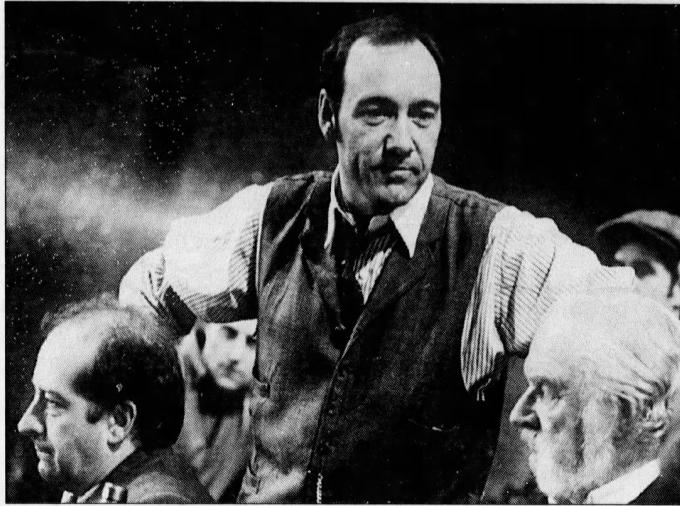


# Spacey's a star in the No-Chance Saloon



Kevin Spacey as Hickey, the sinister salesman taking charge of lost souls Picture: ALASTAIR MUJIR

**A**N ASTONISHING troupe of actors triumphed last night in one of the great dramatic marathons of the century — Eugene O'Neill's view of life through a glass darkly, hard-set in the lower depths of alcoholism. It took a taxing though tremendous four hours to complete and I, who have never made this rare theatrical journey before, emerged from O'Neill's New York, No-Chance Saloon of 1912, devastated, scathed and curiously elated. The Iceman Cometh wrestles with the question of whether existence is better lived smoking heavily on pipe-dreams or facing cruel facts of life — all illusions scorned. And it gripped me heart and mind.

It may sound a subject best suited for debate by dry philosophers in academe's ivory towers. But O'Neill makes the problem brightly live through the experience of vintage alcoholics who slouch, sleep and slur in Harry Hope's Manhattan saloon. A stinging pathos is arranged. There they are, eyes and bodies dormant in the midst of Bob Crowley's handsome Edwardian bar which looks far too clean and stylishly modern-Islington to be the dilapidated creation of O'Neill's imagining.

These people are chronic has-beens who have only their better pasts on which to fall back for consolation. O'Neill knew their persistent drunkenness and dereliction well. How vividly he brings them into theatrical



FIRST NIGHT

by Nicholas de Jongh

The Iceman Cometh  
*The Almeida* ★★

focus and conflict. Harry Hope, the ironically named saloon proprietor, has not even dared to step out into daylight for two decades. The English Captain and the Boer Commando are at permanent odds. The Anarchist has lost faith in anarchy, the English war correspondent only battles with alcohol and always loses.

Howard Davies's beautifully choreographed production, surely the best of his long career, aptly liberates the play from realistic confines and gives

it touches of dream-like ritual. Into this saloon there comes Kevin Spacey's mesmerising visitor, Hickey, perhaps the deathly Iceman of the title. He is a salesman involved in a spiritual hard-sell, urging the pipe-dreamers to abandon high hopes, to go for honesty and accept themselves as they are.

Most Hollywood film stars chancing it on the London stage twinkle dimly, all personality shrivelled. To this regularity, Spacey is a ripe exception. His Hickey breezes into the saloon to take charge of lost souls, all the while oozing a charm and bonhomie that mask fanaticism. Tim Pigott-Smith is ripe for superlatives as the former anarchist Larry Slade, the only saloon habitué who accepts hard reality. But it's Spacey, nonchalantly underplaying Hickey's crazy 20-minute confessional monologue of his life, who

pierces to the play's dark heart.

O'Neill uses Hickey as a vehicle to peddle the idea that self-awareness is better than self-deception. But Hickey, as Spacey's bland though sinister performance eloquently suggests, is an unreliable advocate. The Iceman Cometh says something different. Rupert Graves's fraught, treacherous young man, Ian Bartholomew's touchingly drunken journalist and James Hazeldine's gruffly melodramatic saloon bar owner, prove that for many people truth is better left un-faced. A towering theatrical night.

Ratings: - ○ adequate

★ good,

★★ very good,

★★★ outstanding,

\* poor

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## Iceman Standard de Jongh



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Sun, Apr 16, 2023