

**Cottesloe**

Nicholas de Jongh

**Roots**

DOWN in farm labourers' Norfolk, where Arnold Wesker's *Roots* is set, socialism is regarded rather like a nasty sexually transmitted disease: "Perhaps you can pass it on to someone near you." And as for ideas — otherwise known as "high-class squat" — well they only cause trouble in the countryside, better to take them back to London where such things belong.

This everyday story of country folk, revived for one of the National Theatre's touring productions to schools and colleges, was given a messiah's welcome when first seen in London, at the Royal Court, 30 years ago. It opened doors on worlds from which London audiences and critics had been barred. Here was a play with not only a kitchen sink, but also a tin bath and a labourer's family whose sights — in Harold Macmillan's days of "never-had-it-so-good" — had not far risen above the poverty level.

Applause sounded out loud and pervasive. Kenneth Tynan found the final act, in which the family sit down to a high tea of sandwiches, trifle and jelly washed down with indigestible home truths, quite the most af-



Maria Miles as Beatie

fecting thing he had seen in modern drama. Thirty years on *Roots* still raises searching, significant questions. Beatie Bryant, the farm labourer's daughter who has been three years in London with a young intellectual lover, returns home to try and convince her mulish, blinkered family that education and culture need not be the prerogative of the rich, the privileged and the sophisticated. "We want the third rate, we've got it," she cries to her family who subsist on the Light Programme, the Evening News and small lashings of village gossip.

By close of play Beatie has been jilted by her young man, but realises, in a fashion which seems rather too glib for comfort, that she now has a good mind of her own. Doors will open. Yet *Roots* does not face up to the questions it raises. The play is very much an affec-

tionate domestic rural comedy. Wesker conjures up a village world in which Beatie's mother gauges time by counting the hourly buses, and dramatises her days with talk of cancer, thromboses and the mental hospital; her sister and her ailing father react with as much suspicion to Beatie's new ways.

But for all Wesker's affectionate evocation of this world, the play itself seems languidly anecdotal, lacking dramatic shape and focus. Further Wesker's idea of culture seems a little high-minded and cerebral.

But in Simon Curtis's shrewdly cast production these qualifications are somewhat annulled. The stage setting, by Bunnie Christie, with its huge back wall and stage decorated with kitchen props is redolent of a Royal Court studio production, and conveys a meticulous sense of impoverished, serene rural life.

And the performances are as precisely gauged. Best of all is Pam Ferris's Mrs Bryant, a bulky matriarch, stentorian of voice, a battle axe with a soft edge. Maria Miles's Beatie is full of ardour for a world beyond her family's grasp, even if she does not fully register a sense of shock at being jilted. The supporting cast — particularly two fine cameos from Ewan Hooper as a dying old lecher and a gnarled paterfamilias — looked to these metropolitan eyes like the real thing.

de Jongh on Roots

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