

Orange Tree, Richmond

LAST TIME we saw a play in which a middle-aged male journalist was left alone with a young girl the result was the cosmic mayhem of Sarah Kane's *Blasted*. But, though it shares a similar situation, James Saunders's *Retreat*, at the Orange Tree, Richmond, is an infinitely subtler, richer play about the nature of moral responsibility. An Inspector Calls, a friend muttered. I thought more of Albee's *A Delicate Balance*, in which a couple, fleeing from some nameless terror, sought sanctuary with their oldest friends. But Saunders's play sets up its own unique reverberations. We are in a Welsh cottage late at night, Harold, its owner, is listening to Mozart and drinking scotch, when the doorbell insistently rings. The visitor is Hannah, the hitch-hiking daughter of his oldest friends who were killed in a Pakistani air-crash. "I've come to disturb your peace," she claims and she's not joking. Harold, whose wife died in a car accident and who now devotes himself to his disabled daughter, has created a rural retreat whose calm is violated by this importunate visitor who clearly intends to stay for rather more than dinner. Saunders sets up a calculatedly artificial situation — and just how artificial we only discover through a last-minute theatrical surprise — to explore the debt we owe to others and ourselves. Harold has sold his house in Barnes, shed all his past possessions — somewhat improbably for a newspaper columnist — and created a new life based on paternal care. But the basic question Saunders asks is whether cocooned happiness is ever a possibility and whether we can resist the clamorous demands — embodied by the importunate Hannah — of the outside world. As in his 1977 play, *Bodies*, Saunders implies it is better to accept your own neuroses and the world's imperfections than to struggle to achieve a sterile contentment. Host and guest, occupant and intruder: it is a classic situation, much used by Pinter and Albee and here given a philosophical spin by Saunders to make us side, at different times, with both parties. We feel for Hannah in her need to give and receive protection: we understand Harold in his anxiety to divest himself of religious guilt and unwanted commitments. The situation's sexual tension is a bit slow to surface but otherwise this a nail-biting 100 minutes in which director Sam Walters gets two brilliant performances from

unacknowledged demons of desire and Victoria Hamilton turns brooding, watchful stillness into a moral demand.

□ Until June 3 (0161-940 3633).

Michael Billington

TALL TALES FOR SMALL PEOPLE

Scotland/ touring

THERE IS a dearth of good children's theatre in Scotland, but here is the best of stuff. Tall Tales for Small People employs Comunicado's energetic flair, originality and distinctive talent in this neglected area. The source material is three tales of master traveller-story-teller Duncan Williamson, superbly adapted by Gerry Mulgrew, who sensibly sticks closely to the original language and line. The Paisley audience I saw it with were totally enraptured by *The Hunchback And The Swan*, *The Wee Girl And The Boots* and *The Taen-Awa*, written mainly in a genuine, dense but comprehensible Scots.

It is an ensemble piece, with actors and musicians pulling together strongly. A tinker family plod wearily on the road. "Traivelin, traivelin", stopping for the night on a private estate, bribing the gamekeeper who attempts to move them with stories. At the end he can't wait for them to come back, and no wonder.

This magical, entrancing medley has many moments of thrilling but simple brilliance: the animal impersonations, of fox, cow, badger, owl, robin are achieved naturally, with characteristic flourishes which make them utterly convincing. The most ordinary touches quite alter the scene, as feathers become snow, or queesting squirrels, or autumn winds give way to clear, moonlight nights. There are strokes of breathtaking genius: when the hunchback is dying of a broken heart for love of the swan, the robin crosses a vast lake to appeal to the swan for mercy. One moment we see this from a God's eye view, in an upturned hat where you see a miniature lake, and the small figures of robin and swan, then in a flash, you are there in close up, as a passionate colloque takes place between them. The transposition was stunning. The world should see this show, whatever its age!

□ Touring until June 3 (0131-228 5465).

Joy Hendry

Billington on Retreat

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