



FIRST NIGHT
by **Nicholas de Jongh**

Speer ★
Almeida Theatre

Destroying the legend of Hitler's henchman

THIS IS one of those rare plays which stirs a sense of horror while just two characters talk on stage. It lasts 90 minutes, remains an atrocity-free zone and works by theatrical stealth. No brutalities or butcheries are discussed. No violence is simulated. Yet Esther Vilar's fantasy about Hitler's armaments minister, Albert Speer, returning in 1980 to the Berlin office where he and the Führer once planned to build the capital of a new Nazi-controlled world, is a full-scale assassination attempt. Vilar is set upon destroying the legend of Speer as a penitent Hitlerite, who claimed to know next to nothing about the Final Solution.

She always gives her anti-hero a case to plead against his accuser. The Austrian actor and international film star, Klaus Maria Brandauer, thrillingly plays Speer as a man whose smooth surface-charm gives way to elemental rage. So despite its rambling form and the awkward way Vilar keeps feeding us facts about Speer's dangerous career, the play casts a slow spell. Its verdict on Albert Speer cannot easily be swallowed whole, however, without the airing of doubts. The boundaries between known facts, supposition and sheer fantasy seem confusingly blurred.

Vilar sets the play in fantasy's realm. She has dreamed up the most piquant of scenarios, imagining Speer lured back to communist Berlin in 1980 after 20 years of imprisonment. His mission is to speak at the Academy of Arts, which served as his headquarters while he planned Germania, the megalopolis of Hitler's envisaging. The room into which the old Nazi is brought by



Affability and fury: Klaus Maria Brandauer in Speer Picture: ALASTAIR MUIR

the Stasi official Bauer even boasts a dramatic memento of Speer's creative life. Under drapes, in the midst of Hans Hotter's stage design for an empty, half-decorated room, is Speer's own white-domed model of Germania over which he and Hitler used to pore. The scene is, therefore, powerfully set for Speer's reminiscing, stimulated by Bauer's unctuousness — and champagne. "You're one of this century's most important figures," he helpfully starts.

Brandauer has chosen to direct as well as play Speer and this double burden has understandably proved rather much. He not so much holds as grips the stage, dramatically shifting gear from stiff-necked affability to shimmering fury. As he stands, in his tight suit and matching smile, he oozes suave inscrutability. But his production lacks confrontation or a cutting edge. There's no vivid tension and unease coursing between Speer and Sven Eric Bechtolf's handsome, insidiously barbed and sometimes unintelligible Bauer.

The saving theatrical grace comes at mid-point with the fraught tempting and challenging of Speer. When failing to evade Bauer's charges of anti-semitism, of creating the modern Jewish ghetto, of prolonging the war and having wished to launch nuclear weapons, Brandauer's paroxysm of roaring, shimmering rage astonishes. It's quite the most intense display of anger I've ever seen on stage. That Vilar's Speer should then eagerly succumb to the East Germans' plea for him to save their almost bankrupt state, beggars belief. But this notion, though not the final melodramatic twist, believably bolsters Vilar's charge that the icily managerial Speer believed humanity should trail a poor second to the call of his ravenous ambition.

Ratings: — ○ adequate
★ good,
★★ very good,
★★★ outstanding,
★ poor
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