

Cool, calm and collected

The Iceman Cometh
Almeida, London

For a celebrated ensemble piece that requires a cast of 19 actors, Eugene O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh* certainly knows how to behave like a star vehicle. Having supposedly graduated from the paralytic to the catalytic, the key character is Hickey, the popular travelling salesman whose rousing periodic benders at this New York last-chance saloon are the stuff of befuddled legend. The heroine of *Hello, Dolly!* scarcely gets a bigger build-up before her entrance at the Harmonia Gardens, and once he's arrived, Hickey dominates attention, first by coming across the reformed alcoholic, full of missionary zeal to strip these derelict drunks of their illusions, and then by launching into an extremely lengthy last-act confession that allows them to take refuge in the belief that he's mad and to subside back into the booze.

In Howard Davies's revival, there's a buzz of anticipation on both sides of the footlights. Continuing its policy of fielding big name film actors, the Almeida has assigned the role of Hickey to Kevin Spacey, whose ability to project laid-back self-amused insolence is one of the joys of *LA Confidential* and who, in Al Pac-

ino's frustratingly bitty *Looking For Richard*, pulls you into a creepy intimacy with Shakespeare's devious, power-broking Buckingham.

Spacey is enormously watchable as Hickey. All controlling, calculating bonhomie, his fast-talking salesman has more than a touch of the modern games show host about him. He's so sincere-sounding, he's genuinely managed to fool himself and as he passes amongst the barflies, kneeling down to them or massaging their shoulders, there's a hollowness and a pseudo-hollowness in the contact that suggests this Hickey could give any Oprah-clone a run for his money. The overtones of the self-conning conman persist disturbingly here through the character's eventual stricken realisation that his reform was a pipe dream too. He's an object lesson in mankind's inability to bear very much reality or unconditional love.

Spacey is backed up by a crack cast, but *The Iceman Cometh* is to a true ensemble piece what serial adultery is to an orgy. Unlike Bill Bryden's revival at the National in 1980, which presented the bar and its denizens in almost two-dimensional frieze-like form, Davies uses the full depth of the Almeida and Bob Crowley's set – which includes surreal touches such as the bare bed and chairs aerially sus-

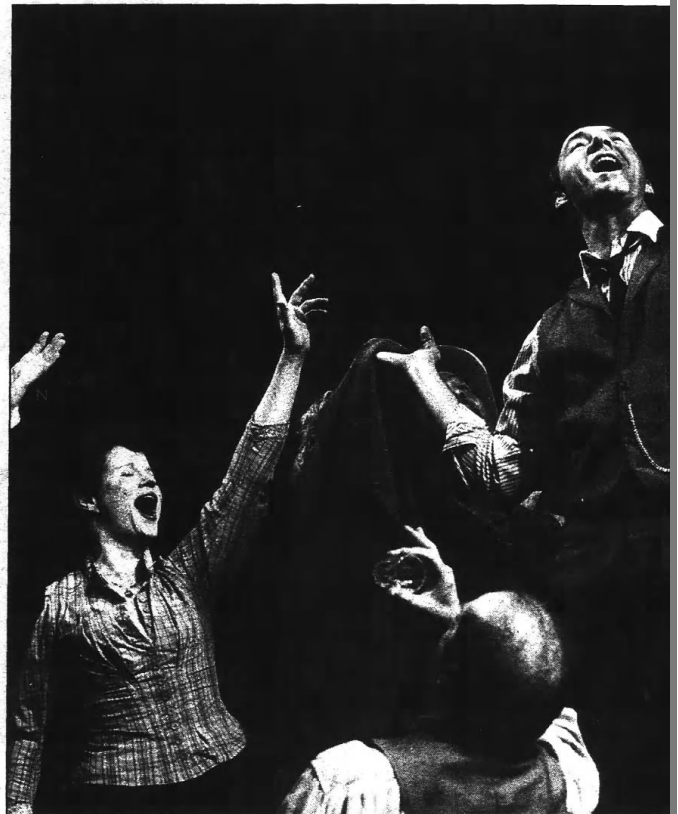
pending against the back wall – does not make the mistake of grounding the action (or rather inaction) in slavish naturalism.

This, though, pinpoints one of the problems of the play. You'll never come across more symbolic drunks than O'Neill presents us with here. Each seems to be in overweening control of his own little portion of illusion and they all consent to relapse into respectful catatonia or an obedient listening posture when it's another's turn for the spotlight. To say that O'Neill did not anticipate the technique of overlapping dialogue would be an understatement. Where are the sudden irrational lunges, the ominous silences and fits of violence found in a congregation of non-symbolic dipsos? The actors have to create a social texture from next to nothing. Sitting through the four-and-a-quarter hours of this production, you may find yourself asking why, if one drunk is axiomatically a bore, the company of over a dozen should be considered an epic experience.

Paul Taylor

Kevin Spacey 'enormously watchable' as Hickey in 'The Iceman Cometh'

Photograph: Geraint Lewis



Iceman Independent Taylor



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