

Review

Transcending the gay play ghetto

Michael Billington

The Day I Stood Still
Cottesloe

IT'S doubles all round at the Cottesloe. In Stoppard's *The Invention of Love*, the dead A.E. Housman communed with his younger self. Now in Kevin Elyot's wistful, elegiac *The Day I Stood Still*, another shyly repressed gay hero encounters himself when young and recalls his unfulfilled passion for a straight student chum.

The emotional pattern of Elyot's play is weirdly similar to Stoppard's. But all resemblances end there. For Elyot's intricate 110-minute play is, in many ways, a continuation of ideas explored in his 1994 hit, *My Night With Reg*.

Once again we have a sexually nervous hero living off past memories and an ever-present sense of death and decay; and even if there is not quite as much bounce and wit as in the earlier work, Elyot once more shows himself capable of transcending the ghettoising definition of the gay play.

What is particularly striking is the way Elyot plays so assuredly with time. Set in a north London mansion block, his play moves confidently from present to future to past. It starts with Horace, a solitary museum worker and part-time novelist, being unexpectedly visited by Judy, an old friend from student days in

the sixties. Horace's awkwardness stems partly from the fact that he was very much in love with Judy's ex-partner, Jerry; even more from the fact that he is expecting the arrival of a rented stud.

It would be cruel to reveal Elyot's manipulation of the plot. But through the experience of the lonely, hesitant, life-fearing Horace, he touches poignantly on a universal theme, the way we cling, in desperation, to some golden moment in the past as a protection against the uncertain present.

Horace's life has clearly been defined by his unfulfilled love for the young Jerry; and Elyot cunningly suggests this is a source both of constant pain and strange contentment.

Not everything in the play works. The very artfulness of the plot, in which every loose end is tied up, gives an over-resolved feeling.

It remains, however, an intelligent play about a common experience: the Proustian notion that the true paradise is the one that we have lost. Ian Rickson's production is sensitive to the play's changes of tense.

Adrian Scarborough captures precisely Horace's mixture of romantic longing and fear of commitment. Callum Dixon is also suitably tentative as his younger self, and there is good support from Oliver Milburn, as the youthfully idealised Jerry, and from Daisy Beaumont as the hippyish student Judy.



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