

Prisoner: Cell Block ouch

THEATRE
By
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An early play by Tennessee Williams has been given its first-ever performance at the Cottesloe Theatre. Written in 1986, for a seminar at the University of Iowa, *Not About Nightingales* is based on an incident which took place that year in a Philadelphia prison. A group of inmates who went on hunger strike to protest against their conditions – in particular, against the monotony of their diet – were locked up in an isolation unit furnished with a massive bank of radiators. The heat was turned up, the windows closed and the water shut off. When the building was reopened after some 13 hours, four of the men were found to have bled to death, their hearts shrivelled to half their normal size.

Williams puts on stage the revolt, the punishment and the deaths, and adds a feeble subplot in which the secretary of the brutal prison governor falls for a hyper-literate prisoner to whom, in a particularly ridiculous scene, she reads a Keats sonnet. The result is a sprawling, often slow-moving piece, with a strong, horrific central sequence, some plodding epistolaries and purple passages. Last week there was torture on the stage, courtesy of Irvine Welsh; this week, more torture.

Not About Nightingales has the considerable documentary interest of its real-life story. It also has the biographical interest of belonging to a period before Williams's writing was acclaimed, when he was producing socially committed plays: earlier works had included a melodrama about coal miners and an attack on war profiteering. But *Not About Nightingales* doesn't count. It doesn't, as it attempts to do, bring together in an illuminating way images of personal and institutional captivity. It fails to develop its ideas about society and its dictators: the leader of the hunger strike, who promises his followers a heaven and takes them to hell, proudly compares himself to Mussolini and to that German tanky with the trick mousetrap. It gives the impression of being a first draft.

Nevertheless, it allows James Black to fire up convincingly as the tyrant of the prisoners, and Corin Redgrave to put in a well-judged performance as the bullying governor, so confident of his power that he is relaxed and impulsive almost to the end. The



Richard Zinnas as Sobell (left) and Richard Leaf as Jack Bristol in the premiere of Tennessee Williams's *Not About Nightingales* at the Cottesloe. Photograph by Neil Lobbert

play also allows Trevor Nunn as director to put to telling use his gifts for choreography and the staging of spectacle. The most expressive sequences in the play are those in which the prisoners act as a body, stifled but stubbornly resistant: whistling and banging in unison in their cells, struggling against steam in the isolation unit, shuffling mutely across the stage, with their hands on each other's shoulders.

These sequences are greatly helped by Richard Hoover's harsh, looming, monochrome design, which sets the two worlds of the prison – that of the governor and that of the inmates – at opposite ends of the stage: the action bounces between them. In the governor's corner, a huge wall of gleaming metal lockers frames a long, light window which looks out on, but doesn't show, the world outside. In the prisoners' corner is a jungle of grids and mesh and sliding doors in front of which appears the ladies of the isolation unit, with its huge horizontal pipes,

its underground grills through which a red light glows, and its great spouts of steam. There is no place of comfort anywhere.

The *Things We Do for Love* includes the following deeds: the betrayal of a best friend, the bestowing of a black eye, the shredding of an unfaithful lover's socks and ties, the pressing of a bulky male body into a Nicole Farhi gown – and the complete reneging on the stated principles of a lifetime.

Alan Ayckbourn's play – his fifty-second – is a farce. It was first performed last spring at the Stephen Joseph Theatre in Scarborough, where Ayckbourn is the artistic director, and where he directed this piece, as he does now. At the Cottesloe Theatre, it seems set for a long run. Ayckbourn's achievement in *The Things We Do for Love* is not so much that he manages to make humour from a series of ugly, dire and painful events – the darkest episodes are likely to be the funniest in any farce. His real skill can be measured by the extent to which he squeezes

surprise out of stock, sometimes corny, ingredients and situations. There are a number of smoking guns in this play, some predictable reversals, and a strong flavour of old-fashioned spinstery-aying in the main thrust of the plot.

The most obvious smoking gun is Barbara's single, middle-aged, bound up in her office life – a pre-Bridget Jones figure for whom repression rather than confession is a natural condition. She is a Gogol of the kind who used to be asked in movies to let down her hair and take off her spectacles. It's difficult to imagine her in any modern film, or indeed anywhere off a stage, but Ayckbourn gives her an engaging idiosyncratic crossness – vegetarianism just sort of generally irritates her – and Jane Asher immaculately unveils her varied dimensions: she is a martinet under her shower cap, an ice maiden in her office suit, and finally a roaring whooping bedfellow.

The conclusion of *The Things We Do for Love* may seem to suggest that most women would prefer to have a man and be diffed up than to be single and unbranded: that there is something flimsy – or spinstery – in minding about the odd black eye. It is not a conclusion which sits easily with the real merriment of much of the play. But then much of that merriment has to do not with human responses, but with comic contrivance. This play is a near-perfect piece of stage machinery: it is not just the characters' speeches that are revealing. The set – split into three layers, on each of which a different kind of love is enacted – also makes a point. As do the props. When, towards the end of the play, a scrapbook is hurled against a set of shelves, a point is made about the collision of two worlds, and their destruction, without a word being spoken.

The Things We Do for Love carried much more of a sexual charge than *Girls' Night Out*, which has arrived at the Victoria Palace after leaving Eng-

land for more than a year. The flimsy excuse for a play is a hen party, made up of three gormless women and one shrewd one, who attend a show of male strippers at a joint called *The Feast of Fresh* and, in doing so, manage to solve a variety of sexual problems and mysteries. It is the strippers that form the not very hard core of the piece. Four comely young men do bumping and grinding and smirking dressed as highwaymen (lots of poking up of blunderbusses under coats) and as monks (sussled grilles are wiggled at navel height and his candles loom large. When they get down to jock-strap (which is where they stop), they rub water over their chests and play with foam and bananas. The piece has none of the edge or charm of *The Full Monty*, with which it invites comparison; the double voyeurism, of watching people watching strippers, which could have provided an extra twist to the occasion, is neglected. It's a bad night out.

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