

Theatre

Kirsty Milne

Heartbreak House
Chips with Everything
The Comedy of Errors

TWO playwrights, one living, one dead. Both with taste for state-of-the-nation plays that deal with big themes: class conflict, social change, altruism, love. Each inclined to verbiage. Each capable of high drama and fine comedy. Each with a fondness for inspirational actresses. United last week at the Almeida, where David Hare directs *Heartbreak House* by George Bernard Shaw (in partnership with AT&T). *Heartbreak House* is Shaw's portrait of Bloomsbury — England's "neuritic classes" — leading, charming, cultured, useless lives on the precipice of the First World War. Meetings are irregular and "pagan philosophy" prevails in the home of the eccentric Captain Shotover (Richard Griffiths), an inventor who subsists on rum. One daughter, Hensone Haskaby (Penelope Wilton), is a bohemian sister with a handsome, stay-at-home husband; the other, Lady Utterword (Patricia Hodge), is an upright lady of Empire. Into this household comes Ellie Dunn (Emma Fielding), a classless Shaw heroine. Her engagement to cigar-smoking industrialist Boss Mangan (John Bowler) promises a marriage as unopposed as that Hensone is determined to prevent it.

The play turns out to be 50 times funnier on stage than on page, thanks to a cast who work on every manner of arch of the eyebrow, every dip of the voice. The director, which Hensone attempts to seduce Ellie's strait-laced father ("The fact is, you don't strike in my box, Miss Haskaby!" brings to mind Ottoline Morrell making up to Mr. Bean, though neither Shaw nor Hare would forgive the suggestion, the play works best in the first, establishing act as a delightful and zany comedy of manners.

Shaw's social comment is less amusing. If Captain Shotover's house is a ship — and in line with the author's instructions, designer Vicki Mortimer has given the set a nautical look — it is a ship heading for the rocks. In a typically thumping and didactic preface, written in 1919, Shaw explains that he modelled *Heartbreak House* on Chelmsley, to show an industrial power-ruling class, disengaged from politics and destined for a sticky end, as scenarios familiar from films and novels like *The Shooting Party*.

But subtlety is not Shaw's style. He hangs home his point incessantly. The result is that the production drags badly in the second half, and the long, soliloquy diatribes become extremely trying. Some of this is well illustrated on Shaw's part: the arguments in a play like *St Joan* are infinitely clearer. Not much a director can do except slash 20 minutes off but the actors should be



Fifty times funnier on stage than on page Richard Griffiths and Emma Fielding in *Heartbreak House*, Shaw's portrait of England's neuritic classes leading charming, useless lives on the precipice of the First World War

Every arch of the eyebrow

The seduction scene brings to mind Ottoline Morrell making up to Mr Bean

congratulated. In particular, the two sisters are perfectly cast: Penelope Wilton, in defiant two-tone silks, as the generous romantic; Patricia Hodge as the didactical partisan who secretly longs to lose her heart.

Shaw flays the inhabitants of *Heartbreak House* for failing to give a moral or political lead four decades on. Arnold Wesker wrote about a young upper-class rebel who consciously tries to reject the role of leader. Chips with Everything, at the Littleton, shows a general's son "slimming" with fellow conscripts in the RAF. Pip, a general's son — "I was born in a large country house and I'm — in — rich" — doesn't want to be an officer. He wants to train with the sort of men who eat

"chips with everything". But the Air Force top brass breaks him in like an animal, forcing him to examine his motives and accept what they see as the natural authority of his social position.

Written in 1962, *Chips with Everything* is based on Wesker's experience of National Service in the 1950s. The first half is vaguely amusing in a *Dad's Army*-ish way — best in a silent sequence in which the squad nip out at night to steal coal for their heater. Only after the interval as officers intervene to drive a wedge between Pip and his squad, does the drama pick up. But there is an absence of real tension, real fear, despite atmospheric assistance from Rob Howell's wire-settling

set, which can look like a cage to a games pitch. James Harebine makes a good corporal, changing in an instant from familiar to fierce. But Rupert Penry-Jones could be more charismatic as Pip, and his tentative friendship with East Ender Chav (Eddie Marsan) is unconvincing. An odd choice for a revival by director Howard Davies.

SHAKESPEARE — whom Shaw considered an inferior rival — would be taken back by the RSC production of *The Comedy of Errors*, now at the Young Vic. One of his earliest plays, it brings together two divided sets of twins — two masters, both called Antipholus, each

paired with a servant called Dromio. One set are settled in Ephesus, the others newly arrived from Syracuse; and the quartet are mistaken for one another in the course of one chaotic day. At worst, the play can feel like a tiresome piece of juvenilia; at best, a cheerful romp. This director, Tim Supple, opts to be different by giving it the somber treatment.

Taking literally Shakespeare's choice of setting — Ephesus, in Turkey — Supple introduces exquisite Middle Eastern music, played live, that accentuates a sense of strangeness. It highlights the mental confusion of Antipholus of Syracuse, who finds himself erected by total strangers and nagged at by a wife who is actually married

to his brother. As for the end of the play, where the two sets of twins and their parents are reunited, Supple draws it out in a silent ritual of redemption that prefigures the yearning reunions of *The Winter's Tale* and *Pericles*.

The trouble is that *The Comedy of Errors* cannot take the serious treatment. It is not as serious as *Luciana*. She handles very naturally Luciano's mix of horror and delight when the man whom she believes to be her brother-in-law that is in fact his twin declares his love. It would be satisfying to see her relief when she realises romance is possible.

Some of the actors lack panache. But Thosilla Jansz, a slender star in a confident performance as Luciano, she handles very naturally Luciano's mix of horror and delight when the man whom she believes to be her brother-in-law that is in fact his twin declares his love. It would be satisfying to see her relief when she realises romance is possible.

John Goss is on as Kirsty Milne is an assistant editor of the *New Nation*.

LAST 5 WEEKS — MUST END 11 OCTOBER

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