

Oh, go on. Just say no...

THEATRE



By
Susannah
Clapp

The charms and the limitations of Kevin Elyot's new play at the Cottesloe Theatre are suggested in its title. *The Day I Stood Still* scrutinises the defining moment in the life of a disappointed homosexual man, a moment whose chief components, constantly revisited in memory, recur in varied forms in his early and late middle age. It is an idea which offers the opportunity of making an infinite number of fine discriminations and distinctions, an opportunity that is ably fulfilled in Elyot's delicate writing and in Ian Rickson's lucid direction. But its clever, careful arrangement also imposes restrictions: this is an evening full of small, beautifully delivered surprises, but in which nothing is really startling. Because of this, it is a less arresting play than Elyot's hugely successful *My Night with Reg*.

The controlled, elegiac tone of the piece is in keeping with the general demeanour of its

main character, the unfairly named Horace, who is first seen as a young adult, then as a teenager and finally in frowsty maturity. Horace, played as a youth by Callum Dixon and as an adult by Adrian Scarborough – and in both performances given a nice owlishness – appears in different stages of mild hopelessness. As an adolescent in the Seventies, he can't dance and doesn't see the point of *The Hobbit*. As a young man, he pays for sex which he doesn't get. As a mature adult, he spends evenings drinking, with his dressing-gown worn over his trousers.

The tender heart of *The Day I Stood Still* reveals that this hopelessness became entrenched as a result of Horace's unrequited love for a schoolfriend, the charismatic Jerry, acted with attractive exuberance by Oliver Milburn. Horace's most attractive quality is also his handicap. But this revelation becomes completely clear only at the end of the piece, in a flashback which shows Horace declaring his love, being rebuffed by the realisation that Jerry prefers girls to boys, receiving a keepsake and getting into a fight with a local tough. Everything which precedes it springs from this scene, which brings together previously scattered elements and weaves them into a design.

Much of the pleasure of the play lies in recognising its elaborate echoes, triggers and recurrences. The accident which finally befalls Jerry is prefigured in his youth: in both instances, his admirer is implicated. Jerry himself disappears, but seems to come back in the shape of his son. The son expresses a passion for a schoolfriend which is very like Horace's passion. A mishap with a piece of antique furniture takes place in the first two scenes, and is accounted for in the third. Horace's craving for Mars bars is eventually explained. The point of these variations is scrutinised by Horace in a speech which talks of no two things – not even worms – ever being the same. But the effect of watching them in the theatre – where Mark Thompson's midnight-blue oval design skilfully evokes a sense of entrapment – is to suggest that circumstances endlessly repeat themselves.

The funniest scene in *The Day I Stood Still* shows Horace snorting a line of cocaine provided by his godson. The subject of drugs is afforded no comparable lightness of treatment in *Iced*, a dramatic treatment of Ray Shell's novel about crack addiction, presented at the Tricycle by Black Theatre Co-Operative and the Nottingham Playhouse. *Iced* should

have made more of the music which drifts between its scenes: in fact, there is a case for saying it should have been a blues musical. What it is is a cautionary tale of an academically gifted boy bullied by his father and driven by his crack addiction to misery and to murder. The intermittent but considerable power of this production, under the direction of Felix Cross, who also composed the music, comes from the graphic immediacy of its short scenes and from some forceful acting – particularly by Cecilia Noble, who dextrously doubles as a sullen, submissive wife and a sexually voracious acid-dropper. Nothing is gained by the occasional attempts to spell out the moral or underline the agony: fewer words would be better.

Forced Entertainment, the Sheffield-based theatre company, is an odd and an interesting case. In some stretches of its new touring show, now at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, this group of five actors – who are performing in a work devised in collaboration with the director Tim Etchells – seems bent on demonstrating the aptness of its name, on declaring itself the quintessence of gruelling obscurity. At other points, it is flighty and funny. But for most of the evening, the forbidding and the



Clipped By:

ianlharris

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