

PATRICK Marber was scheduled to deliver a new play to the National this year. Instead he has delivered a first-rate production of Denis Potter's 1979 TV hit, *Billington on Hills*: the one in which seven adult actors play children in the corrupted Eden of a wartime Forest of Dean. As Potter's most cohesive script, it transfers naturally to the stage.

Its secret is that it uses Potter's particular memories of the summer of 1943 to explore children's constant gift for playfulness and cruelty. The war shapes their fantasies, games and sorrows: Willie lives in a dive bomber's dream world, bullying Peter is a Mittyesque parachutist and the despised Donald executes lonely rituals invoking the memory of his dad, who has been captured by the Japs. Yet there is also something strangely timeless and horribly recognisable about the kids shifting alliances, about the boys' competitive tension in the presence of the flirty, mothering Angela and Audrey and about the children's collective guilt over Donald's eventual death. Potter's vision, in contrast to the apocalyptic pessimism of *The Lord of the Flies*, seems to stem from lived experience.

In general, television plays — Potter's included — sound verbally thin when robbed of the camera's speaking eye. But Marber and his designer, Richard Hudson, solve the problem magically by creating a totally artificial world: a child's pastoral dream of an imagined England, all rolling hills and Enid Blytonish toy animals, which offsets the casual cruelties on display. Marber also wittily brings the two worlds — real and stagey — into collision by having Audrey, in a moment of celebration, boot one of the sheep into the distance and by having Peter aim a menacing swipe at the church spire.

Paddy Cunneen's score, also very Potterish, deploys pop-songs of the period and the actors reinforce the point that the child is father and mother of the man. You can deduce their whole adult futures from Gerard Horan's swaggeringly weak Peter, Steve Coogan's dreamily fantasising Willie, Gerilline Somerville's bossily attractive Angela and Debra Gillett's affection-craving Audrey. After the stuttering start to karaoke, it is good to be reminded of Potter at his best.

MB

Billington on Hills

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