

Reviews

Theatre

Deceit and delusion

The Country

Royal Court, London

★★★★

Martin Crimp's new play is an assault on the pastoral myth: the Virgilian idea of the country as a place of order, harmony, continuity. What Crimp shows, in this fascinatingly cryptic 90-minute piece, is the fractious disharmony of a deracinated generation less concerned with planting roses than transferring neuroses from the city to the country.

As in Crimp's last play, *Attempts on her Life*, the audience plays the role of detective: we piece together the plot from scattered clues. We deduce that Richard, a doctor, and his wife, Corinne, have moved to the country with their two children to start a new life. But the rustic idyll is shattered when we learn that Richard has brought home a young woman he claims to have found lying unconscious by the roadside. Corinne's suspicions, like ours, are instantly aroused: Richard's old drug habit, his failure to visit a dying patient, the needles in the girl's handbag all become vital pieces of evidence in a tale fraught with deception.

In the past Crimp's plays have attacked urban consumerism. Here he widens his vision to suggest that country life is now filled with transplanted bourgeois desperation. Richard's unseen doctor-partner constantly quotes *The Georgics*: what we get from Crimp is a

Pinterish philippic about corrosive deceit and delusion. If it works it is because Crimp artfully withholds information to generate suspense and because he subtly plays with verbal leitmotifs: the word "track", for instance, constantly recurs implying both a rural byway and the marks left by a mainlining addict.

The Pinter parallel is strongly reinforced by the use of language as a mask. When Corinne finally meets Rebecca, the unexpected guest, their encounter is fraught with a semantic nit-picking that conceals mutual hostility: as Rebecca shrewdly remarks, "the more you talk, the less you say". And the last scene between husband and wife is an elaborate verbal dance in which a truth suddenly spoken comes like a blow in the face.

Much as I admired the play's cryptic quality, it is taken a shade too far in that, from the side seats, you can't see the whole of Vicki Mortimer's set. But Katie Mitchell's production has the fevered intensity she normally reserves for the classics and Juliet Stevenson's excellent Corinne displays the edginess of someone tiptoeing over eggshells, while Owen Teale as the doctor has the nervous bonhomie of the practised liar and Indra Varma as the mysterious guest radiates a tetchy sensuality.

All contribute to a deeply disturbing play that both demolishes Wilde's assertion that "anybody can be good in the country" and adds to the growing catalogue of works charting the bourgeois malaise.

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Until June 24. Box office
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Owen Teale and Juliet Stevenson in *The Country* at the Royal Court Photograph: Henrietta Butler

Billington on Crimp's *The Country*



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