

## No poetry in rigged debate on morals

### Review

Michael Billington

**Speer**  
Almeida Theatre

**K**LAUS Maria Brandauer as Albert Speer? The prospect is tempting and certainly worth a journey to the Almeida. But Esther

Vilar's two-handed play strikes me as a rigged moral debate that never takes us to the heart of the most ambiguous of Hitler's ministers.

Vilar's setting is East Berlin's Academy of Arts in 1980: the very room where the architect Speer drew up his plans for an overblown megalopolis to be called Germania.

Now 70, he has been invited to lecture by the Honecker regime. Afterwards he is drawn back to his old office by a GDR functionary, Hans-Bauer, who plies him with champagne and questions about the exact nature of his moral complicity with evil.

They are, I suppose, the questions we would all ask. Why as an intelligent man, was Speer so mesmerised by Hitler? At what point did he become aware of the Final Solution? Did his success as armaments minister help to prolong the war? And why did he not encourage Heisenberg's nuclear experiments to raise the possibility of German victory? Speer's basic response is that he was a manager rather than a politician and in no position to influence Hitler's indomitable will.

The questions raised are all crucial. But, dramatically, the problem is that the situation

is artificial – if Speer really were an East German guest, why would he undergo such questioning? Vilar may present Speer as persuasive and articulate but, in theatrical terms, he remains a prisoner in the dock. And although Vilar finally aims to show that Speer's supposed penitence is simply a skilled survival tactic, the narrative trick she deploys is highly implausible.

The one question she never really poses is also the most fascinating one: not simply why was Speer so mesmerised by Hitler, but why were so many people mesmerised by Speer himself?

It is the question that haunts Gitta Sereny's penetrating biography, which contrasts the fierce loyalty Speer inspired with his own moral obliviousness and lack of empathy. It is also the question that drives Pinter's *Ashes to Ashes*. But Pinter's play is poetry where Vilar's is isstled debate.

Brandauer's own very deliberate production is, however, worth seeing for the acting. He himself plays Speer as a restrained, world-weary, aged figure. His very quietude also makes his sudden explosions of anger, as when he dismisses the idea that he was creating a Jewish ghetto in 1938 as "absolutely abhorrent", all the more terrifying. Brandauer's forte as an actor has always been a controlled mania and here it erupts with shattering implosive force.

But at the end of the evening I felt that Vilar's play, unlike Sereny's biography, had offered an indictment of Speer without really explaining him.

Speer, Guardian Billington

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Sun, Mar 31, 2024