identifiable company that backs all the way down.

Michael Bryant as the Voyseys' head clerk (in on the family secret) is his usual tower of strength offering a mixture of bribing cajolery and wounded pride: I swear you can see his back stiffen as, after an abortive blackmailing attempt, he is told to go about his business. Graham Crowden, as a defrauded family friend, exudes a glittering rapacity. And, amongst the Voyseys, there are two fine vignettes from Robert Swann as a barking, blustering major and from Selina Cadell as a ruthlessly exploited daughter who flaps around the house like a bird with a damaged wing.

Barker's play ends a touch tamely with a redemptive marriage: despite the heroic efforts of Stella Gonet the character of Alice Maitland won't, as Max Beerbohm said, do at all. But the work remains a landmark in English political drama: one that manages simultaneously to be opulent and subversive like some sleek, handsomely furnished ocean-going liner on which is concealed a quietly ticking bomb.



Tower of strength: Michael Bryant

Billington on Voysey

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