

Making heavy weather of light entertainment

THE RSC clearly thinks highly of Stephen Poliakoff's *Talk of the City*, and there is certainly no mistaking the play's ambition.

The piece concerns the BBC in the late 1930s, and examines both the hugely influential radio output and the infant television service, then broadcasting to the tiny number of households — some 2000 — which actually owned a set.

Poliakoff has plainly done his homework, and his portrait of the BBC is often both persuasive and funny. His hero Robbie Penacourt is an entertainer in the ITMA mould, presenting a Friday night variety show, complete with terrible police detective series and chorus girls who sing and dance in full costume, even though no one can see them.

The excitement of live radio broadcasts is beguilingly caught on stage, as are the patrician, impossibly plummy news broadcasts, and the sometimes malign machinations of the BBC's bureaucracy, as unimaginative and oppressive then, Poliakoff mischievously suggests, as it is today.

The main burden of the play is that the BBC could have done far more to alert its listeners to the dangers of Nazism, and in particular to Nazi treatment of the Jews. The BBC's caution, some might say cowardice, in this respect is a matter of record, and the theme is undoubtedly potent. Poliakoff, however, makes exceptionally heavy weather of it. An earnest, fiercely intelligent

Theatre

Talk of the City
RSC/Swan Theatre
Stratford-upon-Avon

young man from the Talks department, called Clive, approaches Robbie with a view to producing a drama documentary on a day in the life of a Jew in Germany. Robbie becomes increasingly drawn to this radical in the cosy BBC nest, and a secret pact is hatched. Unfortunately it is at about this stage that both credibility and dramatic insight start flying out of the window.

The scenes in which Robbie starts wildly improvising on air are entertaining, but they don't convince. The BBC would have stopped the broadcast and put on a record instead.

It is also hard to accept Poliakoff's thesis that broadcasting the truth about Nazi Germany would have transformed world opinion, forced Hitler to mend his ways and averted the war. The wireless was a powerful medium, but not that powerful. Even the most harrowing TV broadcasts today can do little to rectify famine and poverty in the Third World.

There is also the matter of technical clumsiness. Poliakoff's dialogue often sounds as stilted as a second-rate radio play from the 1930s and I fear this is not deliberate pastiche.

He also keeps springing surprises about his characters — Robbie's

bisexuality, the suicide of Clive's girlfriend — without satisfactorily integrating them into the action.

The play is a muddle, and needs a rigorous director to sort it out. Yet foolishly, the RSC has allowed Poliakoff to direct his own play, compounding the piece's confused implausibility.

The performances, however, are first rate. The charismatic David Westhead brings a memorably driven quality to Robbie, capturing the variety man's intellectual curiosity and emotional openness, while as Clive, Angus Wright suggests the overbearing arrogance of a man who knows he has a first-class mind.

Kelly Hunter supplies the piece with some much needed emotional depth as his girlfriend, though the part is woefully underwritten; John Normington is excellent as "Arnos" Grove, a devious bureaucrat who isn't nearly as vague as he pretends, and Julian Curry is touching as a confused old character actor.

It is an intriguing, atmospheric and fitfully entertaining play, but as so often in the past, Poliakoff has failed to do complete justice to his subject matter. He is a writer who is always full of bright ideas, but only rarely does he make them sing. Indeed, too often here he seems content merely to preach.

Tickets: 01789 295623

CHARLES SPENCER

Spencer Telegraph Talk



Clipped By:

ianharris

Tue, Jul 25, 2023