



Ian McKellen as Gennaro . . . 'a performance of superb discipline' PHOTOGRAPH: DOUGLAS JEFFERY

Family at war with itself

Michael Billington finds broad humanity in Richard Eyre's production of *Napoli Millionaria*

YOU sometimes know in a theatre, within a matter of seconds, that you are in safe hands. The curtain rises on Richard Eyre's production of Eduardo de Filippo's *Napoli Millionaria* at the Lyttelton to reveal a noisy Neapolitan argy-bargy. Through the open doors of Anthony Ward's stunning set you see a long stone-walled passage where people casually loiter in the late autumn morning sun. Instantly you feel you are in for a good time.

Eduardo (as he was always known throughout Italy) wrote this humane wartime comedy in 1946. He brought it to the Aldwych in 1972 with himself playing the lead role with a magisterial stillness. But the most radical aspect of Peter Timmiswood's new version is, while retaining the Neapolitan setting, to employ Liverpool speech-rhythms. The result gives the show a working-class authenticity and spares us the delight of listening to British actors sounding like a convention of ice-cream vendors.

But what makes this play so moving is its portrait of ordinary people dehumanised by wartime profiteering. It starts in 1942 with Amalia Jovine keeping her family together, despite the head-shaking doubts of her tram-driver husband, by

selling black-market goods to her neighbours. But what saves the family also destroys it. After being captured by the Germans, her husband, Gennaro, returns in 1944 to find that his wife is now an adulterous racketeer, his son is a thief, his grown-up daughter is planning to decamp with a GI and his youngest daughter is dying. The moral is clear: the family that preys together no longer stays together.

The parallel that constantly comes to mind is O'Casey. Like the great Irishman, Eduardo has a compassion for common folk corrupted by war (think of the looting in *The Plough And The Stars*) and the ability effortlessly to merge tragedy and comedy. One might object to the over-earnest irony by which the fate of Gennaro's dying daughter ultimately hinges on drugs rendered unobtainable by the black market, but one of the lessons taught by Moliere's *The Miser* in the Olivier is that an active pleasure in contrivance is one of the oldest pleasures in theatre.

My initial doubt was whether Ian McKellen as Gennaro could compete with what Thornton Wilder once called Eduardo's "powerful quiet". But this is McKellen the character actor at his very best. He shambles around the house, in his vest

and baggy trousers, like some shaggy bear, but when preparing to face the world neatly folds his handkerchief into a perfect square. He is at his best in the silent grief of the second act where, weighed down by his nightmare memories of war, he simply stares at his transformed wife and her slyway consort with a hollow-eyed dismay. It is a performance of superb discipline in which McKellen harnesses his overarching physical energy.

Clare Higgins is equally impressive as Amalia whom she plays as a busily protective wife and mother whose sensibilities have been blunted by war: instead of making a moral judgement on the character, Ms Higgins makes you question what other options she had. And in a large cast there is an outstanding performance from Geraldine Fitzgerald as a gawky war-bride forever collapsing into insane giggles and puzzling over whether, since her marriage was unconsummated, she is technically a virgin. Richard Bremner is also first-rate as a petty-bourgeois accounts clerk reduced by war to a state of mendicant poverty.

But the great feature of Richard Eyre's production is that, although he captures the hustling public nature of Neapolitan family life, he focuses on the key issue: the broad-based humanity of a play that shows how ordinary people are all but destroyed by the economic imperatives of war.

Billington on Napoli

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