

A damper for liberal spirits



Disturbing: Glenna Heady is the lonely Lemon and Miranda Richardson the acerbic Dan

THIS is an evening of dramatic provocation, calculated to make wet, liberal spirits squirm and recoil. That Wallace Shawn's Aunt Dan and Lemon is being revived 14 years after its London premiere, at a time when Britain is bombing Serbia and TV screens nightly dazzle with atrocious images, gives it a needling pointedness. The liberal-minded, according to Miranda Richardson's voluptuous Aunt Dan, grudgingly allow governments to use force, provided that their own easy lives are not disturbed. It's a wild charge, but there's still a lingering sting to it: Aunt Dan keeps comparing the men responsible for tough, hard action in war with journalists who enjoy the luxury of sitting down to write criticism of politicians and fighting men.

Shawn, who is American, also parades a set of disturbing, Right-wing conjectures: that humans are low-life creations, natural-born killers who are quickly inured to violence and whose claim to compassion is mere hypocritical showmanship. But this, disappointingly, turns out to be no true play of ideas. The clash of opposing argument is avoided in Tom Cairns's handsome, finely acted production. The liberal voice is nowhere heard during

Aunt Dan and Lemon ★
Almeida Theatre
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protracted monologues, even though Shawn ranks as a practising liberal. The Devil, in the shape of Aunt Dan and Lemon, plays all the tunes. And what a disturbing cacophony they make.

The 90-minute play is filtered through the rays of memory to become a sort of look back in sadness. American Glenna Heady as the mysteriously moribund and lonely Lemon wanders around, gazing like some enthralled voyeur who has been summoned to watch scenes from her childhood. With glazed, staring eyes, head tilted to one side, hands hanging as loose as a rag doll's and voice all tired and monochrome, melancholia seeps

from pores of this riveting actress. The decor, by director Tom Cairns and Robin Rawstorne, is powerfully evocative. It relies upon filmed images of gardens and a mobile, transparent gauze panel behind which the past begins to play its part.

Miranda Richardson, whose brilliant, blonde Aunt Dan is both Oxford academic and decadent bohemian, draws the competing aspects of her character together in the clasp of ice-cool sexiness and inscrutability. As a child of unhappy parents, whose tremors of neurosis are vividly displayed by Kerry Shale and Janine Duivitski, Lemon finds in this alternative heroine-figure a source of excitement and alluring unconventionality. Not only does Richardson's acerbic Aunt Dan celebrate Henry Kissinger as a morally courageous man who deals in the politics of violence,

she approves of Mindy, a decadent girlfriend who strangles the police-informer male she has coaxed to bed.

Aunt Dan admires people with the courage to take a stand and fight for their beliefs. Her admiration finds a ghastly echo in Lemon's support for the Nazis and the belief that we naturally kill what threatens our happiness.

In this shocking dénouement, the last of the ponderous monologues on which Aunt Dan and Lemon has been precariously built, Shawn draws the play's strands together and suggests people are inherently attracted to those spectacles of violence in which they have no involvement. It's a theory on which I'd like to pour huge scorn. But I am full of wet, liberal uncertainty.

● Until 5 June. Box office: 0171 359 4404

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