

ARTS □ REVIEWS

A case of pastiche Pinter

MARTIN CRIMP is a constantly intriguing writer whose plays almost always create an atmosphere of creepy menace and alienation. He uses language that is spare to the point of impoverishment and there is a firm sense of authorial control. You don't feel that Crimp's characters ever take him by surprise. He plots their every move and then seems to observe them from an immense distance but with great clarity, as if through the wrong end of a telescope.

All this is well and good and fashionably minimal, but there are two disadvantages. The first is that his dramas may generate interest, but they never generate warmth. The second is that he often appears to be up to his ears in debt to Harold Pinter. That debt is particularly burdensome in *The Country*, and at times the piece seems less like an original play than an immensely skilful parody of dear old Harold.

The setting is one of those vaguely forbidding rooms that are such a feature of Pinter's work, and Crimp quickly wheels on the old device of the intimidating stranger who threatens another character's possession of the territory.

The action begins at night, deep in the country. Richard, whom we gradually realise is a doctor, has brought home a young woman whom he has found lying unconscious by the roadside. Or so at least he says. His wife, Corinne, is troubled by this intrusion, especially since her children are sleeping upstairs, and becomes even more anxious when she discovers that the woman's bag contains drugs and syringes.

As in Pinter, much of the dialogue is clipped and self-consciously stichomythic. As in Pinter, single words — "solicitous", "clean" — acquire a sinister resonance. As in Pinter, an unseen character, in this case Richard's partner in the medical practice, Morris, assumes increasing significance.

Crimp also combines the unsettling menace of the early Pinter plays with the sexual anxiety that informs his mid-period masterpieces, *Old Times* and

Theatre

The Country
ROYAL COURT THEATRE

Betrayal. This is homage, or pastiche, of a very high order. The trouble is, I'm not sure that Crimp realises how derivative the play is.

He differs from Pinter in a crucial respect. Pinter would have left everything ambiguous. Crimp obligingly spills the beans, so that we eventually learn the precise and squalid nature of the relationship between the doctor and the young woman.

Pinter's deliberate obfuscation often irritates, yet Crimp's frankness with the audience proves disastrous. Once we know what is going on, the mysterious detached quality of the writing seems merely absurd, and we long for the flesh-and-blood drama of real people in real relationships rather than all this chilly artifice.

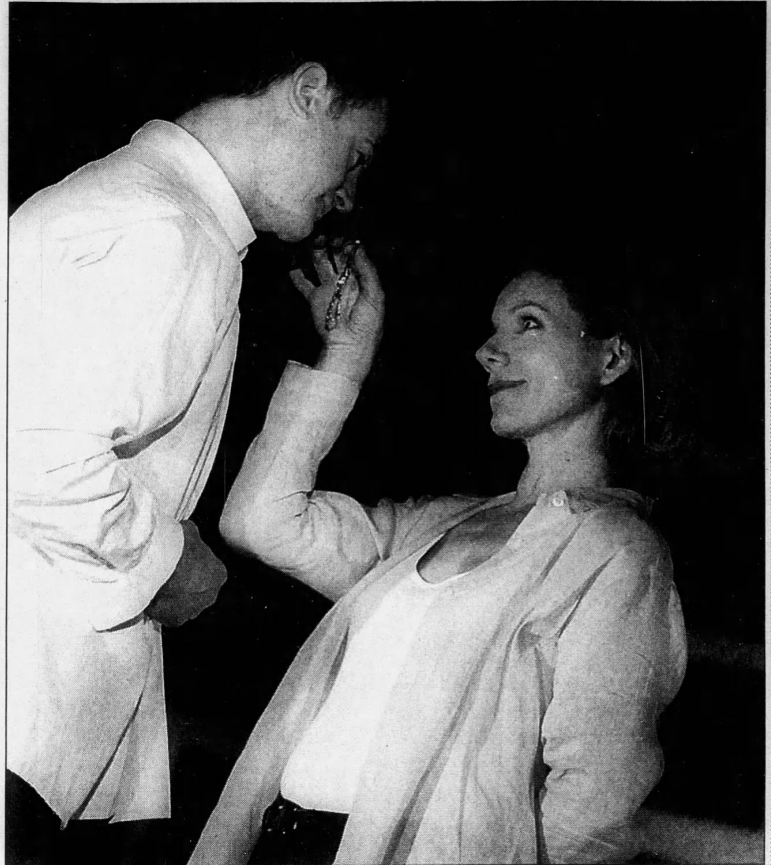
However, Katie Mitchell's production, bleakly and suggestively designed by Vicki Mortimer, holds attention throughout its 90-minute running time. She builds the tension effectively and the final moments are truly unsettling.

Owen Teale memorably combines shiftiness and charm as the doctor you would least like to attend you in a crisis. Juliet Stevenson plays the wife with the tense, clenched misery that seems to be second nature to her. Indira Varma seizes all her dramatic chances — and they are good ones — as a house guest who spells real trouble.

But Crimp is capable of more than wan Pinter parody. A few years ago he wrote a free and savagely funny adaptation of Molière's *Le Misanthrope* — in stinging rhyming couplets — in which he seemed to discover a reckless, hugely entertaining dramatic voice that was entirely his own. We could do with another dose of this unfettered Crimp.

Tickets: 020 7565 5000

Charles Spencer



Shiftiness and charm: Owen Teale and Juliet Stevenson in Martin Crimp's new play, *The Country*

Picture: ALASTAIR MUIR

Spencer on Crimp's *The Country*



Clipped By:

ianlharris

Mon, Sep 5, 2022