

important property in the theatres of Greece and Rome.

Howard's vowels became more elongated as Oedipus awaited death and the sky was shattered with the thunder of Zeus, an electric storm typical of the vicinity and acquiring an intensity quite separate from its technological derivation. Suzanne Bertish (a powerful Jocasta in the first play) took the platform as the Messenger recounting the blind and banished hero's assumption by the gods. The evening closed on a great peaceful exhalation, a sense of wonder and elemental calm of the sort you read about but rarely experience in the living theatre. A triumph.

Most new plays wither in comparison, but Stephen Poliakoff's latest, *Blinded by the Sun*, entering the RNT Cottesloe in repertoire alongside *The Oedipus Plays*, is a great stab at a really good topic: the price we now put on pure research in science or the arts. We crave soundbites, results, and the suits are moving in to close down laboratories, undermine vocational ingenuity.

There have been famous scientific frauds because of these new pressures, most notably (as

the RNT programme recounts) that of the widely exposed 'cold fusion' experiments in Utah in 1989. As then, Poliakoff's innovative chemist, Christopher (superbly played by Duncan Bell), rushes into press statement before print. Chris's discovery is a sun battery, unfortunately represented by a boffin's test tube bubbling with sci-fi style green liquid and hitched to a Meccano-like claw. The play does not hinge, cannot possibly do so, on this feeble device. But then Poliakoff is no more really writing about science than he is about my left foot.

The luminous performance by Frances de la Tour as Elinor, the resident genius who cannot explain what she's doing, must suffer, you feel, dramatically, from this fact. But her secrecy is a facet of her integrity, and she pleads the dignity of professional silence as though it were the Fifth Amendment. This stance becomes deeply admirable as the play moves towards a resolution at an academic ceremony where Elinor is honoured with a Lifetime Achievement award for not having done anything.

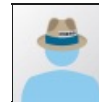
Poliakoff, as usual, is bending towards poetic metaphor and

here strikes as deep as he has ever done on the unquantifiable value of human existence. Although his characters and situations are, on the whole, skimpily drawn, he does serve up a compelling theatrical brew. Almost incidentally we are informed that the evidence against Chris's apparent fraud may itself be suspect. Ron Daniels's production is less about what you believe in than whom can you trust.

The play, surely one of the year's best, is therefore eminently watchable, eminently enjoyable. Alongside de la Tour, Douglas Hodge – bearded, impulsive, hectically intoned with a Ken Livingstone whine – is energetically brilliant as the new broom with insufficient talent to complete his own experimental forays.

Odd, after such pure resort to the ancient language of theatre in Epidaurus, to see the Niggawa Company's magical, strenuously manufactured Japanese version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the Mermaid (one more week). Great sensuality and great effects. Great cart: but where's the bloody horse? I'm not all that sorry to say the question is superfluous.

## Blinded Coveney Observer



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