

## A shattering achievement

IT IS hard to believe that this painful, passionate play was written when Ibsen was 66. Nowadays we think of him as an intimidating moralist, all whiskers and gloom, but there is a recklessness, a sense of pushing art to its limits in *Little Eyolf*, which remains shocking even in our own unshockable age.

The play often seems to anticipate the subsequent discoveries of psychoanalysis, while its portrait of a desperate marriage puts one in mind of the cruel intensity of Strindberg and even Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

It is an exceptionally tough piece to pull off, and in the only previous production I have seen it appeared almost risible. Ibsen trundles on portentous symbols with all the delicacy of a removal man lugging a piano upstairs.

When the sinister old rat-catcher arrives and insinuatingly inquires whether the Allmers household has "any troublesome thing that gnaws here in this house",

### Theatre

**Little Eyolf**  
Swan Theatre,  
Stratford-upon-Avon

we know that Ibsen isn't just referring to rodents but to buried guilt and nagging remorse.

With great daring for a play written in 1894, Ibsen lays bare the secret sexual life of his characters. Alfred Allmers, a failed writer, is impotent. His wife, Rita, is sexually voracious.

Like a gruelling session on the psychiatrist's couch, the cause of this trauma is laid bare. The couple were making love, when their baby fell off a table and was badly crippled.

More daringly still, it is gradually revealed that Allmers also nurtures a near-incestuous love for his half-sister, Asta; a love which she ardently reciprocates. These, as Holmes might have observed, are dark waters, Watson.

Noble's production has a raw anguish from which one

physically flinches. As in his superb *The Cherry Orchard*, now in the West End, there is never a moment when the emotion rings false, a remarkable achievement in a play as tormented as this.

The catastrophe occurs at the end of Act 1, when the nine-year-old son is drowned. This is all the more shocking because only moments before, the boy's mother has come within an ace of saying she wishes him dead, frantically jealous of the way her damaged child separates her from her husband. The rest of the play takes place in a mood of stunned grief and reckless truth-telling.

There are some brilliantly illuminating moments in Noble's consistently gripping staging, sparsely designed by Rob Howell. In Act 1, Joanne Pearce's marvellous Rita reaches tenderly to embrace her husband, only for Robert Glenister to jump back like a man threatened by murderous assault.

In Act 2 his half-sister presents him with a bunch of bedraggled water-lilies, and

Picture: ALASTAIR MUIR



Fine performances:  
Pearce and Glenister

he holds them in his arms like the child he has just lost.

At the end, the action is agonisingly frozen as Rita reaches for her husband's hand and he stares blankly, blindly, unresponsively ahead.

Pearce's performance is one of the finest of the year. She combines sensuality with racked neuroticism, unconditional love with appalling selfishness.

At times her desperate face seems to be in perpetual spasm, and in the great, drained last act, her smudged and haunted eyes seem to have gazed for far too long at the unendurable.

Glenister is almost as fine as Allmers, fiercely capturing the baffled incomprehension and terrifying mood swings of those confronted with inexplicable tragedy, while Derbhla Crotty beautifully captures the mixture of tenderness and terror with which Asta responds to the illicit promptings of her heart.

My only caveat is that this short play would achieve an even greater impact if it weren't interrupted by two intervals. It remains a shattering achievement, though, intense, turbulent and deeply moving.

Tickets: 01789 295623

CHARLES SPENCER



Spencer Telegraph Eyolf



Clipped By:

ianlharris

Sun, Sep 18, 2022