

Theatre

John Gross

Things We Do for Love  
Not About Nightingales

**L**A Rochefoucauld said that if love is judged by its visible effects, it looks more like hatred than friendship. I doubt whether Alan Ayckbourn would disagree — not, at least, on the basis of his new comedy *Things We Do for Love*, at the Gielgud Theatre. There's some frenzied love-making in the play. There is an even more explosive scene in which an angry couple grapple, batter one another, crash their way across the stage, and that's all about love, too.

The setting for these unleashed emotions is a house in London, somewhere not too far from Peter Jones, belonging to Barbara, an efficient, buttoned-up, fortysix executive who has settled for a life devoted to her job and her boss. (Her passion for him was once briefly requited, but that was then.) At school Barbara used to be known, strictly behind her back, as Spike, and she hasn't grown any less spiky over the years.

The basement flat in the house is rented to Gilbert, a widower whose boring monologues would be hard to endure if he weren't so useful with household repairs. The flat upstairs is vacant, and a couple called Nikki and Hamish are about to move in while their own house is fixed up.

Nikki, who has had a crush on Barbara ever since the fourth form, has reappeared after eight years in Norway, undergoing hell at the hands of a violent husband. Hamish is the man who came to her rescue (and whom incidentally she detached from his wife). He is kind and gentle. He also rubs up against some of Barbara's many prejudices. He is Scottish for one thing, a vegetarian for another. She doesn't like him anyway, and he isn't one to take her hostility lying



ALASTAIR MUIR

Deep into desperation Finbar Lynch as Canary Jim in Tennessee Williams's 'Not About Nightingales', an early play of sledgehammer impact but with touches of poetry

down, not even for Nikki's sake. In no time at all the first salvos are being fired.

The complications that follow leave us in no doubt that love hurts. It can make us resentful and cruel; it can humiliate us and twist us — as poor Gilbert increasingly demonstrates — into strange shapes. Yet *Things We Do for Love* isn't nearly as painful as this makes it sound. At times it has the tone of a lightly humanised farce, at others (in spite of all the rough stuff) the feeling of a romantic comedy. Perhaps the strongest passion it reveals is a taste for ingenuity.

This is to define, not to com-

plain. At its own level the play is enormously enjoyable. The jokes work, the details divert. If the big "unexpected" development is fairly predictable (there's really nowhere else for the plot to go), we can still relish the skill with which Ayckbourn lays the ground for it. If the characters are not so much developed as put through their paces, they are in the hands of a superlative ringmaster.

The virtuosity of the writing is matched by the virtuosity of the production. (Ayckbourn himself directs.) The fight, for example, is beautifully choreographed, emotionally no-

less than physically. And the three-tier set by Roger Goslop heightens our sense of being in the department of games and novelties. The main tier is Barbara's living-room. Above, there is a voyeuristic sliver of the upstairs flat, with the lower legs of the occupants visible. Below, we can see Gilbert hunched up like a troglodyte, painting a pornographic fresco of Barbara on the basement ceiling.

The one obvious flaw is that Jane Asher is much too attractive to play Barbara. But it is a price most of us will be willing to pay, and it doesn't stop her giving an exemplary perform-

ance. Steven Pacey's Hamish seems rather too personable, too, but again, his actual performance couldn't be bettered. And there is fine support. Serena Evans's Nikki is giggle and oh-my-gosh girlish but contrives to have the most affecting moment of the evening. As Gilbert, Barry McCarthy is funny and pathetic, and wisely leaves it at that; he doesn't make the mistake of trying to make him seem endearing.

Tennessee Williams wrote *Not About Nightingales* in 1958, when he was 27. He himself thought that it was the best of his early full-length

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plays, but until last week it had never been staged. Now at last there is a chance to see it, in a production at the Gielgud Theatre directed by Trevor Nunn.

The story is based on a widely reported atrocity of the time. Prisoners in a jail in Pennsylvania staged a hunger strike in protest against bad conditions; in the course of putting it down, the prison governor had a group of them confined in a punishment block known as "Klondike" where the heat was turned on full blast. Four of them died.

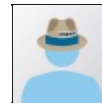
Williams kept close to the events he had read about, but

he added two themes of his own. In the play, the prison governor is pitted against the prisoners' equally domineering ringleader, Butch O'Fallon. (Both men get compared to Mussolini.) And much of the focus is on a sensitive trusty called Canary Jim. He is despised by the other prisoners and tormented by the governor, but at least he has the run of the governor's office, and there he becomes emotionally involved with a new secretary.

The play has a sledgehammer impact, but then there'd be no point in trying to write about the kind of events it describes with Proustian sensibility. Occasionally it seems contrived or stereotyped, like a parody of a 1950s Warner Brothers movie. Occasionally it is mawkish. But what mostly impresses is its power, and its ability to give that power dramatic shape. You are right there inside.

There are odd touches of poetry, too. And though the play takes its title from Canary Jim's ambition to write about real life and "not about nightingales", as in Keats, it is clear that the author himself is chafing, even here, at the limits of documentary art. (There's line in the *Ode to a Nightingale* that sums up life in the prison pretty well, incidentally: "Here where men sit and hear each other groan.")

Trevor Nunn's tenure at the National Theatre has got off to a mixed start, but in this clangorous, well-drilled, astonishingly atmospheric production (with designs by Richard Hoover) he comes into his own. Corin Redgrave is on terrific form as the governor — a brute, but a believable brute. Finbar Lynch takes you deep into the desperation of Jim, the man trapped in the middle, and elsewhere there are stunning performances from a largely American cast — notably from James Black, Gagnevesque (but never merely imitative) as Butch, and from Sherri Parker Lee, perfectly in period as the secretary.



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