

Review

Casting light on visible darkness

Michael Billington

The Real Inspector Hound/Black Comedy
Comedy Theatre

THIS is a witty and delicious pairing of two classic comedies of the sixties by, respectively, Stoppard and Shaffer. One contrasts reality and illusion, the other light and dark. What links them is the way they both feed off the conventions of theatre itself.

Stoppard's play famously confronts two theatre critics, a vengeful deputy and a philanthropic first string, with a creaky country-house thriller of the kind, thankfully, they don't write any more.

The skill lies in the way the two aisle-squatters are drawn into the stage events and are thus fatally able to act out their vindictive and lubricious fantasies.

At the risk of sounding like the pretentious deputy, Moon, the play is partly about the dangers of wish-fulfilment.

But what keeps it alive is Stoppard's merciless parody of the fog-bound whodunit in which the characters lob great chunks of exposition at each other and the comic char is forever on the phone.

As played by Nichola McAuliffe, with bedraggled stockings, a hat that looks like a curving pancake and a fearful, premonitory stare, she turns out to be the funniest character, in that she reminds us just how much the rep-thriller depended on condescending class stereotypes.

Like Stoppard's play, Shaffer's *Black Comedy* also hinges on a highly theatrical concept: a famous Peking

Opera sketch in which two men, supposedly fighting in the dark, are brilliantly illuminated.

What is astonishing, however, is the way Shaffer wrings endless variations on the basic joke in which a South Ken sculptor, while entertaining his fiancée's father during a blown fuse, manages to return all the furniture and objects of art he has secretly borrowed from his antique-dealing neighbour.

Shaffer has a serious point to make: that only in darkness are hidden truths revealed.

But what makes us laugh inordinately are the alarming physical consequences of people stumbling around in a supposed black-out: handbags gets speared on chair legs, feet land in travelling bags, and the peppery colonel at one point finds himself at the mercy of an unexpected rocking chair.

It becomes a play about the treachery of inanimate objects.

But it is also very much a director's and actors' piece. Greg Doran's production has the right frenzied choreographed skill and there are very funny performances from David Tennant as the deceitful sculptor, Desmond Barr as the neighbouring antique-dealer who suggests camp on the verge of being struck, and Geoffrey Freshwater as the electrician, repair man mistaken for a millionaire art-lover.

Shaffer, like Stoppard, plays wittily with theatrical stereotypes. But this brilliant comedy finally rests on its ability to wring endless laughter out of what Milton called "No light, but rather darkness visible".

Real Inspector Black Comedy Guardian Billington



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