

First night

# Poliakoff makes shining return

Lyn Gardner

Blinded by the Sun  
Cottesloe

THESE is something positively Jacobean about Stephen Poliakoff's latest play, half-mystery thriller and half-revenge tragedy and always wholly compelling even when it seems intent on winding itself into intricate knots.

The Latin inscription at the entrance to Magdalen College Oxford's old Daubeney science laboratory — "without experiment it is not possible to know anything adequately" — dominates the stage, conjuring up a university's shabby chemistry department with a glorious past but uncertain future.

In a final act of either inspiration or revenge, the retiring head of department appoints Al, an unsuccessful scientist but efficient administrator, as his successor. Al's mission is to reinvent the department, attracting sponsorship and students. But he doesn't count on the intransigence of Christopher and Elinor who pursue their own scientific research with an apparent ruthless purity of purpose.

Scientists, suggests one character, are the conjuror's favourite audience because they believe everything they see. So it proves as Christopher announces he has developed the sun battery — an endless source of non-polluting energy. Everyone has reasons for wanting to believe him, but it is Al who turns detective and unravels a kind of truth. A kind of truth because, as in all Poliakoff's work, the truth is a slippery,

squidgy thing that it is difficult to get a firm grasp on and which is almost entirely a matter of perspective.

Al may convince himself that the colour coded evidence he keeps in plastic bags constitute the real story of what happened but, as Elinor points out, you cannot reduce everything to nice neat patterns. We never know for certain that Christopher's discovery was fraudulent, and in the wake of what becomes known as "the occurrence", Al prospers, building a successful career as a popular science pundit. He ends up destroying the past while paying lip service to its traditions.

The old chemistry lab is pulled down to make way for a department of media studies.

On its simplest level, Poliakoff tells a gripping story of scientific fraudulence and the changing face of modern research in a free market economy where ideas and discoveries only have any currency if they are marketable.

But the play goes far deeper than that, investigating the selective nature of memory and the relativity of truth, and serving as a metaphor for the way we make biased selections from, or falsify, the past in order to construct an acceptable future for ourselves.

It is beautifully acted by Frances de la Tour as the ageing Elinor, a woman who has become a dinosaur in the new scientific world, Duncan Bell as the suave, self-deceiving Christopher and most of all by Douglas Hodge who suggests that behind Al's flabby exterior and lazy vowels there may be a steely brain. A welcome return to the National and form for Poliakoff.

## Blinded Lyn Gardner Guardian



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