

THEATRE



At a wonderful loss for words

Blue Heart
Royal Court Downstairs at the Duke of York's, London

Now pushing 60, Caryl Churchill continues to be the most playfully and profoundly innovative dramatist in the country. *Blue Heart*, the new double bill at the Royal Court, combines high-spirited formal fooling with deep, troubled yet elusive feelings. This is theatre joyously re-juvenating itself in a production by Max Stafford-Clark that is a miracle of buoyant, biting precision and underlying melancholy.

"Heart's Desire", the first part of this thematic dipych, plays a hilarious wailing game with the idea of what it is to anticipate something. The world of Victoria Wood collides with that of Ionesco, as a spoofy soap-opera trio of sixtiesomethings (dickering married couple and sister-in-law) prepare for their daughter's imminent homecoming from years spent in Australia.

Acute to the fact that to wait nervously is also to imagine and to fantasise, Churchill keeps stopping, rewinding and restarting the action from different antecedent points, and sending it off on absurdist alternative routes (cue the arrival of a HIT ostrich). It is Death, of course, not a daughter, whose ring at that Avon Lady-doorbell we sit in fundamental dread of—a consideration soberly threaded into the uproarious proceedings. With a splendidly dotty daintiness, the cast backtrack and fast-forward, laying and unlaying a table more times than it's had hot dinners placed on it. The piece must be a nightmare to play, but they play it like a dream.

Darker in tone, the second play, "Blue Kettle", dramatises both our deep imaginative need for alternatives to reality and the damage this

compulsion can cause. It focuses on Derek, a boyish-looking 40-year-old man (superb Jason Watkins) who cons elderly women into believing that he is the son they gave up for adoption. The injury this inflicts on everyone's sense of identity (including, crucially, Derek's) is registered in the gradual disintegration of the play's language.

Your ears twitch incredulously when, out of the blue, the words "blue" and "kettle" start to crop up in the dialogue as replacements for whatever word the character actually means. At first, this has a smack of the kind of substitution game children play and you wait for its logic to emerge. But it becomes apparent that a closer analogy would be with a computer virus spreading through the whole piece. By the end, communication has broken down to the desolate blurring out of his only of the two usurper words. The world ends not with a bang but with hiccuped single letters.

You could make a marvellous straight play with the basic material: the central character's bleak psychology and the intriguingly varied reactions of the combed ladies—from Anna Wing's Joyce Grenfellish 80-year-old, who can't remember what she felt at the time ("That remains a blue kettle"), to the complex competitiveness of the two women, riskily brought together by Derek, who each think that the other is just his adoptive mother.

The linguistic trickiness Churchill has added does not get in the way but takes us to the heart of the theme by, as it were, performing it on the level of language: substitution and loss in a play about substitution and loss. A truly weird and wonderful evening.

To 18 Oct. Tickets 0171-565 5000
Paul Taylor

Blue Heart Taylor Indy



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Sat, Nov 19, 2022