

Painful Pinter is a pleasure

HAROLD PINTER has written more mysterious, more menacing and more poetic plays than 1978's *Betrayal*, but I don't think he has ever written anything that speaks so personally and so powerfully to an audience.

Anyone with any experience of love, any experience of infidelity, will identify with it instantly and experience rueful pangs of recognition.

As Michael Billington's excellent biography of the dramatist first revealed two years ago, the play is closely based on Pinter's own clandestine, seven-year affair with the writer and television presenter Joan Bakewell, affectionately known to her many admirers as the thinking man's crumpet.

It seems churlish to resent such high-grade gossip, but this is one piece of biographical insight I could live without. As a wag remarked when the news first broke, it's a bit like learning that Ibsen had based the character of Hedda Gabler on Valerie Singleton.

Nevertheless, the writing in *Betrayal* is so lean and lethally poised, the structure so ingenious, and Trevor Nunn's revival so alert and delicately judged that you quickly find yourself forgetting the play's autobiographical origins.

The novelty here, though it is part of the play's meaning rather than a gimmick, is that Pinter takes us through the course of a love affair backwards.

Since Nunn has brought this 20-year-old play bang up to date, this means the action begins in 1998, with Emma and Jerry raking over the ashes of their now concluded relationship. Scene by scene we move backwards in time, watching love curdle, and trust die, before the play ends in 1989, at the very beginning of the affair, full of hope and ardent passion.

This backwards progress allows all kinds of ironies to come into sharp focus, most notably the fact that Robert (a publisher) actually learns of his wife's infidelity long before his best friend and best man, Jerry (a literary agent), realises the fact. Needless to say, Pinter wrings great dramatic tension from this imbalance of knowledge. The reverse time scheme also lets us see just how defective a character's recollection of an incident can be.

Theatre

Betrayal National Theatre

It is a play, in T S Eliot's potent phrase, that mixes memory and desire, but there is no escaping its bleakness. The writing leaves no doubt that betrayal — and it comes in several varieties in the course of the drama — corrodes and poisons the lives of the characters; and even when they are happy, the audience is always keenly aware of just how miserably it will all end.

My only real complaint about this Lyttelton Theatre production is Es Devlin's ugly and intrusive design, based on Rachel Whiteread's famous plaster cast of a London house, and supposedly signalling — though never very atmospherically — a variety of locations, from a Kilburn love-nest to a Venetian hotel room.

Much more effective is Roger Eno's haunting score, the use of blurry video footage and, most poignant of all, the sounds between scenes of children's voices and laughter — for the children are the unseen victims of the affair.

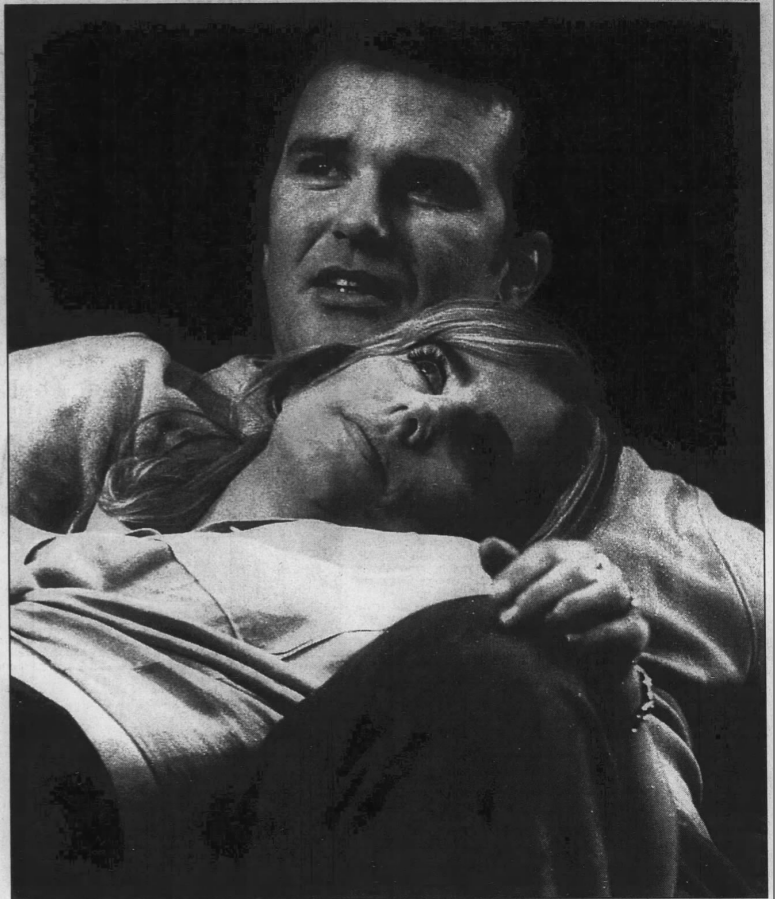
The performances are first-rate. Douglas Hodge presents Jerry with a rumpled, little-boy-lost charm while making it quite clear that there is real steel in his nature, too. Imogen Stubbs plays his mistress, Emma, with feline grace, great sexual allure and a palpable sense of hurt, especially in the great central scene when her husband first discovers her infidelity. Like almost all Pinter's women, there is something ultimately unknowable about Emma, and Stubbs captures this sense of tantalising enigma well.

As the cuckolded Robert, Anthony Calf is perhaps best of all, his smiling, patronising urbanity barely concealing a coiled anger, so that at one point you are uncertain whether he is going to kiss his wife — or beat her up.

Such charged moments leave no doubt that you are watching an enthralling production of an indisputably great play.

This review appeared in some editions yesterday. Tickets: 0171 452 3000

CHARLES SPENCER



She's lying: Jerry (Douglas Hodge) with his best friend's wife, Emma (Imogen Stubbs), in Harold Pinter's *Betrayal*

Betrayal Telegraph Spencer

Clipped By:

ianlharris

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