

mystery of the generation.

Two big openings, too, at the National. David Hare's edgy, disturbing production of Wallace Shawn's *The Designated Mourner* suggests that the world, or at least part of it, has ended. The barbarians are through the gates, executions have taken place, literary society is destroyed and the surviving Jack – mesmerisingly played by film director Mike Nichols as a twitching, laughing, sardonic compromiser – reports that everyone on earth who could once read John Donne is now dead.

Jack is joined at a long trestle table, laden with books, on a stage designed by Bob Crowley to resemble a golden, underground bunker, by his ex-wife, Judy (the equally mesmerising, fatally beautiful Miranda Richardson), a teacher of literature; and her father, Howard (David de Keyser), a languid, ghostly/ghastly famous writer. Their relationships and vivid memories are refracted through a series of intercutting monologues that repay serious attention and implicate us all.

The actors seem to be reliving the past by jerkily prodding at their own versions of it, as if reading off autocue or referring to a text in front of them. The overall impact is eerie and hypnotic.

The play also reworks Shawn's own reactive relationship with his father, William Shawn, the famous editor of the *New Yorker* who cropped up, too, in Shawn's *The Fever*, a similarly apocalyptic monologue about poverty for liberals. The question, finally, is: does everything go out the window, and if so, who cares? Nichols's Jack is left fighting back tears, saying the breeze on your face in the park is all that matters. Is it?

Coveney on Mourner

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