

Last chance for charity

Michael Billington praises the spiritual generosity in Richard Eyre's revival of *The Night Of The Iguana*

THE NIGHT OF THE Iguana, dating from 1960, may well be Tennessee Williams's last great play. It is also one of his most neglected and, on the evidence of Richard Eyre's exemplary revival at the Lyttelton, deeply moving: it deals, as so often, with victims and outcasts but finally suggests that human frailty may conceal an innate resilience.

Williams's setting is a paint-fringed Bohemian hotel on the west coast of Mexico in 1940: another of his last-chance saloons. The action stems from the spiritual crisis of Larry Shannon: a cracked-up Episcopalian minister reduced to resorting to mutinous, all-female parties of Texan Baptists round Mexico.

At the hotel he is offered shelter and sex by the rapacious widowed proprietor but of far greater importance is the spiritual consolation he finds there. It comes intriguingly from a wry Nantucket spinster, Hannah Jelkes, who rears the world with her grandfather, a 97-year-old poet struggling to complete his final work. Out of this odd encounter, Shannon discovers the strength to survive.

Langorous, dreary and symbolic, it is a hard play to pin down. But for me its meaning is expressed in two antithetical moments. In the first, Shannon explains to the butch ringleader of the Texan tourists that his life is cracking up on him and is bluntly asked "How does that compensate us?"

Against that shuffling of the spirit, Williams sets the virginal Hannah's last-act description of an encounter with an Australian businessman who found solitary sexual release in fondling her underwear. Asked if she were not disgusted by the incident, Hannah simply replies "Nothing human disgusts me unless it's unkind, violent."

Through these episodes, Williams opposes crude materialism and spiritual grace: human life as barter and exchange versus an acceptance of our essential loneliness. But there is nothing soggy or sentimental about Williams's compassion. Hannah is a sharp cookie who sees through Shannon's failure as a priest, brutal rapacity with under-age girls and voluptuous delight in martyrdom. But Williams's point is that "a understanding" can save even the most damaged and degraded souls: it is, in short, an unfashionably optimistic play.

For me its spiritual generosity outweighs its technical imperfections: its casual structure, its belated introduction of the iguana-symbol, its easy caricature of a party of outsize Germans. Whatever Williams's flaws, Eyre's production also reminds you of his built-in sense of theatrical poetry: one of the evening's delights is watching the way Bob Crowley's palm-clad verandah changes its texture as Jean Kalman's superb lighting shifts from noonday brightness to storm-flecked sunsets.

EILEEN ATKINS'S Hannah is also one of the best Tennessee Williams performances I've ever seen. Ms Atkins not only has the priceless gift of stillness but also the ability to radiate spirituality: standing on the twilight verandah in her kimono brewing poppy-seed tea, she communicates not only solitude but the character's mysterious inner strength.

She is also excellently partnered by Alfred Molina who makes Shannon a burly, untamed bear of a man whose wild eyes have clearly looked into the abyss. Frances Barber, though slightly too young for the role, captures the voluptuous earthiness of the Costa Verde proprietress and Robin Bailey rightly makes the nonsensical poet a barking hustler who gradually moves towards an acceptance of death.

But what the play finally proves is that there are far bigger things in drama than formal symmetry; that you come out of the theatre moved by Williams's stoicism, charity and affirmation of the resilience of the human spirit.

Billington on Iguana

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