

### Theatre Upstairs

Nicholas de Jongh

## The Fever

WALLACE Shawn, the American actor-playwright, is going to show us something significant. In the past, he explains, he has shown it to select people in the privacy of his friends' apartments. But now he has grown rather daring and he is asking us to pay money to see it: so he sits there in the empty space surrounded by black drapes — a baldish, plumpish, bespectacled chap.

Within moments the raw, bleeding thing is out in the open — nagging for attention for the next 100 minutes, with no relief. The thing is no less than a rich, white liberal conscience which either belongs to Mr Shawn or is being used by him for his own thoughtful purposes.

The conscience erupts in the middle of the night in a luxury hotel in some South American country where it cannot speak the language, and it leaves Shawn vomiting into the lavatory bowl. Between puking bouts, the conscience worries and fantasises. "Shouldn't people dance and hold each other close?" it asks through the emotionless Mr Shawn. Well yes, you think, from time to time they should. Ah, says the conscience, think about it. In America there is dancing for Mr Shawn and his friends, while across, so to speak, the street, there are crushed testicles and beggar women.

The conscience moves on and comes across a Mr Karl Marx who tells him that his cup of coffee contains the history of those who picked the bean. Mr Shawn agonises. Is it not true, the conscience asks, that we could not exist without the poor? Would it be right to say that there is suffering so that rich liberal America can have itself a good time?

I abominate this narcissistic form of liberal conscience that parades its guilt with rapt self-absorption, pretending it gives us food for thought.

## Nicholas de Jongh on Fever

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