

Michael Billington on a telling Mamet metaphor at the Haymarket

Life in the final stages

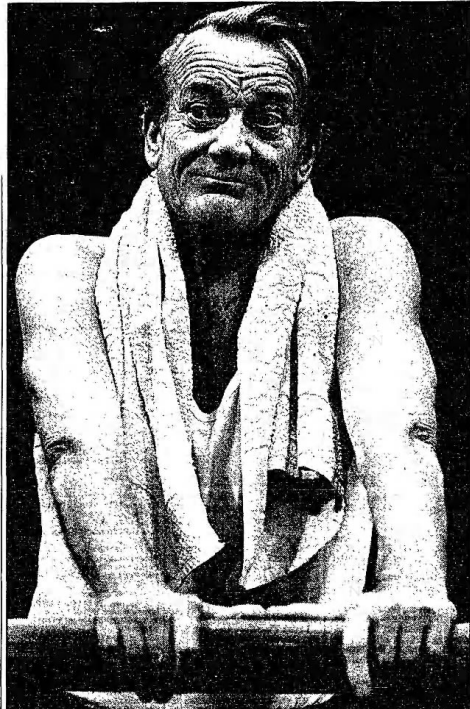
DAVID Mamet's *A Life in the Theatre*, first seen in New York twelve years ago, predates both Ronald Harwood's *The Dresser* and Michael Frayn's *Noises Off* yet has a great deal in common with both. It is both about the paths that cling to old actors and the precariousness of theatrical illusion. But it is also, as Bill Bryden's excellent new production at the Haymarket makes clear, a satiric valentine to a medium Mamet palpably loves. Written in 26 cryptic scenes that move easily between backstage and onstage in an English rep, it homes in on the shifting relationship between an old actor (Robert) and a young one (John). At first, Robert is all wise saws and ancient instances: the complete pro. But gradually Mamet reveals his vulnerability and isolation. "We must all have an outside life, John," he sagely counsels; but it is John who gets the letters and the phone-calls while Robert, in his twilight years, comes to see that the theatre both represents life and devours it. Although the action is confined to a theatre, it works as a telling metaphor for all professions in which the experience of age is supplanted by the energy and ambition of youth.

But Mamet also provides a blithely witty, kaleidoscopic parody of the kind of plays a working actor encounters. One or two (such as the American Civil War drama) seem out of place in a British provincial rep but they are all hilarious: the tight-lipped Rattiganesque domestic piece, the autumnal neo-Chekhovian comedy, the flag-brandishing romantic epic (the speech at the barricades might have come out of *Les Mis*), the two-men-in-a-lifeboat drama. Mamet also anticipates Michael Frayn by showing how the theatre treads a delicate tight-ropes between manufactured illusion and fragmented chaos: each scene is wilyly belittled by non-ringing phones, missed entrances or six pages of dialogue arbitrarily skipped. Mamet simultaneously satirises the fragility of theatre and celebrates its most masculine rituals. But what motors the play (even in an early piece like this) is the dazzling economy of the language. The first scene alone might serve as a text-

book example to aspiring dramatists. On the surface, it is a nervous backstage encounter in which Robert is seeking reassurance that his performance went well: underneath it is about a lonely old actor's desire to be asked out to eat. Initially John alone is "farnished", at the end Robert echoes the word, signifying his grateful acceptance by the younger actor. My sole reservation about Bill Bryden's production is that, by inserting an interval, it punctures the vital rhythm of the piece, surely one of Mamet's points is that a play has the same rise-and-fall curve as life itself. But there is a first-rate set by Hayden Griffin that contrasts the naked bulb tackiness of dressing-rooms with the artificial glamour of the stage and even of the auditorium which we see in a receding perspective. Mr Bryden also never lets us forget that, just as much as Glengarry Glen Ross, this is a play about work and the competitive disciplines it imposes.

It is also expertly played. Ironically, Denholm Elliott is not an actor who has devoted his life exclusively to the boards, but he brings out all of Robert's passion for theatre and pained insecurity. Paying tribute to "Young people in the theatre... tomorrow's leaders", Mr Elliott exudes a wringly testiness, he hovers around the stage-door like an elderly orphan looking for a home and in the theatrical parodies he is diabolically funny. He brings a Gielgud tremolo to the Chekhov scene and in the Rattigan-Coward sequence bats every line out front like a narcissistic matinee-idol. Only the flag-waving scene needs more rhetoric. But Mr Elliott gives us a beautiful piece of acting wreathed in silvery sadness.

Sam West as John proves an admirable foil. He plots precisely the character's growth from deferential nervousness to truculent independence to tuxedoed assurance: even the casual "he borrows twenty quid off the old actor in the final scene tells you everything about their reversed status. And that, in the end, is one of Mamet's most powerful points in this tight-packed play: that, inside its hierarchical structure, the theatre functions like an instinctive democracy in which talent alone is the ultimate arbiter of success.



Denholm Elliott... a beautiful piece of acting wreathed in silvery sadness. PHOTOGRAPH BY DOUGLAS JEFFERY

**Almeida/
Cripplegate**
Gerald Lerner
**Kurtag
Portrait**

THERE have been Kurtag Portraits in Amsterdam, Berlin, and Vienna and, inevitably, Adrienne Coengery has been

texts of her own choice, and has continued to exploit her three-octave range and her expressive ability while writing more melodiously and avoiding the mannered extremes.

The Attila Jozsef Fragments for voice alone is a particularly beautiful example. Miss Coengery performed the cycle at both of the first two concerts in the Kurtag Portrait. On each occasion she gave a wonderful display of controlled colouring, melodic phrasing, and a rare ability to capture the essence of

Sadler's Wells

Mary Clarke

**Merce
Cunningham**

THE heart of the first programme being given by the Merce Cunningham company at Sadler's Wells is Fabrications, of 1987. It is a marvelously constructed, marvel-

Billington On A Life In The Theatre

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Sun, Dec 27, 2020