



exhaustively expressed notion that Wales is in the thrall of fairies - try announcing that at the Arms Park - never really convince.

Susanah Clapp is on holiday

Interview
Patrick Marber
by Kate Kellaway

'You give actors lines to deliver, but what they really love is subtext'

Patrick Marber has always been a champion of David Mamet. Marber's first play, *Dealer's Choice*, about gambling, established him as a writer to be reckoned with, though some critics regarded the play as derivative - of Mamet (Marber and Mamet are both skilled gamblers). Then came the extraordinarily successful *Closer* - a cynical passion play - in which Marber found his own voice, writing dialogue of witty distinction.

Now Marber is directing three short, secretive plays by Mamet, grouped under the title *The Old Vic* at the Duke of York's from 17 June (with Zoe Wanamaker, Diana Quick and Colin Stinton in the cast). In the first play, *The Disappearance of the Jews*, Mamet's dialogue is artfully a slight, the dialogue between two old men who have known each other all their lives. The old friends do not need to fill in any gaps. Marber would say, on Mamet's behalf, that there are no gaps to fill. He explains, with satisfaction, that Mamet's work there is 'so subtext, only what is said and done'. He adds: 'Mamet would possibly argue that there is no character, journey or relationship in his work. All that actors have to do is speak the lines and make sure they don't bump into the furniture.'

But the trouble with this, as Marber admits, is that actors often want subtext. And so do audiences. And as a director, Marber has had to 'invent, impose, suggest, cajole, wheedle something out of the words'. Mamet's view amounts to a serious tease, a way of not having to be his own critic.

Look at Patrick Marber and silently try out Mamet's idea on him, try to judge him only on the evidence of what is in front of me. We are sitting in a cheerless office at the top of the Old Vic, surrounded by fat blue files, with Peter Hall Company libels on their spines. Marber has politely offered me a choice of deflated-looking chairs, suggesting I take the swivel one for its greater mobility.

Marber looks comfortable. He is short, dark, handsome and well-fed (not an euphemism for fat). His blue and white check shirt and black suit suit him, but are as unorthodox as uniform. There is a largeness about the way that he sits and his slightly crooked smile has indolent charm. His blue eyes look as though they might give his game away - but he has got his words on a lead. He often has a dog in his West Highland terrier called Mrs Riley) on a lead too. But she is reported to be suffering from arthritis and at home in Marber's flat in Smithfield.

Marber has been described as arrogant and shy by turns. Friendly and depressive. But it is the exceptional person who does not consider themselves, on one level, shy. Marber doesn't quite pass the test. He was a stand-up comic for four years (before co-writing the Alan Partridge *Knocking Me Around* series) and though he hated it, stuck it out. Today he seems confident, buttressed by the reception of *Closer*, which has been recast with Imogen Stubbs, Tom Mannion, Kate Ashfield and Lloyd Owen. It will also go to Broadway in the winter.

Has the success of *Closer* had a paralyzing effect on his writing? 'No. It is much easier to write your next play if your last play has been a hit. Confidence is everything.' He is not writing but 'thinking' about a new play: 'It is in deep cover, below the undergrowth.'

I tell him my impression of him as of someone who does not worry unduly, is this right? 'No! I am a classic worrier. I'm a worrier who knows he shouldn't worry - because what's the point?' My impression is also that he has an engaged intelligence. He is quick to detect the bogus. He was an over-keen gambler as an undergraduate at Oxford (he joined Gamblers Anonymous when he was 20). Did he see his creative life as a gambler? 'No, he said, not tempted to deliver a pat answer.

Has Marber ever not Mamet? 'I took a stroll with Mr Mamet. We were in Soho so we discussed "buildings". They tried and failed to buy Mamet a leather jacket. He tried one on; he didn't like it.' They talked about why Jews - they are both Jewish - generally don't drink and why writers often do. Later, Marber says, they talked about oblivion. Marber is in favour of having 'one or two drinks when writing. It takes a little bit of your self-off yourself.' He says later there can be a strange magical feeling when you write. Especially when you don't quite know what you're doing - that's when it is bliss.

Marber, who has a younger brother, was born in Wimbledon. His father worked in the city. His mother was a housewife. He describes himself as a 'lapsed' Jew, though he still has a strong cultural attachment. This makes him feel relatively 'sure-footed' with Mamet. Marber has directed other people's work before - Craig Raine's 1983 for example - as well as his own. Does he find it a relief to direct someone else's play? 'It is equally demanding, but in a different way. It is pleasurable not to know how it should sound.' But he worries about making 'a pig's ear' of someone else's work.

Marber looks forward to directing *Closer* in New York and marvels at how serious showbiz is over there. As an ironic Englishman, he is able to take this seriously? 'It is my little project to throw away my bags of irony,' he says.

Kellaway Observer Marber Interview



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