

# Cops, robbers, and a system that's a law unto itself

In the end we get the kind of law we deserve. **Michael Billington** on David Hare's stylish indictment of crime and punishment nineties-style

**"LET'S** kill all the lawyers," cries Shakespeare's Jack Cade in Henry VI. But although David Hare's projected trilogy about British institutions — beginning with Racing Demon and now continuing with *Murmuring Judges* at the Olivier — was partly triggered by seeing *The Plantagenets*, his new play is no simple Cade-like crack at the law. It is, in fact, an immensely rich, subtle and complex play about the rigid compartmentalisation of the judiciary, the police and the prison system.

Hare's skill, however, lies in the way he dramatises his discovery. He presents us, initially, with three distinct worlds. In one we see an Ulster fall-guy, McKinnon, despatched to a vily overcrowded gaol for his part in a warehouse robbery. In the seductive world of chambers, a star QC washes his hands of the case though his inquisitive black junior, Irina Platt, scents an injustice. And in a busy South London copshop a young detective-consta-

ble preens himself on getting McKinnon and his partners convicted even when his girlfriend, WPC Sandra Bingham, starts asking awkward questions.

What is fascinating is the way Hare gradually breaks down the barriers separating these three worlds. And it is no accident that it is women, excluded from clannish male values, who act as the unremitting seekers after truth. One of Hare's key points, in fact, is that each area of the law subscribes to the team ethic. The judiciary, with its arcane collegiate rituals, is seen as an exclusive, mainly masculine club. The cops, too, have their own private code of loyalty. And even in prison, Hare shows McKinnon getting savagely beaten up for betraying the criminal freemasonry.

In short, Hare sees the law as a microcosm of British society: one still dominated by rigid hierarchical fraternities. But Hare's great theatrical virtue is that he doesn't just tell; he shows. It is hard, in fact, to imagine a more exhilarating

first-act climax, beautifully staged by Richard Eyre, than the one here.

In a tremendous triptych, we simultaneously see McKinnon languishing in his prison-cell, the promoted, bent cop setting off for a celebratory game of snooker and the flash QC and Irina settling into a plush Covent Garden stall. It is typical of Hare's tight-knit structure that the opera in question is *The Magic Flute* which deals with trials, freemasonry and the final triumph of light over darkness.

No play is flawless; and once or twice I was reminded of Bagehot's description of Dickens as a "sentimental radical."

Irina's crusading zeal is weakened, rather than strengthened, by her apparent sexual affection for the wronged McKinnon.

Hare's wit, at its best Will-dean, also sometimes seems prejudiced. "If you run the country," asks Irina, "is it compulsory to go to the opera in the evening?" Better, I would argue, an Establishment that goes to Mozart than not. But this is to cavil at a play that combines a savage indignation at the ineffectualness of our penal system with a surprising sympathy for the poor bloody infantry of police and prison-officers who have to make a collapsing system work.

I leave it to others to judge

the play's legal accuracy: what impresses me is Hare's moral fervour and campaigning theatricality. Mr Eyre and his designer, Bob Crowley, have also brilliantly found a way of staging the play that echoes its main theme. The Olivier stage is dominated by giant triple screens on to which close-up images of prison, police station and barrister's chambers are projected. But, as connections are gradually forged, so the pictures acquire high-definition harmony as in a remarkable panorama of Crystal Palace.

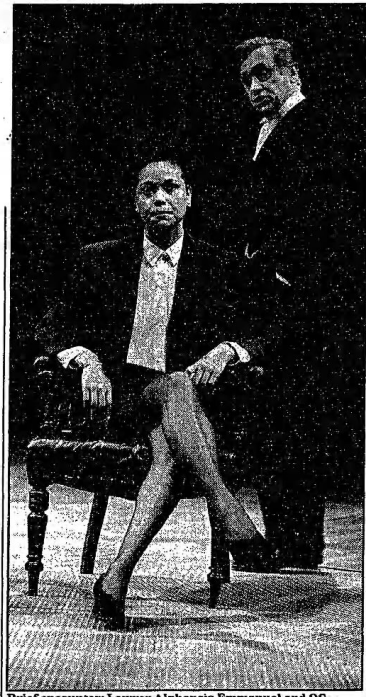
Eyre also directs the key confrontations with admirable stillness allowing the words to do the work.

In a 25-strong cast there are signally impressive contributions from Lesley Sharp as the inquisitive constable, Alphonisia Emmanuel as the unbudgeable lawyer, Richard Pasco as a paternalistic QC, Michael Bryant as a wickedly impish judge, Keith Allen as an unscrupulous copper and Paul Moriarty as a long-suffering desk-sergeant.

But what really cheers me is to find Hare chasing, with such stylish anger, after the big public issues and the National Theatre placing itself at the centre of the debate about law, order and the kind of society we inhabit.

A stirring evening.

Box office: (071-928-2252).



Brief encounter: Lawyer Alphonisia Emmanuel and QC Richard Pasco in *Murmuring Judges* PHOTOGRAPH: TRISTRAM KENTON

## Billington Judges Judges

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