

# Railing against British industry

**Kate Kellaway**  
on Poliakoff's train of thought at the Pit and Vaclav Havel's trilogy at the Soho Poly.

STEPHEN POLIAKOFF's new play, *Playing with Trains* (The Pit), is about invention and dissent. Engineer Bill (Michael Pennington) has packaged himself as an entrepreneur of flair; he upsets television presenters, civil servants and the captains of industry. He also upsets his family.

As a father, he is at once interfering and neglectful: his moon-faced children Danny (Simon Russell Beale) and Roxanna (Lesley Sharp) have, with unendearing precociousness, appointed themselves experts on his business affairs.

Roxanna is the brighter of the

two. She can enlighten the audience on the latest design modifications in a camera but when she refuses to become an engineer, she loses her father's interest. Danny is ambitious for affection but not bright enough to secure it. Russell Beale and Sharp show convincingly how the spurned desire for approval curdles into bitterness.

The overriding tone of Poliakoff's writing is bitter. Although the father has different cause for complaint from his offspring, everyone is lamenting and their complaints are leavened only by facetiousness.

Poliakoff's argument is that inventors in Britain are thwarted by industries that do not recognise them (a theme that has its origins in his earlier play *Breaking the Silence*). In a compelling lecture at the Albert Hall, Bill attempts to shame his

audience into seeing their own backwardness. 'People are not getting the technology they deserve,' he insists.

As Bill's innovations make his fortune, his children become increasingly like spare parts. Then he unexpectedly loses a libel case: fortune's mechanised wheel seems about to run him over. Poliakoff's arguments are agile, the emotions are slacker, less interesting. Ron Daniels' trenchant production offers us an excellent machine looking needlessly for a heart.

In *The Vanek Plays* by Vaclav Havel (Soho Poly) hearts are endangered by the state. There is great excitement in watching these slight, deft plays while their author is working hard to make them out of date. It does, however, seem unlikely that history in Czechoslovakia will tidy them away for good,

for their subject transcends politics. This trilogy, directed with unpretentious sensitivity by Peter Casterton is partly about the disappearance of trust.

In *Audience* Ferdinand Vanek (Tom Knight), a dissident writer, is invited to drink with his boss, the master brewer. Vanek speaks in a low colourless voice, while the maltster (superbly played by Seamus Newham) tops up his glass with the refrain: 'People are real bastards, take my word for it.' But it is hard to know what words to take from him. And in the cruelly funny *Private View*, Vanek visits an old friend, now a government-approved writer, who boasts about his life, advising his erstwhile friend: 'One must never give up even if one doesn't find precisely what one's looking for.' He is speaking of the furnishings in his flat.

## Kellaway on Trains

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