

REVIEW

Pernicious evening in the company of a wrong-headed moralist

THE American dramatist Wallace Shawn is the Jimmy Cricket of modern theatre, the voice of conscience constantly whispering, sometimes irritatingly, into the audience's ear.

of unnamed barbarians. In Aunt Dan and Lemon (1985) Shawn asks perhaps the toughest question of all — how is genocide allowed to happen? Why do people inflict such terrible suffering on each other? This is a subtle and fascinating play, and I found

Theatre

Aunt Dan and Lemon Almeida Theatre, NI

myself gripped almost throughout. But it is also a deliberately contentious work that is meant to make an audience feel uneasy, make them argue with what the characters are saying, and with what Shawn himself seems to be saying. And my final impression is that the play is wrong-headed to the point of malignity.

At first we might be in a cosy family memory play. The narrator, nicknamed Lemon, is a frail twentysomething woman, living a reclusive, anorexic life. With nothing to occupy her, she looks back on her childhood, and in particular the conversations she had with "Aunt" Dan (real name Danielle), a close friend of her parents when they were all at Oxford together.

But an early note of unease is struck when the apparently meek and mild Lemon says that she has been reading about the Nazis "and it has to be said that they managed to accomplish a great deal of what they wanted to do".

Nor does Aunt Dan seem to have been the ideal

Picture: ALASTAIR MUIR



Disturbing: Glenn Headly

companion for an 11-year-old girl. She regales Lemon with detailed stories about her sex life, and even more graphic ones about her friend Mindy, who actually killed a man for cash and kicks — to Aunt Dan's apparent approval.

Tom Cairns's production, making ecovative use of home-movie clips, music and translucent screens, vividly captures the haunting, almost dreamlike quality of memory;

Glenn Headly as the frail Lemon, looking back on her younger self, and Miranda Richardson as the glamorous and outrageously candid Aunt Dan, both give mesmerising performances. Unfortunately the play's political concerns become increasingly prominent, and here Shawn's dramatic subtlety deserts him. There is some crude satire on Henry Kissinger, whom wicked Aunt Dan perceives as an almost saintly figure; nor does she evince any concern about the villages bombed by the Americans in Vietnam.

"The whole purpose of government is to use force. So we don't have to," she says. Shawn's play, however, insists that it is impossible to separate the individual and the state, that private amorality gradually seeps into public policy. Like Peter Simple's Dr Heinz Kiosk, this talented but alarmingly self-righteous writer clearly believes that we're all guilty.

At the end, in a brilliantly delivered monologue that reduces the audience to a stunned silence, Headly's increasingly disturbed and disturbing Lemon attempts to justify the Nazis. It is in the nature of humanity to kill, she argues. The Nazis were

just more efficient and more honest about it than the rest of us.

It is always a great mistake to confuse an author with his characters, and Shawn undoubtedly withholds his consent from both his characters; indeed, I'm sure he despises them. But the

point he is making, and he has spelt it out in interviews, is that the United States is a "dangerous killer", and that "from the point of view of the victim of brutality, an American brute looks like a Nazi brute".

Such a comparison from a self-proclaimed Marxist

seems to me to be worse than fatuous, and as Nato struggles to do its inadequate best to combat genocide in Yugoslavia, the timing of this intriguing but ultimately pernicious play could not be more unfortunate.

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CHARLES SPENCER

PICK OF THE WEEK

An Infinite Masterpiece: π

Be prepared for a to travel 'ad infinitum', which refreshingly innovative and intelligently merged with an intelligent creation, writes Norma Barry.

Film aficionados the world over are delighted by the much hyped new production directed by the award-winning Givenchy. π [Pi] is taking the nation by storm. Buzz Aldrin, who has delighted critics with an inspired cameo role, brought an element of interstellar stardom to the launch party.

is successfully merged with an inspirational spirit of conquest and intelligence.

Although π is a celebration of the 'eternally masculine', do not expect a predictable portrayal of Rambo-esque machismo — nothing could be further removed from the subtly sophisticated (yet energetically passionate) experience which unfolds before one. The dénouement provides an almost un-

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