

Walking backwards toward a paradise lost

Review

Michael Billington

Betrayal

Lyttelton Theatre

TWENTY years ago, I signally failed to get the point of Pinter's *Betrayal*.

But I don't think anyone watching Trevor Nunn's meticulous revival at the National could fail to see that this is a complex play about the corrosiveness of treachery rather than a lightweight study of metropolitan adultery.

Nunn's approach to Pinter is highly unusual. We are used to seeing Pinter's language as a mask concealing violent emotion. Here, however, the pain and heartache are eminently visible as the story details, in reverse chronological order, the endless mutual deceptions involving literary agent Jerry, his best friend, the publisher Robert, and Robert's wife, Emma.

Not only have Jerry and Emma conducted a clandestine, seven-year long affair; each character has betrayed



Imogen Stubbs as Emma in the National Theatre revival of Harold Pinter's *Betrayal*

partners, lovers, and, in some way, their own secret vision of themselves.

I can now see, as I certainly did not in 1978, the symmetrical ingenuity of the structure with everything pivoting on a central Venetian hotel scene in which Robert forces Emma to reveal her affair.

What is also infinitely clearer is Pinter's remorseless exploration of the labyrinthine nature of betrayal. As

young men, Jerry and Robert used to correspond about Ford Madox Ford and Yeats, whose work jointly deals with deception, loss and decline. Now the once idealistic Jerry and Robert are literary middlemen trading in the market-place and engaging, like Emma, in the destructiveness of emotional treachery.

Nunn's production, staged against Es Devlin's brutalist concrete background, clearly

derived from Rachel Whiteread's *House*, is at pains to emphasise the immense cost to all concerned. Imogen Stubbs's excellent Emma is not, as so often, a poised survivor of this emotional maelstrom, but a woman who is invested from the opening scene with a rueful sadness, and who in the Venetian hotel quivers like a leaf at the revelation of her adultery.

Equally, Douglas Hodge's

outwardly tough Jerry curls up in a chair with semi-foetal pain when learning that Robert has in reality known for years about the affair. And Anthony Calf's Robert, lunching with Jerry after the return from Venice, displays a self-torturing professional rage while lacing the conversation with brutal sexual innuendo.

What Nunn slightly misses are Pinter's gift for social comedy and the contrast between external insouciance and inner turmoil. But if Pinter's debt to Coward is overlooked, his connections with Strindberg are exhaustively mined.

And what Nunn brings out superbly, apart from the authentic suffering, is the exquisite dramatic irony by which, through seeing the characters in retrospect, we always know far more than they do themselves.

Even the filmic interludes, with their echoes of children's games and the Venetian lagoon, evoke a sense of the Edenic happiness these characters may once have known but have long since forfeited. This is Pinter played not only with a bruising sense of pain but with a rare feeling for a paradise lost.

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