



Kathryn Hunter... a figure of demonstrable evil. PHOTOGRAPH BY DOUGLAS JEFFREY

Too slickly executed

Michael Billington
on *The Visit*

WHAT is style? A simple way of saying complex things, according to Cocteau. But watching Theatre de Complicite's production of Durrenmatt's *The Visit*, acclaimed at the Almeida and now at the Lyttelton, one notices how style can also turn into a complex way of saying simple things. The ensemble technique is brilliant but one comes out humming the company rather than talking about the play.

Durrenmatt's fable is, in fact, stark, chilling and resonant. A legendary plutocrat, Clara Zachmannstein, offers the citizens of her hometown a billion pounds in exchange for the life of the grocer, Alfred Schill, who as a young man seduced and killed her.

Obviously the play demonstrates the corrosive effects of greed. But it also suggests that justice is purchasable, that democracy is corruptible and, intriguingly, that the credit system motivates

human actions: Schill knows his number is up once he sees his fellow-citizens so deep in debt they have no alternatives but to kill him.

The power of Durrenmatt's plays lies in the way ordinary people are transformed by economic necessity into murderers. But this production, directed by Anabel Aiken with Simon McBurney, suggests from the start that the townsfolk are Gogolian grotesques: we first see them, with their gap-toothed smiles and angular bodies, collectively judging an expressive rattle through their station. We seem to be in the presence of a troupe of accomplished mime-artists rather than middle-European bourgeois.

What I miss in this production is the chilling economy that informed Peter Brook's 1981 original. When Elysse Fontaine's cool and elegant Clara demanded Schill's life it came as a moral shock as if a Dior model had turned murderer. But brilliant though Kathryn Hunter is in the role, she seems from her first entrance, dark-gloved and hobbling on gold-en-

crusted crutches, to be a figure of demonstrable evil. And, where this production dwells on the collective brutality of Schill's killing, it has none of the horror of Brook's version where the murderers simultaneously lit up cigarettes in the dock once their task was accomplished. The greatest effects are often achieved by the simplest means.

Although I find this production overrated and over-long, I would not deny the company's prodigious physical skill. They are also individually impressive as well as collectively cohesive. Simon McBurney's Schill has a moving sense of reluctant complicity in his own destruction and Ms Hunter's Clara, for all my doubts about her pre-emptive moral strike, combines autocratic grandeur with a whiff of iron.

Although Theatre de Complicite received an ecstatic ovation I feel that in *The Visit* style dominates content and that Durrenmatt's vision of the sheer ordinariness of evil is finally overruled by ensemble expertise.

Billington on Visit

Clipped By:



ianlharris
Wed, Mar 3, 2021