

DAVID HARE's painful, witty and moving new play *The Secret Rapture* (NT, Lyttelton) is a morality of modern behaviour in which the people who have all the answers face, buy out and destroy the people who thought there were no questions to ask. The elements are traditional but neglected: a representative of earthly government, an artist, an artisan, a man of God, a witch. Hare also brings off a portrait of absolute goodness on stage, while a conflict between sisters transforms a fatal attraction into a *crime passionnel*, rare in any English play.


Marion (Penelope Wilton), Junior Minister for the Environment, and her fatuous evangelist husband Tom (Paul Shelley) meet Marion's sister Isobel (Jill Baker) at the deathbed of their father. Robert was a country bookseller of such liberal otherworldliness that he took a brittle alcoholic drop-out half his age to be his second wife. When Katherine (Clare Higgins) maliciously announces after the funeral that she is joining Isobel's small studio, Marion, the Tory advocate of individual initiative, forces the gentle Isobel to accept by declaring that resistance would be selfish. Arguments are stood on their head throughout and Isobel, too good for this world, is marked out for destruction.

She loves Irwin (Mick Ford), an artist in the studio, and Irwin adores her. When Tom and Marion beef up her small business with much-needed capital, turning it into a company with a board, they first buy Irwin's acceptance, an act of betrayal Isobel never forgives.

Both sisters give themselves away in transparent disingenuousness. 'It isn't a question of principles,' says Isobel when taking Katherine on, 'I'd just like to be sure we do the right thing.' Exactly. 'I've nothing on my conscience,' says Marion as Irwin drifts into despair, 'I feel nothing.' But she does, and her aggressive public composure breaks down into the anger of exasperation and then the rage of grief as her tantalising, sensual and mysterious sister remains ever beyond her reach.

When read (Faber, £3.95), the play's resonance seems political and its tensions absolutely sharp. In Howard Davies's production they are more elusive. John Gunter's handsome designs—oak panelling, office walls, bare

Passio



Paul Alder and James Durre

floor and great tree—provide a stark, reductive setting for these English lives rather than the clutter they sometimes suggest: the performances within them are very precisely balanced, led by Baker, all resignation, simplicity and stillness as the woman whose feelings are defined for her by others, and by Wilton as the Thatcherite sister who knows she is better briefed than her opponents and therefore always, but always, in the right. It is the irony of this disturbing and passionate play that where her own sister is concerned Marion has never been properly briefed from the start.

Ulez's production of *The Public* at the Theatre Royal, Stratford East, opens with an explosive drumbeat and ends with the onset of a new ice age. It confirms the impression made by Lorca's surrealist experiment in homoerotic theatre in its Paris production, on which I reported earlier in the year. It is a pagan piece, celebrating the pre-Christian universality of all love and the coexistence of the earthly and the sublime.

Ratcliffe on Rapture

Clipped By:



ianharris
Mon, Feb 24, 2020