

EVENING STANDARD

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# Nicole's body shock

'We knew she wasn't fat, we knew she'd look pretty good, but this!' **SHANE WATSON** scrutinises Nicole Kidman as she makes her debut on the London stage and is mesmerised by the measurements

**T**OWARDS the end of *The Blue Room*, Iain Glen's character remarks that he has a problem with the theatre ... finding a parking space and eating late. Everyone flitters, because the obstacles that stand between the theatre poor and the work are familiar to us all: the temptation to fall asleep in the cocooning dark, restricted leg space and light-headedness induced by gin and tonics downed at breakneck speed during the interval.

But with the Donmar's latest production, a new and far more potent distraction has been added to the list, the presence of Nicole Kidman.

As someone who has attended umpteen fashion shows, I thought I was immune to body shock — that wave of awe, disbelief and appreciation tinged with a sense of the unfairness of life that hits you the first few times you see a Schiffer or a Christensen draped in a chiffon hanky. That feeling returns maybe three or four times before you grow used to seeing examples of physical near-perfection and nothing less will do.

At this point actresses aren't even in the frame. They may have a pretty face, nice legs, but never the complete package that can stand up to the glare of the cat-walk lights, let alone the scrutiny of the front row.

But when Nicole Kidman sauntered on to the stage at the start of *The Blue Room*, slipped off her leather coat and stood there in a pink stretch mini and T-shirt, I felt it all over again — awe, disbelief, appreciation, the quick flashback to the two packets of crisps at lunch, the onset of mild depression.

Kidman has the two essentials required for full-on body shock — a blemish-free physique and the kind of springy, graceful movement you only find in dancers and top models. But she has an added advantage, the element of surprise.

We knew she wasn't fat, we knew she'd look pretty good, but this! A figure (narrow hips, bosoms at armpit level, long rangy legs, no — repeat, no — cellulite or any interruptions to the all-over moonstone skin) that not only matches up to the best but would be exceptional on a 20-year-old. Whereas Nicole is 31.

All of which adds up to an evening spent mesmerised by the leading lady's measurements. While others were watching the scene unfold between the young model and the politician I was craning my neck to see if, when she crossed her legs, the one underneath showed signs of creptiness. None.

The scene with the politician's wife and the younger man ... don't ask me, I was concentrating on the black body — searching for signs of bottom bulge or unsightly chicken joint effect in the high-cut front. None. During the model/playwright scene, while others applauded the naked cartwheeling Glen, I was concentrating on her removing her bra under her vest (the moment when the Kidman Achilles' heel would be revealed, surely). No visible difference.

This fixation with bodily perfection is, of course, exclusively a girl thing. The men who see Kidman acting in a variety of underwear and sometimes nothing at all will simply enjoy the experience throughout. Our enjoyment is of a different kind — part aesthetic pleasure, part competitive instinct, with a large dose of Hello!-age voyeurism. It's the same with women on a beach, they're never looking at the man, only at each other.

I told a friend about *The Blue Room*, made a cursory attempt at summing up the plot and then mentioned the Kidman body. "Every woman's idea of heaven," she gasped, "two hours just checking it out ... do they still have tickets?"



'A new and far more potent distraction': Nicole Kidman, who is starring in *The Blue Room*, and below, with co-star Iain Glen



## WHAT THE PAPERS SAY

□ **The Daily Mail:** The evening is a triumph for Ms Kidman, who is as stunning on stage as she was in films such as *To Die For* and *Dead Calm*, writes Christopher Tooke.

□ **The Daily Telegraph:** Most of the time, I had eyes only for Nicole Kidman, writes Charles Spencer. Eyes on stalks in fact. It's pure theatrical Viagra.

□ **The Times:** Kidman is excellent, varying from a sensuous au pair to a power-mad diva, from a drugged-up model to a politician's wife, writes Benedict Nightingale.

□ **The Guardian:** Kidman switches personae with consummate ease. She is not just a star; she genuinely delivers the goods, writes Michael Billington.

□ **The Express:** I can't think of a British actress who could have done it better, writes Robert Coore-Langton.

## She lights up room with a fierce glamour



FIRST NIGHT  
by Nicholas de Jongh  
*The Blue Room*  
Donmar Warehouse \*

**I**T WAS WHEN they hauled on a very smart kitchen-sink unit, setting the scene for a student's seduction of an au pair girl, that I began to feel David Hare was artfully diluting an original bitter sexual cocktail. His *Blue Room* filters the twilight world of the heterosexual through an opulent glow of modishness. Hare has played loose and clever with a famous old Austrian play: in Arthur Schnitzler's *La Ronde*, 10 couples guiltily find pleasure in each other before they separate and are linked in a sexual daisy-chain. So Hare's gentle comedy of sexual manners displaces Schnitzler's serious drama of sex and betrayal.

The change is not always for the theatrical better. But there remains at least one alluring compensation not to say come-on. All five females are played in varieties of figure-bagging, titillatingly minimal dress by Nicole Kidman who proves there's more to her than meets the eye. Iain Glen as her various partners in sex is eventually reduced to his bare essentials as if to prove he can mount as spectacular an erotic show. Sexual relations, though, as Schnitzler conveyed them, undergo a sea-change thanks to Hare's devising.

He transports the original from the Vienna of 1898 to rich London 1998. Sam Mendes's production, with Mark Thompson as his designer, oozes flashy post-modern sumptuousness. The stage shimmers in blue light and neon signs, with film captions and crackling electronic sounds to signal the time taken before orgasm. Since Kidman and Glen look like models they give the sexual encounters a fierce glamour. Their couplings in modish beds, luxurious places or even a designer brothel advertise sex as a recreation for chic, rich beautiful people.

Schnitzler's original was more earthy and tense. It roamed around Vienna with sex frantically undertaken in parkland and parlour, drawing room and whore-house. His characters dared to defy rigid class and marriage barriers. The tone was suitably serious-sardonic: in those days syphilis killed, adultery really wrecked women's lives. There was no state-aid to save pregnant servant girls from ruin. Hare's cast of Nineties characters live in a world from which such serious worries have mainly vanished. His au pair girl, coke-taking, teenage model, adulterous New Labour politician, West End actress and student seducer are pained but not ruined by desire. Hare, therefore, arranges a far lighter comedy of sexual manners without real after-doses of pain when encounters end. Only his smug politician, specialising in "presentation and lies" has much social though not sexual bite to him.

Miss Kidman lacks much theatrical experience. But all five roles are in her elegant, confident grasp. She's firmly set in the glow of her sex appeal. So there's not that much difference in the manners of her French au pair and cockney tart. But she manages all the accents and attitudes in neatly provocative performances. She slips into sex play and display to the manner born, sending up the role of an actress in full preen.

Mendes's super-cool, hip production relies more on the smartness of its atmosphere than emotions. No surprise then that Glen, usually a front-rank, truthful actor gives a disappointingly histrionic set of performances. Only as an aristocrat, wretched in old-fashioned anxieties does Glen really enthuse Hare's interesting view of how desire makes fools of us all.

Ratings: — adequate \* good \*\* very good, \*\*\* outstanding, X poor  
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