



Moral questions:
Charles Dance. In the best performance of his career, and his lover, the enticing Emilia Fox

PICTURE:
ALCANTARA/MEIR

Not just Good, this is one of the best plays for 50 years

THIS WAS one of the most powerful, politically pointed nights at the theatre I can remember. I was shocked quite near to the core. The play describes one man's moral decline and fall, from apparent grace to ghastliness. Yet Michael Grandage's tremendous production of CP Taylor's *Good*, given a first London revival since its 1981 premiere, basks in calm and reasonableness. Brutalities of the physical and verbal kind are quite avoided. Taylor's black satire suggests the stealthy process by which the liberal spirit was extinguished in Nazi Germany. He shows how a humane novelist and Professor of German literature could, without qualms, be courted and recruited by the SS to supervise a euthanasia programme, graduating from University to the Auschwitz death camps.

The intensity of my emotions had to do with the persuasive banality of Taylor's argument: people may collude in atrocities not because they are wicked but because they wish for easy, comfortable lives. His thesis applies not just to Germans under Hitler's way, but to anyone, anywhere. In a week when the issue of Kosovo dominates the headlines, the moral question posed by *Good* assumes a nagging, contemporary relevance. In the last resort do we care about anything beyond the small world of our personal interests and satisfactions?

Taylor would answer no. The villain Halder, exuding sweet airs of academic superiority, succumbs to Nazi flattery, abandons his best Jewish friend, Maurice, and assists with the final solution because it's his easy way out of trouble. His conscience is feather-bedded and gradually stifled. It's what happens. It's what people do. Accept the world as it is, he says in his unguarded and guarded moments, when almost at Auschwitz's Gate. We're both good people, he assures his young mistress Anne (the enticing Emilia Fox) and people who used to be good can still feel fine when following their leader in a soft-shoe shuffle towards inhumanity.

The sinister, walled bleakness of Christopher Oram's design, upon which the lighting designer, Hartley TA Kemp, only allows shifts of murky light, reflects the play's mood and atmosphere. Scenes flow seamlessly into each other as Charles Dance's Halder journeys downhill. The drift, which is streaked with the blackest comedy, begins with assurances to Jan Gelder's impassioned, forceful Maurice, whom he discards like a used napkin, that the anti-Jewish rabbi's cannot last. It ends with Halder suavely proclaiming that Krystal Nacht and the burning of synagogues, represents a humane action to shock Jews into emigration.

With deadly satirical effect Taylor presents the Professor damning Jewish literature and philosophy for selfish individualism, while succumbing to the same vice. Imperious to the confusions and dark comedy of his blind, demure mother, portrayed by the exquisitely affecting Ruth Brook, and the sorrow of his dejected, deserted wife, Halder is swamped in self-absorption. Dance, in the best performance of his career, distils *Good*'s shocking essence by portraying Halder as the soul of reasonableness and rationality. Emotion flows so steadily through his veins that Auschwitz hardly touches him. He swallows Nietzsche dutifully as if it were a tough tonic to make the nation well again. In 1981 I thought *Good* made nonsense of Hitler's anti-semitism. I eat my old words now. This is one of the key British plays of the last half-century.

Rating: -) adequate
* good
** very good
*** outstanding
poor

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Good Standard de Jongh



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