



PHOTOGRAPH NEIL LIBBERT

Cometh the Iceman, cometh the star

Film stars sometimes shrink on stage. But Kevin Spacey, who plays Hickey in the Almeida's four-hour-plus revival of O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh*, not only brings to the role a long theatrical pedigree but a spellbinding technical assurance: even more importantly, in Howard Davies's exemplary production, he is part of a first-rate ensemble that gives the play the copious detail of an American genre painting.

Set in Harry Hope's dilapidated bar in downtown New York in 1912, it confronts the great theme that dominates modern drama from *The Wild Duck* to *A Streetcar Named Desire*: whether human happiness depends on consoling life-lies or confrontation with reality. O'Neill's sundry barflies, lapped in drunken torpor as we take our seats, are all the non-walking emotional wounded sustained by cheap whisky and pipe-dreams. Only with the arrival of Hickey, a travelling salesman and sudden, messianic convert to truth-telling, are they forced to act out their red-eyed fantasies with predictably disastrous results.

You could easily make out a case against O'Neill's play. He never uses one word where 20 will do: typically Larry Slade, the ex-anarchist and grandstand philosopher who acts as a sardonic chorus, says of Hope's watering-hole "It's the No Chance Saloon. It's Bedrock Bar. The End of the Line Cafe. The Bottom of the Sea Ratskeller." You kind of get the point. In arguing that mankind needs its protective illusions, O'Neill also seems to demolish any hope of Utopia: again in the words of Larry, "you can't build a marble temple out a mixture of mud and manure." But can you generalise about all humanity from a cross-section of bar-room derelicts?

The great thing about O'Neill as a playwright, however, is that he has the virtues of his defects. He turns repetition into a dramatic strength, drawing us into the hermetic circularity of these toppers' fantasies: he even has the wit and confidence to send up his characters' prolixity so that, in the midst of Hickey's final confession, an exasperated Harry cries: "Get it over, you long-winded bastard."

Even O'Neill's defeatism is balanced by the quality that, I believe, gives the play its universality: its warning against ersatz messiahs whose reformist zeal camouflages personal guilt. Just as Ibsen's truth-telling idealist, Gregers Werle in *The Wild Duck*, is driven by filial revenge, so

O'Neill's Hickey is spurred on by the need to expiate a domestic crime. The play has become more, not less, topical as America, in particular, seems filled with rancorous evangelists and self-help merchants assuaging their own neuroses. When an idealist turns up at your door, suggests O'Neill, check out his credentials.

The play's currency is reinforced by Spacey's interpretation of Hickey as a born-again zealot. He reminds us, crucially, that Hickey is not only a salesman but also the son of an Indiana preacher: he brings to the role the dapper earnestness, the ability to absorb criticism and the blithe unawareness of reality of the blinkered pulpiteer. There's an hilarious moment when, on being confronted by the squashed barflies after their brief contact with the outside world, he cheerily cries: "Well, how are you all getting along?" Spacey also makes the point that the real danger of the convert lies in his desperate sincerity: he handles Hickey's final confessional monologue brilliantly, turning expiation of his own sin into a form of faith-healing, touching each of the bar's occupants in turn as if they were his disciples.

Larry, the bar-room philosopher plagued by the son of one of his old anarchist lovers, is no less pivotal a role: a barely recognisable Tim Pigott-Smith, his bald pate surrounded by greying tufts of unruly hair, catches exactly the weary nihilism of the lapsed agitator. Seeing through Hickey, he also observes the disruption he causes with cackling, mordant glee. And, from a remarkable ensemble, I would pick out Patrick Godfrey and Nicholas Day as a pair of warring old soldiers who fought on opposite sides in the Boer war, Clarke Peters as an angry ex-gambler smarting under a barrage of racial insults and Duncan Bell as a wrecked law-school alumnus.

Bob Crowley's set, with its long, curved bar, tacky frosted mirrors, flophouse beds suspended from the wall and faint projections of the outside world, has exactly the right stylised realism. And Howard Davies, who directed the 1976 Aldwych production, is sensitive both to O'Neill's tragi-comedy and his fundamental argument: that humankind cannot bear very much reality and that the zeal of the salvationist is, more often than not, an echo of private disturbance. — MB

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Iceman Guardian Billington



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