

# Hello again, Mr Chips

Arnold Wesker is back in fashion. And about time too, says **Michael Billington**

## The triumph

**F**ashion is a giddy creature. Both Arnold Wesker and Bernard Shaw have lately been confined to the theatrical margins. They are, I suspect, considered a bit too preachy and tub-thumping for our non-ideological age. But both bounced back this week in major revivals that proved they are much more ambiguous, poetic and mysterious than the fashion-mongers assume.

Wesker's *Chips With Everything*, dating from 1962 and buoyantly staged by Howard Davies at the Lyttelton, famously uses National Service training as a metaphor for the English class system. We follow the progress of a group of raw RAF conscripts during their initial eight weeks' square-bashing and see them transformed from knobby, awkward Fred Karno individuals into a highly disciplined unit. But the key figure is Pip Thompson, a general's son who mutinously identifies with the rankers and who, until the very end, resists all attempts at absorption by the officer class.

It sounds like a piece of didactic realism; and it is perfectly true that Wesker has a point to make about the English class system's ability to

stifle dissent. When the Pilot Officer repeatedly tells Pip, "We listen but we do not hear... we applaud but we do not act," he offers a classic demonstration of what Marcuse called "repressive tolerance".

But, seeing the play again for the first time in 30 years, I was struck by its theatrical ambiguity. Behind the cool assurance of the rulers, Wesker implies, lies panic and uncertainty, beautifully caught in one scene where Angus Wright's Pilot Officer makes a nervous pass at a disdainful squaddie. But Wesker's ending is also theatrically equivocal. Intellectually, we deplore the transformation of the men into perfectly-drilled automata: emotionally, we can't help getting a buzz from their physical precision. And it comes as no surprise to find Wesker writing, in 1995, that he enjoyed square-bashing and that to see a rabble of clumsy men turned into an efficient unit is a "mesmerising experience".

The play has the complexity of art. But it is also much more than the piece of realistic data many initially assumed, indeed Nigel Dennis once wrote a mocking piece in *Encounter* suggesting it was actually written by RSM Brittain. Seeing it again, one is struck by its weird poetry. The language is artificially lean. And the play

contains two famous pieces of physical theatre. In one, the men, patronisingly invited by the officers to sing Presley numbers or tell dirty jokes at a NAAFI party, menacingly chant a peasant revolt song, *The Cutty Wren*. In the other, under Pip's direction, they carry out a perfectly choreographed night-raid on a coke depot. Neither episode is particularly plausible. Both, however, are theatrically thrilling.

Today we tend to divorce physical from verbal theatre. Wesker's great achievement, both here and in *The Kitchen*, was to show that they are allies rather than enemies. Howard Davies's production, staged in a wire compound designed by Rob Howell, also captures Wesker's blend of the comic and the serious: the opening scenes of *Reluctant Heroes* farce shade into something much more sinister with the persecution of the haplessly incompetent Smiler. And the touching scenes between Rupert Penry-Jones's griggishly authoritative Pip and Eddie Marsan's loyal working-class disciple, Chas, authenticate Wesker's claim that the characters are two sides of himself. The cast, including James Hazeldine as the corporal who lives with the men but sides with the officers, and Julian Glover as the lofty wing comman-

der, is first-rate, the occasion exhilarating. In this of all weeks, the play acquires an extra potency, reminding us that, in the late nineties, the Establishment, far from successfully stifling internal opposition, threatens to be unravelled by it.

If Wesker is a much more poetic writer than we allow, David Hare's fine revival of *Heartbreak House* at the Almeida also proves that Shaw is infinitely more than a manipulative brainbox. Once again explicit intention is subverted by art. Shaw's preface makes it clear that he was attacking the division between power and culture in pre-1914 England: his point is that the cultivated classes brought heartbreak on themselves by disdaining political responsibility. But, in performance, one is struck by Shaw's ungovernable compassion for his despairing, self-destructive Bloomsburyites.

Hare is not the first director to tap into Shaw's emotionalism: Trevor Nunn's 1992 Haymarket revival did precisely that. But Hare's gift is for propelling the action forwards (this version runs three hours compared to Nunn's four) while revealing the pain behind the social mask. Nowhere is this better seen than in Penelope Wilton's superlative

Hesione Hushabye, who rejoices in the role of radiant enchantress and then stops the heart with her admission that she does so in order to go on living "in this cruel, damnable world".

Hare gets across the key point that Shaw's play is a form of moral strip-poker in which despair is finally acknowledged. Richard Griffiths's Captain Shotover, though lacking the blasted antiquity of a *Sussex Lear*, movingly reveals himself to be a rum-fuelled dreamer. Emma Fielding's supposedly ingenious Ellie Dunn finally shows herself to be a tough realist driven by economic need. And Patricia Hodge's Lady Utterword is the outwardly cool colonial wife, terrified she may not have a heart to break.

This is not Shaw the preacher but Shaw the poet showing Edwardian England to be a House of Illusions forced to face the truth by the imperatives of history. But if the play lives on it is because it has the ambivalence of art and because there is still something insufferably moving about the spectacle of a whole class craving apocalyptic destruction.

*Chips With Everything* is in rep at the Lyttelton, London SE1 (0171-928 2252). *Heartbreak House* is at the Almeida, London N1 (0171-359 4404), till October 11.

Heartbreak Billington Guardian



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