

undermines the merely adequate choreography of Jonathan Butterell. No sensational Donna McKechnie dance solo this time, alas. And I fear that Sheila Gish's version of 'The Ladies Who Lunch', while intriguingly desperate, lacks the steaming, gorgonesque assurance and technical finesse of Elaine Stritch. Furth's playlets of poisonous intimacies stand up well - they sound like expanded New Yorker cartoons - though they could survive cutting. Bobby's friends encroach along a galleried walkway at the circle level, goading him like a Greek chorus then splintering into their own scenarios: the dieting couple, beauti-

This really was a milestone: the first new play at the National, the debut of a dazzling, witty playwright, a glorious series of 'takes' on the philosophical nihilism of Beckett, the 'theatre as life' of Pirandello, acting itself, even John Osborne ('Don't clap too hard, it's a very old world').

In his debut RNT production, director Matthew Francis is blessed in the coruscating sparkiness of Simon Russell Beale as Guildenstern and the stooge-like innocence of Adrian Scarborough as the other one ('Eternity's a terrible thing: where's it going to end?'). Alan Howard is the eccentric Player - 'We're more of the blood, love and rhetoric school' - whose troupe becomes a metaphorical conduit of the *Hamlet* action.

By the third act, though, the conceit has worn thin and the sheer length of the play begins to conspire against its ingenuity. This was always the case, but Stoppard's own brilliant 1990 film version and a recent, heavily politicised production by the immigrant Russian Jewish company Gesher, in Tel Aviv, have revived my admiration for an astonishing theatrical debut. The RNT's production tells me, and I imagine you, nothing new, apart from confirming Russell Beale's continuing progress to the front rank.

Byron's *Cain* (1821) is an unexpected pleasure in the Pit. John Barton, who believes with Goethe, Sir Walter Scott (the piece's dedicatee) and Schiller that this is a great work, has tucked and trimmed the text and topped and tailed it with direct quotation from Genesis. His careful and unpretentious production clears the stage for a riveting duet between the rebellious Cain and the magnificent grey wraith, the angel Lucifer.

Excluded with the family from Eden, Cain refuses to worship Jehovah and is ripe for abduction through the Newtonian universe and into the Realm of Death. Although, as the Byron scholar John Jump has said, the verse aspires to the condition of prose, one is continuously delighted by the lucidity of the arguments and the sudden shaft

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fully done by Rebecca Front and Clive Rowe: the tense wedding breakfast with Sophie Thompson's brilliant cameo and delivery of 'Getting Married Today'; the vocal competence of Liza Sadoviy's chattering first-timer with a joint; the forlorn post-coital farewell of the airline stewardess (Hannah James).

Finally, Bobby sings of 'Being Alive'. Ingeniously, Lester makes you feel at this point that he has grown through the evening with little reason for doing so. For all Mendes's intelligent handling of the material, the missing ingredients of deep-dyed class and New York pizzazz ensure the absence, too, of a definitive killer punch.

Several years before *Company* arrived in town, Tom Stoppard made his name at the Old Vic with *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1967), and the sight of John Stride and Edward Petherbridge tossing coins as the hapless courtiers entered modern theatrical history.

## Coveney on Rosencrantz

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