

## The Pit

Nicholas de Jongh

### Singer

A SINGLE scene of Peter Flannery's *Singer*, a three-hour moral epic set in amoral times and first seen in Stratford last year, takes place in Auschwitz. But it is the Nazi concentration camp which is lodged at the play's grim epicentre. For Auschwitz teaches *Singer*, the play's eponymous central figure, that survival may depend upon bartering, intrigue and power-play; that no natural justice exists and that the collective memory is quickly distracted by the baubles of time.

Flannery traces *Singer*'s progress across 40 years, with Joe Melia far too jovial as a redundant narrative commentator. Here is a speculator's rise from the slums of post-war Bayswater to a Hampstead mansion, with high life, champagne and freelance lechery amid the go-getting aristocrats. Peter Rachman, the 1960s property speculator, is clearly *Singer*'s model.

But Flannery does not simply

provide a crook's ascent in post-war Britain, the spivs of Mr Attlee's time replaced by the speculators of the Tory years. Nor is the play an anti-semitic tract, showing how a canny foreign Jewish immigrant, marked and marred by Auschwitz, can make business fools of big English business and braying aristos.

Some other theatrical business is transacted. The play's second half is prised dramatically from the realistic frame in which *Singer* has been encased. The Auschwitz survivor, drowned in a Hampstead lake, emerges Phoenix-like to become first a hedonist amid sixties hippies; then a saviour of the down-and-outs and finally with two other concentration camp habitués, Manik, the brain-damaged communist and Stefan the altruistic Polish artist, he becomes an implacable revenger in pursuit of a sadistic camp guard. This *Singer* is quite at odds with the exploiter we have earlier seen, and the transformation is not convincingly justified or motivated.

I think Flannery suggests that in the end *Singer* aspires to

just revenge and good, particularly when that good brings social reward. But Flannery's contentions and the form in which they are expressed quite fail to pass muster with me.

There is cartoon-like animation and energy of performance in Terry Hands's appropriately sombre and lurid production, upon Simon Higlett's set of symbolically rotting bare boards. And Anthony Sher's *Singer* is a triumph of sheer Jonsonian energy and life — relish, with greed and guile overlaid by an oleaginous charm. It is a mesmerising performance to watch, and is complemented powerfully by Mick Ford's Stefan, the voice of nagging conscience.

### Ronnie Scott's

Ron Atkins

### James Moody

LAST week you may have watched James Moody on the *Jazz 625* revival on BBC2 act the silent straight man to Dizzy Gillespie's tomfoolery during the gaps between music. A role

## de Jongh on Singer

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