

Decay comes to life in the East End

ALASTAIR MUIR

Theatre

John Gross


The Waste Land
The Government Inspector
Julian Clary
Special Delivery

WILTON'S Music Hall is hidden away in Grace's Alley, a tiny turning off Rastell Street, which is a turning off Cable Street, which is in the southern part of Whitechapel, near what was once the docks. (You have to screw up your eyes to find it in the A-Z.) It opened its doors in 1878, and closed them, unable to meet new fire regulations, in 1896. After that it served for a time as a Gospel mission, and subsequently as a warehouse. In the 1950s John Betjeman led a successful campaign to save it from demolition. And now it is temporary home to Fiona Shaw for a dramatic reading of *The Waste Land*.

It is a fantastic place. Front of the house there are bare boards, crumbling brickwork, dim staircases. In the auditorium there are the original cast iron pillars and some fresh gliding (though scarcely Jonian white and gold). Ever so often a train bound for Fenchurch Street hurtles by. It is very cold. To see an actual performance take place there after a century's neglect is a strange, time-warping experience, something out of a novel by Peter Ackroyd or Iain Sinclair.

It seems wonderfully appropriate for *The Waste Land*, too. Echoes from the poem abound — unreal city, the sweating river, rats' alley, the waters of Isman (Isman Street is just around the corner). The Eliot of the Twenties was as much as anything a poet of urban desolation and decay. He was also an aficionado of the music hall.

The choice of site is a stroke of genius. The poem is a work of genius. But what of the performance (or the production, since I must admit I can't tell how much of the responsibility lies with Fiona



Delusions of grandeur Tom Hollander with Kathryn Howden in *The Government Inspector*

Shaw, and how much with her director, Deborah Warner)? The only props are a couple of chairs. Naked light bulbs cast big expressionist shadows on the wall behind. Shaw moves around, wearing now a cardigan, now a jacket, now a sleeveless dress, but always something black or subfusc.

No one disputes that she is a highly accomplished actress, and on this occasion she gives plenty of proof of her skills. Her skill as a mimic in particular — you can positively hear the bats whistle and the drip-drip of water

often the tone is shrill and hectic.

The effect, much of the time, is to reduce the poem to the private neurotic outpouring which it would have been if Eliot hadn't been a great writer. Neurosis lay at the root of it, no doubt, but his triumph was to transcend his own experience, to create a work which speaks powerfully to the world at large.

The fragments (though it isn't easy to say how) are welded together; the poem is as much miniature epic as tormented confession. And to convey that aspect of it you need, altogether calmer, more impersonal mode of delivery than Fiona Shaw adopts.

Yet there can be no denying that her performance, taken in conjunction with the setting, has a weird melodramatic impact. It is *"The Waste Land Experience"*, perhaps, more than *The Waste Land* itself, but in spite of all my reservations I found it one of the most memorable things I have seen in the theatre this year.

The production runs until January 11; tickets are available through the Royal National Theatre on 0171 928 2232.

If *The Government Inspector* can be played in English, there is no reason why it can't be played in Scots. Deeply, immeasurably Russian though it may be, Gogol's comedy has a universal appeal. But for English audiences, a Scottish version such as the one currently being presented at the Almeida Theatre (in partnership with AT & T) is liable to seem doubly exotic. They are bound to find the Scottishness of Scots actors pretending to be Russians more obtrusive than the Englishness of English actors: they may well end up reflecting on the differences between Scotland and Russia rather than the similarities.

John Byrne's racy new adaptation heads off problems of this kind by revelling in its Scottishness. What we are given is an unashamed Russo-Scottish hybrid, in which the Lord Provost rides in a droszky and smokes

coexist with samovars. And on the whole the mixture works very well. My only real complaint is that Byrne adds a needless further complication by scattering anachronisms broadcast. Why should anyone in either 19th-century Russia or 19th-century Scotland be made to speak about bifocals or Peter Pan collars?

It is all the more regrettable because the characters in Jonathan Kent's production look perfect in period. The play was written in 1835, and the local officials, when we first meet them in the Lord Provost's parlour, might be Phiz illustrations to early Dickens come to life. (The parlour itself, designed by Rob Howell, is a tumble-down riot of dilapidation.)

We are off to a promising start, in fact. The officials are suitably venal and grotesque. Ian McDiarmid is on fine ironic form as the Lord Provost; the plot begins to bite.

But then the production goes wrong. The action turns comic delirium, overdoes overdoing it. And as Kheslavskov, the wasted clerk who is taken for the dread inspector, Tom Hollander is sadly off-key, a puppet whose tantrums and delusions of grandeur never convince.

There are amusing moments, even so. Individual bits of business are well handled. And the women are particularly good. The Lord Provost's wife (Terry Neeson) is someone you wouldn't want to mess with in a hurry. The forlorn fixed smile of his daughter (Kathryn Howden), when she realises that she has been cheated of romance, is the most effective piece of acting in the play — and an object lesson in restraint to those around her.

Julian Clary is appearing for a short season at the Vaudeville Theatre in *Special Delivery*, a rigmare about him supposedly fathering a baby. He is still a past master at taunting the audience, and his innuendoes are still in good working order. But he desperately needs a better script; force of personality isn't enough to get you through a who's evening.

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Waste Land & Government Inspector Sunday telegraph



Clipped By:

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Wed, Dec 28,
2022