

A kind of triumph, once the sex has been put to bed



Stolid: Pinter proves disappointing in *The Collection*, his one play that touches on homosexuality
Picture: ALASTAIR MUIR

TO SEE Harold Pinter dressed in a floral dressing gown and acting in one of his own plays as Harry, a middle-aged gay chap who's something small in the ring, ought to inspire one of the theatrical freasons of the year. But what an old-fashioned disappointment this Pinter performance, and indeed his own 1998, play, *The Collection*, proves to be. Of the three Pinter one-act plays in this over-long evening, only that little masterpiece, *A Kind Of Alaska*, makes the night worthwhile.

FIRST NIGHT
by Nicholas de Jongh
3 By Pinter • Donmar Warehouse

The *Collection* is the one Pinter play which discreetly touches upon homosexuality — without anyone being actually touched up on stage. Flitting between smart homes in Belgrave and Chelsea, *The Collection* is not so much a sexual whodunnit or even *Bill*, a young dress-designer living with Harry. In what Pinter clearly intended to be some sort of gay message, actually have sex with La Williams's love-born Stella in a Leeds hotel?

Stella's husband James — when Douglas Hodge plays with a truculent eagerness — and young Harry feel the anxious need to pry out the truth. You would think that today all Pinter's elegantly understated intimations of gayness, and of James's obviously erotic interest in Bill, could be brought from the closets of reticence. Not in the sex-suppressed, partly zone of Joe Harrison's light-weight production. Pinter's stolid Harry, sounding more like a dyspeptic colonel than Noel Coward, is about as gay, or camp, as a night in Knightsbridge barracks.



Douglas Hodge's James and Colin McFarlane's Bill repress rather than reveal the flickerings of gay desire. At least, though, the play does not betray its television origins as obviously as *The Lover*, in which a jaded middle-class husband and wife only enjoy each other sexually with the aid of role-play. This is Pinter's astute comedy of sexual manners, suggesting how some couples can only fulfil their unbuttoned sexual fantasies when they assume new personalities. And by the end fantasy has had to encroach still deeper into the marriage to ensure its survival.

La Williams looks the provocative part as the wife while Douglas Hodge teeters on caricature's verge. But there's now no concealing that Pinter's variations on this erotic theme are repetitive, not illuminating.

The real illuminations come early on with *A Kind Of Alaska*, inspired by Oliver Sacks's book *Awakenings*, about the 1960 epidemic of sleeping sickness and those briefly woken with the drug L-Dopa. This brief poetic masterpiece evokes the state of mind of a woman who wakes in her hospital bed after 20 years of oblivion, convinced that she is still in adolescence.

Penelope Wilton, with lank hair, staring eyes and a look of engorged blankness, begins to speak in a high, young girl's voice. Pinter portendly distills the essence of a life petrified in long lost, middle-class adolescence and the woman's confused, reluctant drift into the present. Janet Ruse's production is beautifully pitched. Bill Nighty expresses a grave medical sympathy. Miss Wilton is quite stupendous, conveying a sense of her fraught, bewildered return to the world from which she has been lost. Just stay for this play.

Stupendous: Penelope Wilton with Bill Nighty in the poetic *A Kind Of Alaska* ensure its survival.
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