

Theatre

**A question of morality**

**Aunt Dan and Lemon**

Almeida

★★★★

What is moral authority? Who grants it and where does it come from? Those were the questions Harold Pinter asked, regarding the Balkan war, on TV on Tuesday. And in a way they are the questions that reverberate through Wallace Shawn's strange, compelling 1985 play revived with beautiful precision by Tom Cairns.

Shawn approaches his theme obliquely. His heroine, Lemon, is a sickly recluse obsessed with the Nazis, who looks back, through the rosy filter of memory, to the key influence on her life: an American Oxford don and family friend, Aunt Dan. Endowed with the certainty of the illiberal, Aunt Dan was both a passionate Kissinger apologist and, briefly, the lover of a murderous prostitute; and it is dangerous Dan who has clearly shaped Lemon's fallible moral sense.

What makes Shawn's play so unnerving is that neither of his central women are visible monsters: Lemon has the orphaned isolation of a Tennessee Williams heroine and Dan is a laid-back charmer even if it is hard to believe in her academic brilliance. Both also mix poisonous opinions with dangerous truths. Lemon reminds us that our comfort depends on others' hardship and Dan, in the play's most resonant line, remarks: "The whole purpose of government

is to use force. So we don't have to."

This is the key to Shawn's highly topical argument: that we preserve our ethical purity by transferring moral responsibility to government. But Shawn's whole point, both in this play and subsequently in *The Fever* and *The Designated Mourner*, is that individuals are accountable for what nations do: that the private citizen cannot shut himself off from actions committed in his name. To acquiesce in evil is the first step towards fascism.

It is a disquieting, demanding play in which lengthy monologues are interrupted by passages of highly sexual action. But it is here excellently designed by Tom Cairns and Robin Rawstorne and subtly lit by Wolfgang Gobbel and Michael Gunning so that Lemon's memories are endowed with a subversive nostalgia.

The two main roles are also finely taken. Glenne Headly's Lemon is both withdrawn and watchful: a pallid invalid with maniacal views and also a childlike observer forever craning her neck to view scenes from Aunt Dan's louche past. And Miranda Richardson, with her brooding eyes and domed forehead, lends Dan exactly the kind of perverse charisma that would magnetise an impressionable child. The sex scenes, wholeheartedly performed by Amira Casar as the kinky prostitute, sit a little oddly with the main argument. But Shawn's morally questioning play seems more powerful than ever in a world where to question public action is regarded as eccentric treachery.

Michael Billington



Glenne Headley with Natasha Richardson (back projection) in *Aunt Dan And Lemon* Photograph: Henrietta Butler

Theatre

**Prison and paradise**

**Aristocrats**

The Abbey, Dublin

★★★

*Aristocrats* marks a homecoming for Brian Friel: to Guthrie, Chekhov and the archetypal Irish family. From one point of view the Friel

family is no place to bring up children, with its repressive, dictatorial fathers, its wounded, dislocated children and its dead mothers who cry their despair at night. But the great and subtly realised intuition of Friel is that we can't simply look at the family through the eyes of traditional psychoanalysis and see it as something to be sloughed off by the heroic individual. Friel senses deeply that there is something else at work here—

that there are shadows stalking the family home; that the family is an archetypal prison and paradise; that there must be another way of imagining the family beyond sentimentalisation or blame.

*Aristocrats* was first put on at the Abbey in 1979, directed by Joe Dowling, who directed a second major Irish production in 1990. In the play we have a prototypical Friel homecoming for the wedding of Claire, the youngest mem-

ber of the O'Donnell family. As always, a Friel homecoming is a fraught event, as everyone asks each other the obsessive Friel questions: "Do you remember?" Casimir, the "peculiar" wacky, wounded, sensitive son has returned from Germany; Alice, an alcoholic, has returned with her husband, Eamon; and Judith is sacrificing the remainder of her youth to care for their senescent father. Tom is an American sociologist who is

Aunt Dan Billington Guardian

Clipped By:

ianlharris

Mon, May 27, 2024