

First night

Fascism echoes patrician culture

Michael Billington

The Designated Mourner
Cottesloe

WALLACE Shawn's new play, the Designated Mourner, is a minimalist work not unlike My Dinner with Andre: no action, no instant narrative, just talk. Yet it is an extraordinary and haunting piece about the nature of America: in particular about the contest between an isolated patrician culture and an answering spiritual fascism.

We are greeted at the Cottesloe, in David Hare's production, by a long trestle-table laden with books. Behind the table sit three characters who address us and occasionally each other. Jack is a graduate who has always feigned an interest in Rembrandt and poetry but who is plagued by his own insecure sense of identity. Alongside him sit his wife, Judy, and his famous father-in-law, Howard, who have always moved effortlessly through the rarefied world of literature, the arts, and the finer products of Western civilisation.

Jack seems to conjure up the memory of the other two and it gradually emerges that he is the designated mourner at the death of their particular world. We realise that the despised underclass — what a sociologist once called the "admass" — has revolted against the elitist values of its privileged superiors. Howard, Judy and their kind have been imprisoned, blood has flowed in engulfing rivers, people have been executed. Shawn, in fact, envisions an apocalyp-

tic world which has seen what Jack calls "the disembowelling of the over-bowelled".

What is remarkable about Shawn's play, or series of intercut monologues, is its evenness of tone and sense of historical determinism. Shawn recognises the value of high culture yet condemns those who hug it to themselves as if it were their exclusive personal property. He also understands the deprivation of those who are locked out of the secret garden, yet bewails the descent into barbarism of a society where "everyone on earth who could read John Donne was dead".

Shawn denies us many of the conventional satisfactions of drama, but what he has to say is crucially important: that we live in a world that preserves high culture for the few, that is leading to a dumbing-down of the mind and coarsening of the spirit and that is poised on the brink of a return to the Dark Ages. His prime target is clearly America with its protected oases of cultures in a desert of commercialism; but almost everything he says is horrifically relevant to modern Britain.

It's a demanding play but one's attention is held by the fine acting of Mike Nichols as Jack, finally breaking down into tear-sodden regret for what is lost, by Miranda Richardson as his wife, cocooned in her own world of finer feelings, and by David de Keyser as the father-in-law who represents the insulated smugness of the poetic sensibility.

As a play, it takes its time; but what Shawn has written is an unnerving tract for our times that equates spiritual and political fascism.

Billington on Mourner

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