

Theatre

Michael Coveney on New York sizzle and northern highlights.

NO PLAY on Broadway recently has created a stir comparable to that of John Guare's *Six Degrees of Separation*. Seeing it at Lincoln Center was like entering a sauna of guilty approbation for this quirky tale of a young conman, claiming to be the son of Sidney Poitier, inveigling himself into the Manhattan melting pot.

Some of that buzz has transferred to Phyllida Lloyd's production at the Royal Court, mainly due to the electrifying presence of the New York star Stockard Channing as Ouisa. Guare's writing is sideways-on to the audience, smart and very fast. Channing is his ideal interpreter; she embodies, humorously, self-conscious New York liberalism among the monied art-buying classes.

Ouisa and Fian (Paul Shelley), a dealer, are Paul's chief victims in their circular carpeted apartment with its two-sided floating Kandinsky and abstract rectangular frames, wonderfully designed by Mark Thompson. They are entertaining a South African colleague (Gary Waldhorn), whose \$2 million they need to secure a Cézanne for the Japanese market, when Paul appears claiming to have been mugged.

Reciting his stolen thesis on the death of the imagination and the encouragement to assassins found in *The Catcher in the Rye*, he offers his hosts small parts in the film of *Cats* which his father is now preparing. That is the sucker punch, and he stays. In the night, the play turns on the discovery by Ouisa of a male hustler Paul has brought back to his room. 'He might have a gun on him,' she screams, staring at the stark naked pick-up (where?).

Thereafter, as in New York, the energy level drops, although there is one brilliant sequence in which the deluded parents confront a babble of disaffected children and the play achieves meteoric take-off into sociological analysis. Lloyd has cast admirably, eliciting a particularly outstanding performance from Adrian Lester (Check by Jowl's black Rosalind) as the intruder who finally persuades Ouisa that her world is not as secure as she thought.

'Crappity name, in't it?' belittles Mari Hoff, the Boltonian boozier and square-shouldered merry widow in Jim Cartwright's funny and abrasive new play *The Rise and Fall of Little Voice* in the RNT's Cottesloe. When her husband Frank was alive, the couple were known as Mr and Mrs F. Hoff. Frank bequeathed his record collection to their daughter, christened Little Voice, or LV. She skulks regressively upstairs, perfecting her imitations of Judy Garland, Shirley Bassey, Gracie Fields and Edith Piaf.

Downstairs, Mari brings home a sleazy agent with an Elvis hairstyle, Ray Say (Pete Postlethwaite), and unwittingly triggers her daughter's release into showbiz. Ray's shock of discovery (he is 'into' artiste management) coincides with our spine-tingling realisation that the brilliant Jane Horrocks really is 'doing' Garland and 'The Man That Got Away'.

LV is a paradigm of Garland's Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*. Instead of typhoons and wicked witches, we have faulty wiring, Mari and showbiz sharks. Director Sam Mendes and designer William Dudley create an appropriate atmosphere of danger in the linking drum riffs, collapsing walls, popping fuses and sharp black-outs.

The house is finally charred in a fire and Mari throws all the records out the window. The play wobbles, but Cartwright sticks to his long-term objective of moving the initiative from Alison Steadman's barnstorming Mari to her daughter. The show hinges on an O'Neill-like emotional work-out exactly comparable to a scene between these same actresses in Mike Leigh's *Life is Sweet*.

LV's salvation lies not in cabaret, but in finding her own voice. In this she is assisted by a devoted British Telecom mechanic (Adrian Hood) who, very conveniently, is an electrician on the side. This cowardly lion creates a cathedral of light where LV ecstatically finds her own voice 'Just in Time'.

Steadman's Mari is a hideous creation, vomiting into the sink, prodding the ceiling with a broom handle and letting rip in a funky jive over the sofa with her gross neighbour (Annette Badland) to the squeaky strains of the Jackson Five. Lovely stuff.

Cartwright brings a rich and steamy vocabulary to the stage. Representing the other side of the Pennines, the actor Barrie Rutter has formed a company, Northern Broadbides, to perform Shakespeare's *Richard III* in emphatic Yorkshire accents. I caught this fast, uncluttered and entertaining show in a boatshed on the Hull Marina; this week it moves to Bradford's Transport Museum, with one

Coveney reviews Little Voice

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Sat, Feb 29, 2020