


FIRST NIGHT
by Nicholas de Jongh

The Unexpected Man
RSC Barbican, The Pit ★


THIS HAUNTING question-mark of a play by Yasmina Reza explores what's really going on during a pregnant, more than 75-minute long silence. In this time two strangers — Michael Gambon's famous novelist and Eileen Atkins's Martha, who recognises him and adores his books — sit on opposite sides of a railway carriage, not speaking a word to each other. Yet the stage is still full of significant noise — of two people voicing their intimate thoughts aloud. They coast along on parallel streams of consciousness — interior monologues — with the woman wondering how to break the silence and attract the novelist. In her famously popular play *Art* — still running in the West End — Miss Reza brooded in comic style about the difficulty we have honestly speaking our minds. She poked mild fun at the supposedly close friendships men achieve and suggested on what insecure foundations they were based. Echoes resound in *The Unexpected Man*. This time, though, Miss Reza offers an abuse view of two cut-off people steeped in isolation and loneliness. The man conceals. The woman reveals. The man preserves his wary isolation and the woman recognises how much of himself he hides in his novels. Matthew Warchus's vivacious production, which bounds with theatrical energy, opens up this two-character play, ensuring it never seems better suited to radio. The man and the woman are rarely confined to their seats. Besides, those tantalising questions remain. Will the silence ever be broken and how and why? Mark Thompson's stylish set is worlds away from a realistic railway compartment. Upright wooden chairs rest on a perspex floor under which are seen the parallel lines of the track.

MISS Reza's ruminative streams of consciousness, which run from the pretentious high-flown to the domestic predictable, sometimes achieve a sparse eloquence, wit and yearning in Christopher Hampton's translation. A grey-suited Sir Michael Gambon, looking distinctly Gallic, conveys an invincible air of discontent as the author. His voice is keyed into complaint. Only a touch of invective — directed against a thin-voiced potential son-in-law or a hideous secretary —

Trains of thought that glide on parallel lines



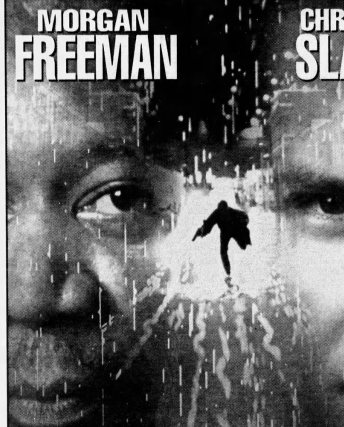
Eileen Atkins: A grand, child-like amusement



Michael Gambon: Chronic indigestion of the soul

Picture: NIGEL NORRINGTON

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MORGAN FREEMAN **CHRIS SLADE**

pleasures him. It's as if his character suffered from chronic indigestion of the soul — not to mention more practical problems which neither *Ex-Lax* or *All Bran* have solved. Sir Michael's beguiling portrait of authorial alienation is matched and then quite surpassed by Eileen Atkins's absolutely vintage performance of late-middle-aged loneliness and longing. Her role involves not just the lyric recollection of past, lost loves, but also her present, wit-fuelled campaign to capture the novelist's heart and mind.

With that quizzical, speculative voice of hers Miss Atkins, dressed in purple chicness and sounding as rigorous as a don, rains down a little light mockery upon herself and her world. She eyes the author, whose works she understands inside out, like an estate agent appraising a tricky piece of property. A grand, child-like amusement becomes her in sight of the brazen effrontery of her seduction tactic. She's sheer theatrical delight.

Ratings: — ○ adequate
★ good,
★★ very good,
★★★ outstanding,
★ poor

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de Jongh Standard Unexpected



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