

THREE BY Harold Pinter is one too many. He has always been the most precise of writers, choosing every word with a care that makes his language both lethal and resonant. Yet to sit through three plays, each lasting just under an hour, is too much, especially since the first, *A Kind of Alaska*, is completely different in style and theme from the inspired pairing of *The Lover* and *The Collection*. The good news is that audiences can see one, two or all three plays, and my own advice would be to give *A Kind of Alaska* a miss and settle for *The Lover* and *The Collection*. They are, without

doubt, the most disturbingly erotic dramas on the London stage and find Pinter at the very top of his form, both as a writer and — the real cherry on the cake — as a spectacularly charismatic performer. *The Collection* was first seen on television in 1961, yet it still seems remarkably modern, even shocking. It concerns two couples, and explores the itch of infidelity and the fluid nature of truth. Harry lives with Bill (the sexual nature of their relationship is signalled with marvel-

ous delicacy), and James is married to Stella. All four work in the rag trade, and after a trip to Leeds it appears that Stella has spent an illicit night with Bill. Pinter superbly maintains a sense of mystery — the accounts of what actually happened that night in the hotel bedroom are constantly changing — as well as capturing the almost sexual complicity between betrayed and betrayer. The piece is perceptive, too, on the terrible urge of those who have been cuck-

Theatre
3 by Harold Pinter
Donmar Warehouse
olded to scratch at the scab of their hurt, while the confrontations between the male characters crackle with tension. Pinter is magnificent as Harry, bullying everyone with vituperative relish. Often regarded with excessive solemnity (not least by himself), Pinter is actually a wonderfully funny actor, a

comic heavy of real panache. When he picks up a small white kitten, à la Ernst Stavros Blofeld, you really don't know whether he's going to stroke it or strangle it. Lia Williams brings a depth of real hurt to the piece as Stella, while Douglas Hodge and Colin McFarlane suggest a growing sexual attraction that transcends their rivalry. Joe Harnston directs this ice-cold gem of a play with immaculate precision. *The Lover* (1965), again directed by Harnston, is

equally compelling. It concerns a respectable married couple and the sexual games they play in the afternoons, when the husband comes home and pretends to be his wife's lover. There is a terrific erotic charge here, and increasing emotional violence as the husband recklessly begins to destroy the fantasy they have lovingly created. The piece is mercilessly accurate about the often squalid nature of male desire. Williams, an actress with a glow like no other, plays the

wife with a lovely mixture of sexual allure and commonsensical compassion, while Hodge movingly captures a man helped back from very brink of mental breakdown. In contrast, *A Kind of Alaska* (1982) seems second-hand, for it is based on Oliver Sacks's famous book *Awakenings*, about patients being aroused from sleeping sickness by the drug L-DOPA. Penelope Wilton is both touching and surprisingly funny as the middle-aged woman who wakes from a 28-

year hibernation, and finds herself caught between her teenage past and the incomprehensible present, while Bill Nighy and Brid Brennan exude compassion as her doctor and her sister. Unfortunately the play, directed by Karel Reisz with some ridiculously long Pinteresque pauses, doesn't really resonate beyond the remarkable borrowed story it has to tell. Indeed it strikes me as the work of a writer whose extraordinary and distinctive talent was about to go into a sad decline. Tickets: 0171 369 1732

CHARLES SPENCER

Three Pinter plays (Pause) Two are very good (Pause) One isn't

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