

THEATRE Heartbreak House Almeida, London

Don't you just love the chirpy mindlessness of the *Evening Standard's Hot Tickets* guide? This was the section that predicted, of Richard Eyre's *King Lear*, "It should provide a suitably doomy contrast to the irresistible feel-funky factor of his *Gyps and Dolls*." And the other day it was flogging the new Almeida production of *Heartbreak House* with a similar euphoric stupidity: "David Hare takes a break from writing the seminal plays of the century to make his directorial debut at this Islington venue, with George Bernard Shaw's characteristically biting slant on the idle rich."

I treasure the idea of Hare switching off his word-processor on completion of yet another massively influential masterpiece and tootling over to the Almeida for some light relief with a lesser dramatist. Nothing, of course, could be further from Hare's own perception of the matter. As the programme note and this lucid, eloquently acted production bring home, it's *Heartbreak House* that is seminal – "the century's original state-of-England play", a genre to which Hare has made several extremely distinguished contributions.

Weirdly anticipatory, too, of the absurdism of Ionesco and of aspects of Brecht and Pirandello, the play kicks off in what looks like familiar Chekhovian territory. As in *The Cherry Orchard*, a cultured, leisured society – here a set of Bloomsbury bohemians in a country house during the First World War – is shown drifting towards its demise. But Shaw pushes the material to

uncomfortable extremes: the apocalyptic calculatedly jars with the zanily playful. When Trevor Nunn directed the last London revival, the proceedings began to the strains of the "Liebestod" from *Tristan*, already insisting on the death wish that is exposed in the exultant reactions to the Zeppelin raid at the end.

Hare's aim is to bring the sense of wasted passion and despair that lie under the surface of a play it would be wrong to regard as merely clever and cerebral. A rich thread of feeling is triumphantly provided by the superb performance of Emma Fielding as Ellie Dunn, the young girl whose unsentimental education during a night at the house is the play's throughline. Fielding has always had the gift of bringing a passionate radiance to intellectual convictions (how one would love to see her play Shakespeare's *Isabella*) and here she lends shining emotional truth to every stage of the character's somewhat rapid journey from romantic naivety, through the tough pragmatism of renouncing love for the money of the man who ruined her father, to a mystical marriage (itself undercut) with Shotover, the 88-year-old rum-fuelled captain of this symbolic ship of state.

Playing the Lear-like Shotover, Richard Griffiths (who must have been the bulkiest sea dog in naval history) comes across as neither old nor dangerously cracked enough: the reason-in-madness has too much reason and not enough madness. As the daughters, Penelope Wilton and Patricia Hodge give delicious performances. The former



Breaking up: Richard Griffiths plays unlikely paramour to Emma Fielding's Ellie Dunn

Photo: Ivan Kyncl

is all vague benevolent bohemianism, her comic penchant for coming on the throaty seductress not disguising the sad fact that the true love of her life is her wayward husband; the latter is a sleek monster of hypocritical propriety who breaks down when her father accuses her of having no heart to break.

It's pure joy to hear the imperious placidity with which Hodge can invest a line like "A good deal of my hair is quite genuine". A good deal of this *Heartbreak House* is quite first-rate and it's so well paced that, for once, you aren't wishing the climactic air raid would come half an hour sooner.

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