



Passion play: Imogen Stubbs and Douglas Hodge in Pinter's disturbing drama

Picture: ROBBIE JACK

Pinter's adulterous tale still grips like a good vice

HAROLD PINTER'S disturbing, 20-year-old play in which three people betray each other and themselves in the messy business of adultery still grips like a good-quality vice. Yet *Betrayal's* small, intimate scale is overwhelmed in the yawning spaces of the Lyttelton. The spectacular atmospherics of Trevor Nunn's production scarcely conceal a failure to evoke the play's tension and veiled menace. It's proof of Pinter's ingenuity that these limitations reduce but do not ruin the play's appeal.

Pinter's ingenuity, casting the whole adultery business in fresh, dark light, is to place this extramarital action in reverse motion. It begins at the end of the smart affair, or rather two years later, when gallery owner Emma meets her discarded lover, literary agent Jerry. She has just discovered her publisher husband, Robert, has been unfaithful for years. Most of the remaining nine scenes are in reverse chronology, retracing the affair from close of play to its first thrusts. Since the married Jerry is also Robert's best friend the problem goes into fraught perspective. The fact that a recent Pinter biography revealed *Betrayal* was inspired by the playwright's Sixties affair with

FIRST NIGHT
by
**Nicholas
de Jongh**
Betrayal ★
National Theatre

Joan Bakewell, the arty television interviewer, casts no titillating or personalising glow upon the action. You can sense how Pinter has altered personal details, while a universal essence remains. That essence has nothing to do with the rude mechanics and melodramatics of adultery. I am no expert on heterosexual philandering, but the play's clandestine meetings in a rented Kilburn apartment for lunch and afternoon last lack conviction's stamp.

Pinter shows how the adulterous affair creates a foggy climate of deception and secrecy in which all three become immersed. This climate spreads and envelops them like bad weather. The trio form a triangle linked by love and lies. As Imogen Stubbs's vampish blonde, femme fatale Emma, has betrayed Anthony Calf's icily imperturbable Robert, so she betrays Jerry who in turn is kept in the dark by Robert. The two men have betrayed their own

ideals too, becoming pushers of marketable books, rather than literature. The reverse chronology patterns exert their ironic appeal. The audience has that unique experience with Pinter of knowing and understanding the characters better than they know each other. The staging, though, does not always help. Es Devlin's set, apparently inspired by Rachel Whiteread's sculpture of a life-size house, consists of a vast back wall into whose cavities doors and pictures are fixed. Its epic grandeur wars with the play's domesticity.

Douglas Hodge's laddish, half-cockney Jerry, as surprisingly open to pain as to passion, infuses the stage with edgy emotion. His compelling performance catches the play's crucial bisexual dilemma, the sense that both men are subliminally attracted to each other. Imogen Stubbs drenches Emma in gushes of come-hitherish sex-appeal while Anthony Calf thinly conveys Robert's taut-lipped, threatening and ominous personality. Yet at the play's thrilling denouement he has his moment, as he catches the aspirant adulterers and, firmly self-deceiving, turns an appalled but blind eye upon them.

Ratings: -) adequate ★ good.
★★ very good; ★★★ outstanding;
X poor
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Betrayal de Jongh Standard

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