

REVIEW

A revival of passion

Theatre

Skylight
Vaudeville

IT IS hard to think of many contemporary plays one could happily sit through for the third time without the faintest twinge of boredom. David Hare's *Skylight* is one of them.

Since its premiere at the National Theatre in 1985, this magnificent drama has played in the West End, on Broadway and all over the world. Now it is back in the West End after a national tour and neither familiarity nor a new cast has blunted its lacerating theatrical impact.

At first I missed the original stars, Michael Gambon and Lia Williams. Their performances were so raw, so urgent and so spontaneous that there were stretches when one forgot that one was watching actors at all. The audience were like entranced voyeurs as this unlikely but credible couple — he a successful restaurateur, she an earnest teacher in an East End sink school — painfully raked over the embers of their long affair.

Bill Nighy and Stella Gonet, the new stars, are closer in age than Gambon and Williams, and for me aren't quite as miraculously good as the originals. When Gambon's face suddenly crumpled with grief and guilt, the emotional effect was overwhelming. As Nighy sobs and repeatedly beats his forehead, furious with his own weakness, there is the faintest suspicion of an actor going for his big moment. And Gonet misses the beautiful luminous glow that Williams brought to the role when recalling earlier happiness.

Yet Nighy and Gonet are emphatically more than pale imitators of their great predecessors. They make the roles their own and play them with great power and passion.

While Gambon often put one in mind of a clumsy, wounded bear, Nighy brings a prowling, panther-like energy to the role of Tom Sergeant. He's sleek and dangerous, his rasping accent betraying a hint of the cockney wideboy he must have been before he made his fortune. The great passages of scorn against the idiocies of modern life, whether they be sweaty, Cellophane-wrapped cheese or grief-counselling on the rates, have a magnificent



Power: Stella Gonet and Bill Nighy in *Skylight*

dyspeptic vigour, but there is also a sense of vulnerability. Nighy has an extraordinary trick of introducing sudden brief, disconcerting pauses into his speeches, like flashes of aphasia, that brilliantly suggest a man haunted by grief and guilt who has taken too long a refuge in the booze.

Gonet lacks the air of self-contained enigma that Williams brought to the role of Kyra, the idealistic teacher whose protestations of love for the people can't conceal the fact that she is on the run from the love of one man. A certain preachiness sets in when poverty and Right-wing complacency are discussed. But Gonet does beautifully capture a feeling of passion painfully revived, the terrible ache of a love she knows she will never recapture. Her memories of open-hearted commitment and her final farewell to her lover, in which she bravely disguises her tears, are extraordinarily moving.

Theo Fraser Steel is superb as Tom's son Edward, capturing all the inarticulate grief of adolescence, and Richard Eyre's production once again does this marvellously rich play proud, turning the mood on a dime, and achieving a bruising emotional candour that is often breathtaking.

Tickets: 0171 836 9987

CHARLES SPENCER

Skylight Spencer Telegraph



Clipped By:

ianlharris

Tue, Nov 8, 2022