

An early Tennessee Williams unearthed at the National; a good value for

## First time out for a gripping prison drama

FEW would deny that Tennessee Williams wrote some of the greatest plays of this century, but he was also responsible for some of the worst. As recent misguided revivals of several of his flops have shown, bad Tennessee Williams is like a lethal pathology of good. Tennessee Williams: shrill, floral and full of whimpering self-pity.

So when Trevor Nunn announced that the National Theatre was going to perform a previously unstaged unpublished Williams play, I feared we could be in for a dire night. *Not About Nightingales*, which Williams wrote in his twenties in 1938-39, has long been accessible in the archives. If it were any good, surely someone would have put it on by now?

In fact we owe a debt of gratitude to Vanessa Redgrave, who went to the trouble of seeking out and reading the manuscript, and to Trevor Nunn who directs it magnificently. *Not About Nightingales* isn't quite a long-lost masterpiece, but it is a raw, angry, primitive work which offers consistently gripping, if occasionally melodramatic, theatre. It also fascinatingly anticipates Williams's later work.

The play is a slice of the radical docudrama that was fashionable in Thirties America. Williams was appalled by newspaper reports of four American prisoners who were beheaded to their deaths in a punishment cell where radiators capable of heating a small skyscraper were left on at full blast.

"I have never written anything since that could compete with it in violence and horror", the dramatist wrote in 1957, and Nunn's production, in which he finally puts his own confident stamp on the theatre of which he is director, remorselessly chronicles man's inhumanity to man.

Prison dramas have become a cliché, particularly thanks to the hilarious *Prisoner: Cell Block H*, but Nunn simply ignores this difficulty, and directs with scorching intensity. At times the result comes across like an exploitative B movie — the set, costumes and even human blood are deliberately monochrome — but at others both Williams and Nunn achieve effects of extraordinary dramatic force.

### Theatre

*Not About Nightingales*  
National Theatre

The action follows the lives of prisoners and staff in the tense days leading up to a hunger strike, after which the ringleaders are incarcerated in the overhated cell from hell, known as the Klondike.

The desolate Richard Hoover has come up with a magnificent, clanking, all-metal set, while Nunn's epic production — staged to traverse at the Cottlesloe Theatre — powerfully suggests an enclosed, dangerously simmering community, which finally explodes like a defective pressure cooker.

The scenes in the Klondike, with great spurts of steam hissing out of the ground as the men writhe in agony, are almost too cruel to bear, as are the brutal beatings. Though the production employs Brecht-like captions to introduce the short, fast scenes, there is no sense of alienation here — you follow the prisoners' travails with your guts as well as your head.

The performances, even in the smaller roles, are tremendous. Corin Redgrave has never been more memorable than as the brutal governor, a Southern good of boy who grants and giggles grotesquely as he pats up his secretary and goes horribly sentimental about his baby daughter even as he calmly plans his next atrocity.

Finbar Lynch, as the prisoner who collaborates with him in the hope of remission, gives a performance of anguished inward intensity. Sherry Parker-Lee is moving as the appalled but helpless secretary who supplies the love interest, and James Black is terrifying as the prison bully who becomes an ageing hero.

What unites the play with Williams's later work is the sense of mounting desperation, of people at the very end of their ropes. Here, of course, their suffering is caused by the cruelty of others, but in his greatest work Williams showed that people can create their own particular hells, their own private Klondikes of the mind, without any outside intervention whatsoever.

Tickets: 0171 928 2232



CHARLES SPENCER

On the inside: Richard Ziman in *Not About Nightingales*

# Nightingales Spencer Telegraph



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