
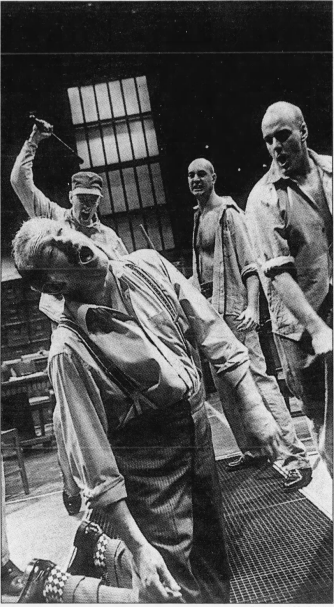


FIRST NIGHT



by **Nicholas de Jongh**

Not About Nightingales
The Cottesloe ★★



Picture: ALASTAIR MUIR

Modern-day warning from Williams of a world without humanity

THIS is one of the most remarkable theatrical discoveries of the last quarter century. I came away astonished and appalled from the world premiere of this lost Tennessee Williams play, left untouched to moulder in the anterooms to oblivion for 60 years. Not About Nightingales, based upon a real-life Philadelphia prison scandal involving hunger-strikers, torture and gruesome fatalities, ought to rank as one of the best theatre-documentaries. With a cinematic structure, an almost Jacobean sense of horror and suffering, and poetic flashes of later Williams, the play remains unlike anything else he wrote.

As a warning-message for end-of-century Britain and America, whose prisons remain reception-centres for institutionalised violence, cruelty and abuse, Not About Nightingales has hardly dated at all. Trevor Nunn's fervently acted though too leisurely production, ingeniously performed on a traverse stage, may have the nostalgic look of a black and white period film. But there's nothing faded or fuzzy about its impact. The brutal and brutalising regimen, crocodiles of prisoners shuffling in single line and each man with hands upon the man in front, is brought to vituperative life. Indeed the final punishment ordeal was almost too horrible to witness.

Richard Hoover, the play's terrific designer, has created a grim two-tiered edifice of steel prison-cages, with sliding doors, bunks, grilles, corridors and platforms. Chris Parry's lighting is suffused in mistily subdued shafts of silver. It's just "the little suburb of hell" Williams imagined. The central area, which becomes an almost literal torture chamber, is bare. Opposite the prison cages stands a mountinous array of filing cabinets and a high frosted window. Here at his desk sits Corin Redgrave's mustachioed Boss Whalen, Warden in charge, aspiring to charm the brasserie off Eva Crane, the new stenographer he has rescued from the Depression. This staging beautifully suits the

Shattering: Prisoners finally turn against Corin Redgrave's menacing Warden

play's terse, though sometimes repetitive, cross-cutting scenes as the action jumps between the Warden's office and prison cells. Neon captions flashed upon a screen emphasise the filmic atmosphere. Williams's script, written when he was only 28, does not, however, succumb to black and white simplicities. It brings an alienated, angry outcast into close, sometimes black-comedy view.

The play's prelude, with a mother struggling to discover from the Warden what has befallen her prisoner son, artfully reveals just how corrupt this island institution with 3,000 inmates has become. Williams pits the sadistic Warden against Butch O'Fallon, the prison's hardman, underplayed by James Black, who brings the prisoners out on hunger strike.

This Warden, dynamically incarnated by Corin Redgrave with a croaking voice, a swagger of a walk and a body whose gestures all convey agitation and menace, retallates by impounding the men in a sweat-box where four of them are literally cooked to death.

Williams intensifies the theatrics by making the Warden's trusty prisoner, youngish Canary Jim, the avenging angel who plots the Warden's murder in alliance with Eva, the smitten stenographer.

Jim, beautifully played by Finbar Lynch in a pall of glooming desolation is a true, mordant Williams character who sees himself as being in "a coffin with a glass lid" and partners Sherril Parker Lee's scared Eva in doomed love play as the prison riot rages. It is a shattering view of a world from which most humanity has gone.

Ratings - ○ adequate
 ★ good
 ★★ very good
 ★★★ outstanding
 ★ poor

More reviews: Page 50

Nightingales de Jongh Standard



Clipped By:
ianlharris
Sun, Feb 12, 2023