

We come almost bang up to date with the year's third home-grown Eastern European saga, David Edgar's *The Shape of the Table* in the National's Cottesloe auditorium.

Jenny Killick's admirable debut production for the RNT is set by Dermot Hayes in an emblematic simulacrum of Prague's baroque castle palace: gilded decorations, chandeliers, tall windows, a long table. Here, various factions — Public Platform led by a Vaclav Havel clone, the National Peasants' Party, and the new Communications Minister (Stephen Boxer) — grapple for the future of their country, jolted by public demonstrations of disaffection.

The first act is witty, elegant, funny; Edgar's most stylish writing to date. The second act — after the surprise resignation of the avuncular prime minister (Oliver Ford Davies) and a unifying rendition of the national anthem — is dominated by two long, beautifully wrought debates, after the breaching of the Berlin Wall last year. Pavel Prus, the Havel figure (keenly played by Karl Johnson), engages first with a re-animated Dubcek-type (John Ringham) and then with an incorrigible old party lion (Stratford Johns in his best performance for years).

World events have given new life and sophistication to Edgar's already considerable dramatic and dialectical post-Marxian writing; the elegiac waspishness of *Maydays* (1983) yields to the supple, humorous reflectiveness of a committed craftsman at the peak of his powers.

Coveney on table

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ianharris

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