

MICHAEL BILLINGTON finds moon exploration shaky ground on which to base a drama

Lost in space

GEOERGE STEINER claimed that nothing is more symptomatic of the enervation of the Western imagination than our incapacity to respond to the landings on the Moon: "not a single great poem, picture metaphor has come of this breathtaking act."

Paul Godfrey's new play *The Blue Ball* does nothing to change that: indeed, the best one can say of this curiously earthbound play about space exploration is that it goes some way towards explaining why this vast subject has failed to ignite the artistic imagination.

The play exists in two time frames. In the present we see a dramatist called Paul interviewing sundry American astronauts — male and female, young and old — to discover what the experience of space is like: mostly he gets

programmed sound bites from capable technicians who talk in mundane generalities. And in scenes from 30 years back, we see a young pilot called Alex being selected for a pioneering space programme that is a synthesis of American and Russian experiences: transformed into a national icon, he is a deeply ordinary guy deprived of any future purpose.

Godfrey has clearly done his homework, but he hasn't forged it into a dramatic event. On the way, he offers several fascinating bits of information: that one of the veteran American astronauts received only \$30 in expenses for his trip to the moon, or that there was a collusion to cover up the fact that micro-meteorites pass through the brain in space.

But he never gets to grips with the politics of space exploration and the extent to which it was always governed more by super power prestige



Dexter Fletcher (front) and Nigel Terry HENRIETTA BUTLER

than scientific curiosity; and his conclusion that the astronauts themselves, though undeniably brave, were chosen partly for their very representativeness is theatrically self-defeating.

If the evening proves anything it is that dutiful research alone doesn't make drama. Indeed, Godfrey's introduction to the Methuen edition in which he describes the primitive nature of the Saturn V rocket and the hand-stitched space suits is more engrossing than anything in the play. If there is drama to be made out of space exploration, it lies in the moral and political issues it raises rather than the fact itself: Stoppard's point in *Jumpers* that the lunar landings throw earthly absolutes into question opens up far more lines of enquiry than Godfrey's assiduous

ventures amongst the astronauts.

That said, he directs his own 90-minute play perfectly well, and Stewart Laing's design encompasses a spectacular climactic display of the galaxy reminding us of earth's relative insignificance. Trevor Peacock as a grizzled survivor of the moon-landings, Nigel Terry as an obsessive supervisor of space programmes and Pooky Quesnel as an astronaut's wife isolated from her husband's experience, also give strong individual performances.

But Godfrey's play confirms that the carefully-programmed, highly technical nature of space exploration somehow prohibits poetry and has a tendency to cramp not release the dramatic imagination.

At the Collesloe. Box office 071-928-2252.

Billington on Ball

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Sat, Jan 30, 2021