

Gray's anatomy

THEATRE

By
**Susannah
Clapp**

Simon Gray's new play begins with a sleep and ends with a silence. This progression must have pleased the director. *Heart Support* allows him to move from one of those interesting scenes that he so much dislikes to one of the silences that he savours. It is a tribute to a fine production that it should make an audience pay attention to its details.

Life Support at the Aldwych centre on or over a woman in a permanent vegetative state - a bit miserable? I heard rather than the woman. Its main speaker, subdued by his inability to help his comatose wife, is dummed and faded. Gray has written that there is nothing as irritating in a play as an unnecessary line and sometimes he overdoes it and sometimes he overdoes it. He is the obvious flamboyance and later regrets of his travel writer that interest Gray. The vegetative experience seems to matter less. If there are real-life origins for this inventive travel writer, they can hardly include Bruce Chatwin - flamboyant, but no number.

None of this is very damaging. Gray is one of the most intelligent dramatists writing for the English stage. *Life Support* has plenty of cracking jokes and its lack of explanations, its veiled quality, can be accounted for. The piece, which runs for an hour and a half without an interval, is in effect the third part of an informal trilogy. It continues - perhaps concludes - the examination of a character first put on the stage by Gray 20 years ago in *Chorus Dropped* and developed last year in *Simply Unconcerned*.

These earlier plays provide the history of a marriage - a quarrelsome, drink-soaked, enduring partnership - which helps to give weight to what happens in *Life Support*. They also give biographical ballast to figures in danger of seeming too easy a target when defined chiefly as the buffoonish creator of books with titles such as *Romans in Burma*. This is a character who provides ample demonstration of the tussle in Gray's work between comedy, irony and fastidiousness. The early plays equip him with a string of gruesome low-watt, a series of rehabilitative social

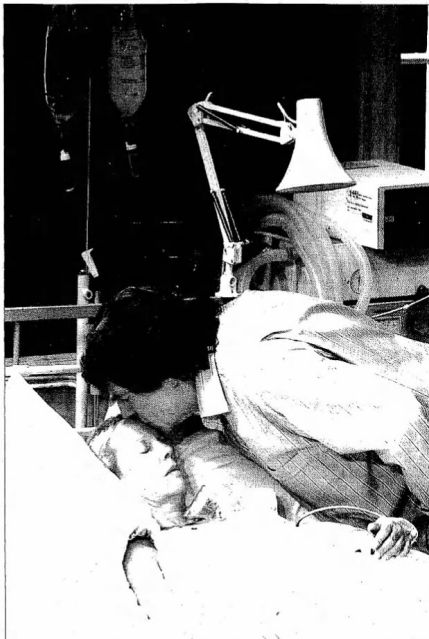
encounters and a career which moves from book reviewing to the exoteric manufacture of best sellers.

Alan Bates has acted in all three plays - although not as the same character. In *Life Support*, he gives a restrained portrayal of a well-meaning, precociousness and bravado. He struts himself rigidly at the foot of his wife's bed, he moves warily, he staves off sentimentality with music, he looks polished. This is a performance which could easily have been florid, and which lacks. It accommodates some skillfully orchestrated comic flourishes. And it is greatly enhanced by the prevailing coolness of the production by Eileen Clapp's austere set with its midnight blue windows, designed by Mick Hughes.

The *Traveller* in Gray's newly chic Merchant City arena, modest, pedantic, is 25 years old and has just deservedly been awarded lottery money. The theatre - made out of an old church, with a steeple and a dotted grammar, with a consultant to save work, a tendency to favour an influx of music and of comedy, and some emphasis on work from Scotland. The last production in August - a modernist about Prince Charles's (first) wedding - will come from Wales. The month began with a play from Dublin's *Flanagh* Company by yet another young Irish dramatist.

Mark O'Riordan's *From Both Hips* is a nicely written piece with more than one real subject. This is a merit, which is also a problem: the play combines too many disparate things. As its title suggests, there are two of everything here. It has two plots: the first involving marital deceptions (one of a prelate and one of a less expected kind), the second featuring a shootout between a policeman and a suspected drug dealer. Both plots are separately interesting, but unconvincingly welded to each other. It draws two genres - the comedy and the thriller - but doesn't get the difficult balance between them right: there could have been a tense tale never given. And it has more than one voice. There is a fractured, artificial, derivative as if by Mamet voice, which delivers speeches made up of phrases, bastions, interruptions, paraphrases. This is a bit... it's like... You see... in the first place... Anyway... And there is the fresher voice of Mark O'Riordan himself, at once more succinct and a little loopy.

This O'Riordan voice is enough in evidence to make an engaging evening. It is particularly in two long-running gaps which wind in and out of the play. One concerns a series of academic experts writing fearfully in the local newspaper on their special subjects of



Life Support has Alan Bates once again as the central character in a Simon Gray play. Photograph by Robbie Jack

study: burglars, animal emotions and the lavatory habits of Canadian. The other concerns dogs. Dogs, it is discovered in the opening sequence of the play, don't really care about human beings: by seeming to do so, they are working the dark trick. This news is it is pointed out likely to come as a big disappointment to people with dogs.

And it is a person with a dog who is the most original character in the play: a girl continuously divided for smelling of dog and having dog hairs on her sweater - and who herself turns

out to be working a dark trick on her human girl friend, Cleve. Cleve is played by Fionnuala Murphy, she provides a memorable image of a modern fury as, with her arms flailing, she shakes her head with anger and sends her loaded dreadlocks bouncing like snakes round her white face.

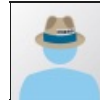
Another worthy recipient of literary funding is the tiny Jermyon Street Theatre, which was a restaurant and is thought once to have been a gentlemen's club. It now seats 70 on two sides of an open stage: a pink curtain behind

the actors is swagged like the drapes on a toy theatre; the ladies in a coat-hanger away from the dressing room. A Lot of Living is the sort of musical revue to which this pretty place is well-suited.

Built around the music of Charles Strousse - *Eye Eye Stroupe*, Applause, *Gene* - it is a fairly loose bag of tightly performed individual numbers, with settings economically indicated by occasional lighting arrangements: a square of lit shawls and caps to their evening dress, in order to masquerade as Irish immigrants.

Langford - hyper-bright and super-lithe - does rather too much shaking of her hands at the wrists and wagging of her head, but reveals a talent for mimicry, especially when playing a bad schoolgirl. Joanna John - though ill-served by a dress which is two inches too long - supplies a stony-necked, swelling imitation of Princess Di. There is only one really embarrassing moment when the company - all four of them - are required to add plaid shawls and caps to their evening dress, in order to masquerade as Irish immigrants.

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