

Theatre

Blinded by the Sun Royal National Theatre

The narrator-hero of *Blinded by the Sun*, the latest work from Stephen Poliakoff, warns us at the start, with a defensive snigger, that he will always have the last word. But in fact the play gives the final say to another character who ends the piece on a call for "patience" – an appropriate conclusion to a drama that looks at how pure research and long-distance creativity in university science departments are now at risk in the market-driven, management-led ethos of our times. The department under scrutiny here is offered, therefore, as a metaphor for the general lowering of values which Poliakov perceives in our culture, a metaphor designed to be all the more telling because (it's implied) you would expect science to be the last bastion of resistance to such contamination.

Blinded by the Sun takes off

from a case of scientific fraud and the play is not above a little trickery itself in that, for much of the first half of Ron Daniels' absorbing production, you are led to believe that this deception will be the central focus of the work. In fact, it's what the response to the fraud reveals that is the real heart of the piece.

Christopher (Duncan Bell), the scientist who fakes a breakthrough sun-battery for creating entirely pollution-free energy, is an enigmatic blank and of much less thematic importance than Douglas Hodge's Al, a blokey 40-something-cum-overgrown-adolescent who has been made

head of department not because of his so-so talent but because of his management skills.

Exposing Christopher is both the "making" of Al and, by an ironic route, the un-making of the department. Metamorphosing into a celebrity author of pop bestsellers that capitalise on the exposure by fomenting a suspicion of experts, Al also gets elected onto the key committee that grades scientific departments. This is bad news for Frances de la Tour's dryly-amused, wistful, high-minded Elinor, a scientist at work on some profound project that can't show short-term results.

Al, her former pupil, hero-worships her, until, that is, he asks her advice about exposing the fraud, and she disappoints him by telling him to do nothing. She already suspects that Al will become a department-cutter and so gambles on the hope that

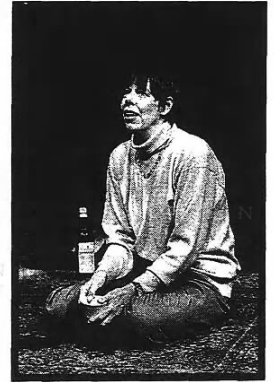
Christopher, stalling for time with the fake sun-battery, is on the brink of a genuine find. This would bring in millions and save her own research facilities. However, her lapse ends up producing directly the opposite result.

It all makes for a thought-provoking evening but not one without giggles and irritations. Al's precise level of scientific cleverness seems to suffer convenient fluctuations for the sake of the plot. There's a perfectly dreadful character, a nubile history researcher who becomes a PR hack, who is there for no better reason than to have things explained to her in layman's terms and make your average cardboard cut-out look rounded. And, as a narrative device, Al's bizarre habit of keeping mementoes of all his experiences in polythene bags, which he fishes out of lockers to show us, makes him look less like a scientist than

a frustrated modern artist with an eye on the Turner Prize.

■ *In rep at the Cottesloe. Booking to 21 Oct: 0171-928 2252*

PAUL TAYLOR



Frances de la Tour

John Haynes

Blinded Paul Taylor Indy



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