

The first stage version of the story about an African prince who is sold into slavery was written by Thomas Southerne; it was first produced in 1695, continued to be seen throughout the eighteenth century and became popular with abolitionists. Bandle has expanded the scope of this version, to include episodes from the prince's early life, and has cleverly blended a laconic, streetwise idiom with a proverbial expansiveness; his script is sharp but not self-consciously hip.

There are a few blots: some of the speaking is muffled; the second half of the play cracks under the weight of melodramatic events, which include rape and sword fights and 'the Indians are coming'. The blots aren't important. This is a wonderfully coherent, cogent production, which gains a lot from Juwon Ogungbe's exciting music. It also gains from Niki Turner's beautiful design, in which an arch - sometimes flashing silver and sometimes gold - looms over a space of cracked earth, at one point dappled with the shadows of leaves. And it gains from actors whose voices - in speech and in song - are more resonating than most actors' voices, and whose movements, as in the best of theatre, smudge the difference between dance and gesture.

The message of David Greig's new play at the Lyric Hammersmith is shorter than its title. **The Cosmonaut's Last Message to the Woman He Once Loved in the Former Soviet Union** says that most human beings are out of touch with their supposed nearest and dearest, and advises them - us - to talk to each other.

We are shown this dilemma cosmically. A pair of astronauts dangle in space, unable to communicate with their commanders or relatives on earth. It is pictured domestically, and quaintly, when a couple whose TV has broken down find themselves obliged to make conversation. It is envisaged romantically, as men and women fail to understand what the other is saying. It is embodied in characters whose native language divides them, and in those for whom language is a struggle, or a career: the excellent Andy Smart appears as an aphasic patient being coached by a speech therapist.

For all the ingenuity of these devices, the scenes come all too quickly to the same point: the point about not staying shtoom. In this sense, the play is over-explicit. But it is also bewildering, encasing linguistically sharp episodes in a complicated, mystificatory scaffolding. Actors are required to take more than one part and to switch nationalities - Norwegian, Russian, French - without making a difference in their speech. Tangehtially related scenes are intercut.

Some parts of the action are unintelligible - when an actor strips off and saunters across the stage, it isn't evident that he's drowning himself, unless you have your head in the playtext. In that playtext, David Greig describes his play as 'autobiography', as 'orbiting fragments of life'. So I've probably missed the point.

# Cosmonaut Clapp Observer



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