

It may not be Art but it's quite apt

Review

Michael Billington

The Unexpected Man

The Pit

YASMINA Reza justly hit the jackpot with Art: a play in which a painting became a test of friendship. Now with *The Unexpected Man*, again translated by Christopher Hampton, she uses a book as a source of adventure: the result is civilised, elegant, but a bit too self-consciously exquisite for my carnivorous taste.

Two people, a man and a woman, sit opposite each other on a Paris-Frankfurt train. Rather than directly converse, they engage in interior monologues. He, Paul Parsky, is a novelist, successful but gnawed by bitterness about age, life, critics, his own literary inadequacy and his daughter's impending marriage to a much older man.

She, Martha, is a stylish widow who happens to have his latest novel in her hand bag, who is half in love with him through his work but who is terrified of bringing out the book for fear of mutual embarrassment.

It is a situation that leads Reza into all sorts of speculation: in particular, the idea that fiction has a greater reality than life. Martha is so immersed in Parsky's imagina-

tive world that she discovers in it the character and thoughts of her best friend, Serge.

The writer himself, meanwhile, is a grumpy sod whose thoughts range over laxatives, his piano lessons, the irritation of being at the mercy of outside opinion.

On one level, Reza is dealing, not unlike Chekhov in *The Seagull*, with the divorce between the writer and the work, between the jobbing craftsman and the fictional world he creates. But, on another level, she is illustrating Paul Auster's point that the reader writes the book.

While Parsky sees his work as an expression of his own rancorous cynicism, Martha discovers in it a poetry and compassion of which he himself is unaware.

All this is intelligent enough. But the form itself is rather restrictive.

As a frequent traveller, I also found myself somewhat envious of the relaxed solitude of this particular train, free from mobile phones, blaring Walkmans and interruptive announcements.

The main pleasure lies in the production and the acting. Michael Gambon and Eileen Atkins marvellously convey two people locked in separate worlds.

This is acting of the highest calibre that gives flesh and bone to what might otherwise be a quietly civilised 80-minute radio play.

Billington Guardian Unexpected



Clipped By:

ianlharris

Sat, Aug 5, 2023