

Michael Billington on revolution by negotiation in David Edgar's thoughtful new play, *The Shape Of The Table*, at the Cottesloe

## Table that straddles the wall

ONE of the few bright aspects of British theatre this year is the speed with which dramatists have responded to events in Eastern Europe. But, in so doing, they have also revealed a good deal about themselves. Brenton and Ali gave us a carnivalesque, Meyerholdian vision of Soviet history in *Moscow Gold* and Caryl Churchill an oblique, surreal evocation of Romania in *Mad Forest*.

Now comes David Edgar's admirable *The Shape Of The Table* at the Cottesloe which displays his usual hard-headed fascination with the detailed processes of politics.

Mr Edgar sets his play in an unnamed East European country that bears a distinct resemblance to Czechoslovakia: you will find here rough equivalents of Havel, Dubcek and the former Czech prime minister, Ademeč. The action takes place

between November 14 and December 16, 1989 in a stately, baroque banquetting-room dominated by a rectangular table.

Around this table we see how a communist government collapses through a combination of its own internal contradictions, discreet Muscovite string-pulling, the reformist aspirations of a group called Public Platform and, significantly, the advances of modern technology. In a world where satellite TV can flash pictures of a popular demonstration round the globe in seconds it becomes difficult to keep the lid on protest.

Mr Edgar is doing two things in this thoughtful play. The first is to show how revolution can be accomplished partly through negotiation: where other dramatists give us images, Mr Edgar gives us committees. Thus we actually see Public Platform, led by a dissident writer and collector of

fairy tales, haggling with the Communist Party over the detailed agenda for talks. But the second, and larger, thing Mr Edgar is doing is asking whether a new order will genuinely arise or whether it too will be compromised by power, economic uncertainty and its own naivete.

It's the right question to be asking but there is a touch of theatrical manipulation about the way Mr Edgar poses it. The key figure here is Josef Lutz (memorably incarnated by Stratford Johns) who in the first half is pure fairytale ogre: a hardline First Secretary of the Party who has crushed earlier reforms with Stalinesque brusqueness.

In the second half, however, he becomes a rational critic of the new regime. In a final encounter with the fairy tale anarchist Pavel Prus, about to be installed as President, he refuses to sign a pardon that

would give him freedom (echoing an earlier gesture by the once-banned writer) and warns against the insidious corruptions of office. The points are well-made but, in a play that argues there are no fairy tale happy-endings in politics, it is disconcerting to see a corrupt demon being miraculously transformed into a pragmatic spokesman.

But it is a good play precisely because it understands that radical change derives from hard work rather than heroic gestures. Jenny Killick, who formerly ran the Traverse, also makes an exemplary debut at the National with this strongly-acted, well-paced production.

Karl Johnson as the anti-Utopian Prus is first-rate. It is an intelligent evening in which Mr Edgar suggests that the Common European Home, if it is to be a reality, will only be constructed through painstaking effort.



Karl Johnson: first rate as Pavel Prus

## Billington on The Table

Clipped By:



ianlharris

Sun, Jan 3, 2021