

A play about pensions? **Michael Billington** at The Pit on an unlikely piece of theatre given life by personal torment and political passion

The battle of Hastings

MICHAEL Hastings' *A Dream Of People at The Pit* is a strange and intriguing mixture of pensions and Piers Plowman. On the one hand, it is a clear attack on the Government's dismantling of the Beveridge-conceived welfare state which proposed, never let us forget, a system of social security "from the cradle to the grave". On the other, it offers a mystic modern equivalent of Langland's medieval vision of "a field full of folk". It doesn't quite hang together but it is good to see a play animated by political passion.

Hastings' hero, Claude Godber, is a quiet idealist: a deputy-secretary in the Department of Social Services driven to manhandle the PM when he nods off during a paper on Pensions By 2025 envisioning breadlines and ration-books for the swelling ranks of the elderly. Claude proceeds to an-

tagonise his wife, a Pirbright matron still dreaming of lesbian liaisons in the wartime WAAFs, by shipping the family furniture to Ethiopia. He also embarrasses his department by scouring Britain to find current victims of pensions anomalies and getting them to turn up at an office farewell. Having ruined his marriage and career, and presumably sacrificed his own pension, he winds up in the Frinton-on-Sea beach house of an old couple who killed themselves out of financial desperation.

The play's faults are manifest. Mrs Godber's nostalgia for wartime female camaraderie is too obviously introduced as a parallel to her husband's memories of clandestine meetings of welfare-state visionaries. And, having spent half the play rounding up victims and beneficiaries of the modern pensions muddle, Godber does nothing very shocking or surprising

with them. But what I admire about the play is its pragmatic Utopianism: its passion for the principles that animated Beveridge of worthwhile pensions, free health-care, free milk for schoolchildren (Mrs Thatcher, of course, attracted political attention as the notorious "milk-snatcher"). Mr Hastings has taken what sounds like an undramatisable subject ("Pensions are boring," says one character. "People don't want to hear about them") and given it life both by relating it to personal crack-up and by endowing it with a visionary element: at one point Godber describes people all staring in wonderment at a strange object in the sky that has something of the mystical fervour of William Langland's medieval allegory.

Anyone writing an allegory today invites ridicule; and I have no doubt we shall hear the usual routine sneers about dra-

matic exploitation of cardboard city derelicts (as if drama shouldn't be representing what is happening under our noses).

But I admire the principled battle of Hastings and the energy of Janet Suzman's production ingeniously designed by Johan Engels with a set of plexi-glass panels. Peter McEnery is also admirable as Godber: he presents a model of Civil Service rectitude inside whom a burning anger rages. Judy Parfitt wrestles unavailingly with the impossible role of his wife but there is good work from Clifford Rose, all silvery apoplexy as a department boss, and from George Malpas as a Rear-Admiral on an index-linked pension since 1972 which makes him rich as Croesus. But that is just the kind of anomaly Mr Hastings sharply pinpoints in a play that, for all its flaws, at least has a vision of an ideal society based on sound Beveridge principles.

Billington on Hastings

Clipped By:



ianharris

Sun, Jan 3, 2021