



Everett picks on a one-man extravaganza of compass in *The Mill Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore*. Photograph by Neil Lobbert

Rupert, is that you in there?

THEATRE
By Susannah Clapp

At the Other Place in Stratford, Katie Mitchell has created a new play for some of London's finest theatre-makers. *Phaedra Doesn't Stop Here Anymore* is a play of four voices - more than twice as many as the original Greek myth - and sets them in different parts of the theatre's building. Between each performance the audience is led through dark passages with black curtains and here, too, sometimes accompanied by the flashing lights of one production, sometimes by the sea sounds of another.

The details of each play were meticulously described by Beckett and are dazzlingly realised in York-Morgan's design and Peter Chappard's lighting. For *Foodlots*, a bright light is suspended with a strip of light on the floor and the shape of two illuminated windows into a curving corridor along which Juliet Stevenson joins a letterbox. *Phaedra* has the colour of a night sky, an illuminated, disembodied mouth, labelling compulsively as it is blocked. *Epiphany* when spoken, hangs high up in the darkness and descends close to the spectators. In *Phae* the dream level of a silent man is perched on a brightly lit stage like fish-bank with his long grey hair swimming

around him, he listens to his own voice giving three accounts of his last. These pieces are ingeniously arranged, divided into two sections, one with male protagonists, the other with women. In each half the visual centre of the story steadily diminishes. The last piece of all, *Anthem*, was written for radio and is performed here live with lights only slightly dimmed, the audience follows as a circle, seeing nothing but each other, with a hole in the middle where the stage might be. The overall effect is of an alchemical novel: distinct bagpipes emerge from these plays with a lyricism for which Beckett on such a stage would credit no one of their aspects - naming a mother, a hero, a man, a fish-bank - these lives draw on Beckett's own. At the same time, the speeches of these characters are arranged in a similar fashion, with staccato phrasing and long parentheses. They share similar preoccupations - in particular, a sense of being themselves. All read a little time between rapid phrases and last lines. They are recognisably part of the same consciousness conveyed with great skill by Nigel Cooke, Debra Gillett and Julie Stevenson. All observe Beckett's instructions about parenthetical precision of phrasing and an absence of histrionics. "Too much colour here, but there is Billie Whitelaw. There is not much colour here, but there is the absence of definition. This original, penetrating occasion has one fault. By putting all these 'where's' together, Katie Mitchell has

made a 'lose'. A too long. She is a victim of the intensity of her staging, by the time *Anthem*, much the weakest piece, is approached, the audience is saturated, so much so that the play's simplicity baffling convolutions of dialogue, its falling in and out of focus, its minutiae of description, its minutiae of description, its shifting between different voices. It could be that Beckett's choice should be the second one leg at a time. The programme could be in half with each half shown in alternate evenings to allow air to blow away some of the dread that pervades that stage around the best Beckett production, there is a reverence which can blot out his brilliant ideas, making a laugh seem like an enigma at a shrine. As the playwright might have put it, how can more more.

Katie Mitchell's directing career was launched, as was Stephen Dillit's, at the Gate Theatre, which specialises in producing work from outside Britain. This week she and Dillit were told that the London Arts Board had refused a further production funding its first season in London. Beckett's *Phaedra* is a good example of what will be lost if the theatre is forced to close. *Phaedra* is another evening of fragments. When he died in 1981, Beckett left few debts of the play, made up of brief, fierce scenes: a firm order for three has never been established, but William Freeman's *Phaedra* is a play of fragments. While the audience are still settling down at the last scene, another

performance by clever casting and doubling of parts, these moments to put an entire busy population on the stage. As the wounded, angry hero - a victim both of his voice in his head and the machinations of the gods - he is a study of emotional chaos in a study of emotional chaos. He scarcely speaks, or his eyes when he looks to the right and left and laughs. He sometimes goes a switch too far but his performance is full of memorable moments: when he goes to accuse his girl of unfaithfulness, he picks over her skin in search of greasy signs, like an ape looking for fleas, Kate Ashfield is beautifully silver-tongued, making a laugh seem like an enigma at a shrine. As the playwright might have put it, how can more more. Timothy Motter has supplied a cleverly economical design in which a black floor opens up in segments like a cat's paw to provide a chair or bed. William's father's chair and a tiny wooden block on which a letter-writer's screen is displayed. The play opens with William's father's chair and a tiny wooden block on which a letter-writer's screen is displayed. The play opens with William's father's chair and a tiny wooden block on which a letter-writer's screen is displayed. The play opens with William's father's chair and a tiny wooden block on which a letter-writer's screen is displayed.

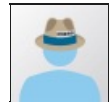
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