

Life is a house party on the cruise ship of fools

UNTIL I saw David Hare's absolutely ravishing production, I rated Shaw's *Heartbreak House* as no more than an over-extended comedy of upper-middle class drifters. But Hare has lifted the pall of arch and stage winsomeness and all those sub-Chekhovian emphases which have often stifled the play's theatrical significance. In Hare's conception, *Heartbreak House* emerges as a fierce state-of-the-nation indictment. His company, one of the best ensembles seen in London for years, play it at speed with lashings of wit, fun and passion.

The witty escapism and political detachment of Shaw's Edwardian and Bohemian people, for whom life is a house party and war will be just a frightfully big adventure, has never so hit home. Admittedly Vicki Mortimer's stage set, ineptly lit, provides no atmospheric sense of the play's Sussex country location. She supplies a conservatory with a view of brick walls, and not a room resembling a ship's façade as Shaw stipulated. But the play's main dramatic lines come over with piercing clarity.

When Ellie Dunn, arrives at *Heartbreak House*, smitten by an imposing liar who proves to be Hector, husband of her hostess, Hesione Hushabye, her heart duly breaks. But Emma Fielding's

Heartbreak House ★★
Almeida Theatre

NICHOLAS DE JONGH

superlative Ellie quickly achieves self-assertion. She ends up with Captain Shotover, her "spiritual husband", and Hesione's octogenarian father, played too young by Richard Griffiths, but with a fetching air of world-weary indignation.

The process that brings Ellie to Shotover also involves a discovery of how *Heartbreak House* (an early version of Britannia plc) is a temple of illusions, a cruise ship of fools heading for the rocks. People here mask their true selves: a pre-shadowing of Pirandello and Jean

Genet, delivered and played in Wildean style of exquisite comic paradox. Penelope Wilton, a delectable Hesione, who exudes the dead-pan humour of a Bloomsbury hostess, and Patricia Hodge, all snobbish hauteur and terrific fun as her sister, Lady Utterword, preside over the illusion-stripping.

Simon Dutton's hilariously distraught and caddish Randall, John Bowe's tough businessman with a soft centre and Peter McNery's Hector, dressed to flirt in his Valentino costume, make handsome examples of hollow Edwardian pomp and circumstance. It's a night high with laughter and serious delight.

● Box office: 0171 359 4404.



Drifters: Richard Griffiths and Emma Fielding in *Heartbreak House*

The sound of silver in the air as the Steinway sings

AUDIENCES prefer variety. At the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra's all-Strauss concert on Tuesday, there had been room to lie on one's back in the arena, but for last night's mixed-bag programme, the Prommers crowded together like a field of tulips from Amsterdam.

The orchestra brought a UK premiere: Three Preludes by Tristan Keuris, the Dutch composer who died suddenly last year at the unripe age of 50. The first was heavy-footed, murky and rather sinister, the second was elegantly syncopated and dominated by strings and harp, while the third was a frantic sprint coloured by

Prom 60 ★★
Royal Albert Hall

RICK JONES

tuned percussion instruments hammering at different speeds and the occasional bar of three-eight to confound the stiff conductor. Indeed, they were written as a test piece for a conducting competition, the product more of craftsmanship than of inspiration.

The pianist Arkady Volodos came on to perform Rachmaninov's Piano Concerto No 2 and made the Steinway sing, trilling in thirds in the second movement cadenza high



on the undamped strings. The sound was silver on the air. He played not a single unclear note and even his pianissimo breathed.

Bartok's *The Miraculous Mandarin*, a pantomime about a prostitute and her pimps touting for the ultimate client, elicited the most vivid playing from the orchestra. Riccardo Chailly hunched conspiratorially on the podium, ushering in each dark, chilling scene like one shepherding flies into a web.

Caprice turned to menace as comedy brasses became violently angry and flighty woodwinds panicked over stabbing strings. A savage Romanian dance traced the line between seduction and rape.

Strauss's *Dance of the Seven Veils* continued on a similar, if more lyrical, theme when the mood of the evening was for something different. Percussion with an Iberian flavour emphasised sultry barbarism which contrasted violently with the sophisticated, almost arrogant three-time of the waltzes. This was a floor-show when nobility was required. No encore followed.

● Box office: 0171 589 8212.

Ratings: ○ — adequate
★ good, ★★ very good,
★★★ outstanding, X poor

Heartbreak de Jongh Standard



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ianlharris
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