

# Love in an arid climate

## REVIEW

EURDYCE

WHITEHALL THEATRE  
LONDON

IF EVER a play was suited to grand, idealistic gestures it is Jean Anouilh's *Eurydice*. The decision by Dominic Dromgoole, artistic director of the Oxford Stage company, to take a revival of this syllabus stalwart by an unknown young fringe company into the Whitehall has an air of reckless defiance that would meet with the approval of Anouilh's uncompromising hero, Orpheus. But while the latter comes to spurn the world and all its mediocrity, there is no reason why Straydogs' beautifully acted production shouldn't stand its ground amid the tainted commercialism of the West End.

Unable to rest on the laurels he received for the BAC run last year, 23-year-old director Simon Godwin successfully argues the case for this 1941 drama, and convinces - with the help of new cast members - that it can and should occupy a large space. Cleverly turning the Orpheus myth into a macabre 1930s love story - in which Orpheus's forgetful breach of Persephone's stipulation not to look at the rescued Eurydice becomes a deliberate choice to send his beloved back to the grave - *Eurydice* tackles huge questions about life and its inimical relation to love. It does so through only a handful of characters and in a disconcerting, semi-naturalistic style. Rather than trying to fill the stage with unnecessary clutter, Godwin emphasises isolation, the actors taking up still, watchful positions in a spartan, stagey design that allows us to watch the scene changes. It is loneliness that this couple, a musician and actress whose paths cross in a provincial station buffet, hope their love will defeat. But they are soon separated, by mistrust and fate - the consequence, Orpheus is persuaded by the mysterious Monsieur Henri, of choosing life and the forced company of all its second-rate players.

What could be aridly schematic is disrupted by Anouilh's calculated overstatement of the lovers' self-importance, and the saving graces he lends the ancillary characters. Orpheus and Eurydice share a contempt for their parents - insolently dismissing them as ridiculous and clichéd. In Orlando Seale and Amy Marston's doomed lovers, we see both the delirious self-confidence of youth, as well as its unloveable smugness.

"We're going to be very unhappy," Marston's delicate, neurotic Eurydice declares after Seale's puppyish Orpheus promises his undying devotion. Seale is the weaker of the two, pushing the earnestness too far and diminishing our sympathies, but then his character's dotting dreams of her wifely obedience often sound chauvinistic.

He is persuasive, though, as a chip off the old block - the overly simplistic son of a stubbornly unthinking father. Edward de Souza is magnificent in this role. He - together with Susan Tracy as Eurydice's self-disgracing mother and Geoffrey Beevers as her speechifying partner - provides the heat that keeps the play's paradoxes sparking. But the evening belongs to the most contradictory character of all - Desmond Barrit's Monsieur Henri - Death in a pinstriped suit, observing everything with sad amusement. Fitting perfectly into Anouilh's provocative scheme of things, he looks the archetypal and inimitable self-made man.

DOMINIC CAVENDISH

Booking: 0171-369 1735, to 14 Aug

Eurydice Cavendish Indy

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