



Yesterday once more: Daisy Beaumont and Oliver Milburn return to the Sixties for the final chapter of *The Day I Stood Still* Picture: ALASTAIR KEAY

A dance to the comedy of time

YOU might imagine a comedy which deals with a middle-aged gay man still nursing an unrequited crush on a long-lost school chum, with Mary Bares serving as a sex-cabaret and gold-neck-chain bringing people together, would be no more enticing than a box full of theatrical clichés with a pretty boy on top. How wrong you would be. Kevin Elyot's *The Day I Stood Still* deals with familiar aspects of sex and hopeless love. Yet he plays such ingenious games with time and coincidence that the jigsaw puzzle of revelations are not completed until the last, shattering moments.

I doubt the play will achieve the enormous impact of Elyot's 1994 comedy of gay sexual manners in the age of AIDS — *My Night with Reg* — which won him a Feast of awards and the Evening Standard prize as Most Promising Playwright. But here there's the same artillo. Unseen the sense of life as some pre-ordained dance in which we are forced to take part while time brings on its revenges. And Ian Rickson's superbly cast production imposes just the right air of dreamy strangeness.

Mark Thompson's eerie stage design upon a revolving stage, sets the unsettling mood. Everything is bleak sparseness. The sitting room in a north London mansion block has nothing on its walls, virtually no furniture except for a piano and a chair, no view from its balcony except of infinite blankness. Here middle-aged Horace, who's very like Elyot's gay anti-hero in *My Night With Reg*, faces up to the play's first, over-elaborated comedy of manners: the unscheduled visit of Judy, a friend from Horace's schooldays, and her new man, clad in the arrival of Terence, his first, first-lover.

True to the play's bleak comedy, Jake Wood's convincing Terence arrives. Horace, an apologetic chap who's something small in himself — to no more than confession of eternal love for a dead heterosexual. Horace's unrequited passion, which strangely echoes the poet A.E. Housman's hopeless ardour for a rover in Tom Stoppard's *The Invention of Love*, was for a school friend — Judy's husband, Jerry.

The idea of Horace abandoning all thought of sex for years in tribute to his school-time passion seems preposterous. But the next scene, 15 years later, when

FIRST NIGHT
by Nicholas de Jongh
The Day I Stood Still
Gottesloe Theatre ★

Jerry's adolescent son Jimi (a reasonably distraught Oliver Milburn) appears in Horace's living room and confesses his own ruined gay affair, is high with pollen, irony and the cocaine supplied by the youth. Adrian Scarborough's Horace as he faces up in memories and forebodings loses all his earlier fussiness and risks of pathos. In playing a game with time, in the style of *J.B. Priestley*, and revealing in the final scene to the Sixties when Horace loses hope of Jerry, Elyot achieves a coup de theatre. The Sixties atmosphere seems rather forced. Yet Milburn, who also plays the young Jerry, suggests how an erotic spell can be cast for years. The final, desolate image is of Horace — whose sexless future we already know — imprisoned in a house where he and time will never move on.

Rating: — adequate
★ good
★★ very good
★★★ outstanding
★ poor
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