

The programmes of Rodney Ackland's **Absolute Hell** at the National and Ronald Harwood's new play **Taking Sides** at Chichester both have pictures of war-time devastation on their covers: the first of a Beaton fashion model in the ruins of the London Blitz, the second of blasted Berlin. Ackland's glorious, sour play studies the aftermath of war in a louche drinking club between VE Day and the Labour Party's general election victory in 1945. Harwood has compiled a stern tribunal drama – Sartre's *Altona* meets Hochhuth's *The Representative* – in which the Nazi 'credentials' of the conductor Wilhelm Furtwängler are examined by a philistine American officer during the 1946 denazification proceedings in Berlin.

Absolute Hell is a 1987 re-working (premiered at the Orange Tree, televised in 1991) of *The Pink Room* (written in 1946, produced in 1952) which Harold Hobson denounced as evidence of talent in its death throes. The West End impresario Binkie Beaumont considered the piece a libel on the British people. Ackland wrote hardly anything else (he died in 1991) and his reinstatement at the National in Anthony Page's fine production – Page directed the TV version and claims to have read the play in the early Seventies (and did nothing?) – is long overdue.

Why the outrage? The drinking club of *La Vie en Rose* is a decadent bathhouse for drunks, gays, bisexuals, mistifs, doxy old women and unsavoury showbiz types. There's an Irish madwoman (Alison Fiske) who yells Biblical hogwash at the club's window, a disgusting film producer (Peter Woodthorpe), and a drunk painter (Richard McCabe) who recognises a fellow spirit ('We keep it to ourselves') in the central figure of the failed writer Hugh Mariner.

The real objection, I imagine, was not to the bohemianism so much as to the picture of a nation falling apart when we had all supposedly just pulled together. Critics, of course, are habitually rude about playwrights, that is their privilege. But whereas a successful genius like Noel Coward survived years of rejection and dismay while the theatre changed around him in the late-Fifties, Ackland simply buckled and faded. Coward's own louche epic, *Semi-Monde* (1926), an upmarket, upscale *Absolute Hell* set in the Ritz Hotel remained unproduced until 1977 at the Glasgow Citizens'. 'If Labour gets in, they'll nationalise women.'

Christine, snapping out first and last orders, precarious on high heels, with a hairstyle like a well-ordered bird's nest and a voice like a gin-sodden angel of death's. The spinal narrative is that of Hugh's falling homosexual affair with a straight-laced dress designer (Pip Torrens) and his desperation to sell his screen version of *The Blitz Story*. The existentialist mood touches all the characters, from Hugh, who looks in a mirror and sees nothing there; to the displaced aristocrat, the 'treacle queen' (Geraldine Fitzgerald), who despises herself for slumming it; and, especially, Christine, who clutches at men's trousers in the small hours with shameless abandon. Ackland's self-pitying contempt for the critics is powerfully expressed in Hugh's long tirade directed at Betty Marsden's lisping, nearly immobile lesbian literary critic, a drag compound, surely, of Hobson and his distinguished predecessor, James Agate. Greg Hicks delivers it with ferocious conviction. The critic has her wig brutally removed, and she dies, hilariously, onstage.

More critical wiggling in Harwood's *Taking Sides*, scrupulously well directed by Harold Pinter. Daniel Massey's comically stricken, Mr Pastry-like Furtwängler sports a bald pate with tufty side-bits that crinkles at the temples as the play wears on. It crinkles most, I feel, when the conductor is charged with having arranged for his disapproving critics be sent to the Russian Front. At the risk of incurring a one-way ticket to ...Bognor Regis? Nuncheon?...I feel that the trouble with this play is its beating on about the sublimity of music, its banal evocation of Furtwängler's mystical powers of interpretation.

Although Harwood cleverly loads both sides of the argument, we are clearly meant to respond to Furtwängler's cultural saintliness as a mitigating factor in his kowtowing to Hitler. There is also evidence, well dramatised here, to prove that Furtwängler helped many individual Jews escape from Berlin. But that might have been his insurance against greater

misdeemeanours. The play ends on the beginning of the smear campaign. The American officer (Michael Pennington, acid and feral) reports that a tame journalist 'will write what we tell him'. The best performance is that of Gawn Grainger as a timid second violinist who needs authoritarianism – musical and political – in order to function. He ends up working as a security guard for the Americans. Here is the real play. Allegiance and moral dependency are much more interesting a subject than whether or not Furtwängler was an agency for both Hitler and Beethoven.

The Hot Mikado is a modest shake-up of Gilbert and Sullivan, not a patch on *The Black Mikado* in the mid-Seventies, wrecking in a Forties cool jazz setting when




Coveney on Taking Sides

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