

Picture: ALASTAIR MUIR



The mind of a Nazi enigma explored with compelling ingenuity

Albert Speer, Hitler's architect and later his armaments minister, is often described as the "good" Nazi. Of all the war criminals put on trial at Nuremberg, he was the only one to express remorse, and his repentance seemed to continue during the 20 years he spent in Spandau, and in the many interviews he gave after his release.

Gitta Sereny, who has written a penetrating biography of this brilliant technician, believes that out of "his continuing and tormenting awareness of guilt... there came to be another Speer". Others take the view that Speer simply said what he knew the Allied victors wanted to hear.

In her dense and gripping play, Esther Vilar, an Argentinian writer whose parents emigrated from pre-war Germany, presents us with Speer in the year before his death (which occurred, incidentally, during an assignment in London with a much younger mistress who subsequently vanished).

The year is 1980 and the 70-year-old Speer has been lured to East Berlin to give a lecture on architecture. Afterwards Hans Bauer — a younger man who appears to be a high-ranking Stasi officer — takes Speer back to the semi-detritel office where Speer drew up the plans for Germania — the megalomaniac "capital of the world" that Hitler intended to create in Berlin after victory in the war.

The imaginary encounter is like a prolonged game of cat and mouse. At times Bauer, played with a fine blend of glib fluency and unsettling enigma by Sven Eric Bechtols, comes across as a sycophantic fan of the former Nazi. At others he asks the hard questions that will always surround Speer. How could he claim not to have known about the Final Solution? Didn't his sheer technical mastery at equipping the German war machine lead to many millions of unnecessary deaths? Couldn't he have been deliberately inefficient once he had at last seen Hitler in his true colours?

Speer, mesmerisingly well-played by the great Austrian actor Klaus Maria Brandauer, initially appears plump and self-satisfied, glibly responding to questions he has successfully answered or ducked many times before.

But as Bauer gets down to detail — and in particular Speer's plans for the Jews in the creation of Germania — the older man becomes rattled, defensive and shrill. He admits he "turned away" from the persecution of the Jews, acknowledging that this is a kind of guilt. But it is not a guilt he appears to feel.

Seventy minutes into this 90-minute play, Bauer makes a specific offer to Speer. It would be unfair to reveal it, for it is a moment of satisfying ingenuity and moral ambivalence that, within the context of the play at least, seems plausible. And here Speer's response and Brandauer's performance become truly illuminating.

The offer involves collaboration with the East German regime, which Speer, the repentant humanist, has previously criticised after hearing people being shot in no-man's-land beyond the Wall.

Yet presented with a practical challenge, and an appeal to his vanity, Speer instantly reverts from born-again moralist to pragmatic technician.

It was never, you are made forcefully aware, that Speer hated the Jews or the slave labour he so ruthlessly exploited. It was just that in the pursuit of his goals he became criminally oblivious to their suffering.

There are two further twists in the final minutes of the play. Again it would be unfair to give them away, but, although they undoubtedly pack a dramatic punch, they seem a touch glib in a work exploring such profound moral themes, somehow diminishing the piece into a slick, Cold War thriller.

Nevertheless, there is no doubt that Speer, skillfully directed by Brandauer himself and atmospherically designed by Hans Hoffer, remains a splendidly compelling drama about one of the most enigmatic figures in 20th-century history.

Tickets: 0171 359 4404

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