

Review

Painful miracle of being born anew

Michael Billington

3 by Harold Pinter
Donmar Warehouse

“FAT?” ran an old Bob Hope joke. “The fireman had to make two trips.” My advice would be to do the same with this trio of Pinter plays at the Donmar Warehouse: one night to see *A Kind Of Alaska*, and another to catch *The Collection* and *The Lover*. Taken together they make for a long, if fascinating, evening.

A Kind Of Alaska, as directed by Karel Reisz, stands up magnificently on its own. This 1985 play, derived from an Oliver Sacks case history, shows its heroine, Deborah, awakening from a 29-year sleeping sickness. Pinter captures with brilliant economy the strangeness that Deborah has not only existed in some other world but is locked into a teenage past.

Penelope Wilton’s performance is astonishing. She suggests the “laughing nature” of this English upper-class girl suspended in time and half existing in a world of balls and parties and boyfriends. But she also conveys the shock of resurrection. When Bill Nighy’s sympathetic doctor tells her that she has been asleep for 29 years, Wilton’s features move from amusement to disbelief to dumb-founded horror in one seamless reaction. This is consummate acting, as the heroine adjusts to the painful miracle of being born anew.

The other two plays belong

more naturally together. Both were written for television in the 1960s and show Pinter exploring the nature of desire, possession, male insecurity and Sphinx-like femininity.

The Collection hinges on what did or did not take place one night in a Leeds hotel; whether Bill, the working-class lover of the possessive Harry, slept with the enigmatic Stella. The delight in this production lies in seeing Pinter himself play Harry. With his Japanese silk dressing gown, he exudes a brutish sophistication and gives full value to the speech in which Harry savagely describes his lover as a “slum slug”.

What also emerges from Joe Harmston’s production is the sense of primitive male fear. At the end Douglas Hodge as Stella’s ceaselessly inquiring, sexually ambiguous husband is reduced to quivering helplessness, while Lia Williams maintains her silken silence.

Hodge and Williams reappear as husband and wife in *The Lover*, a classic study of bourgeois sexuality and of the need for married partners to retreat into enlivening fantasy. It’s Noel Coward on the surface, Strindberg underneath, an extraordinary study of the erotic games people play. My only complaint about Joe Harmston’s production is that it pre-empted the moment when bongos turn out to be a sexual weapon. But Hodge hits the right note of panic, and Williams of fetishistic control. The play proves that Pinter writes as well about sex as anyone in the business.

Billington Guardian Pinters



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Sun, Jul 23, 2023