

REVIEW

Anouilh – not the French for boredom after all

WATCHING Jean Anouilh's *Eurydice* (1941) you become aware of an evocative smell, pungent as the smoke of a *Gitane sans filtre*. It is the unmistakable whiff of fey Gallic pretension.

Anouilh (1910-1987) was a *grand fromage* in the Forties and Fifties, but his stock has declined drastically. His once-fashionable work now seems dated to the point of quaintness.

Strange then to find a young fringe company, Straydogs, reviving his work; stranger still to find it transferring to the West End. Yet Simon Godwin, a preposterously young director who only graduated from Cambridge in 1997, makes a persuasive case for *Eurydice*.

Theatre

Eurydice
Whitehall Theatre

You have to put up with a lot of verbose, pseudo-poetic prose, but somehow the play works. It forced me to revise my opinion that Anouilh is a variant spelling of the French word for boredom.

The action begins in the fly-blown buffet of a provincial station in France in the Thirties. Here a young street violinist and an angular young actress meet and instantly fall for each other. But their rapt declarations of love and fidelity are overheard by a man sitting in a corner.

His name is M Henri, but it doesn't take us long to guess

who he really is. He is Death, and when the violinist and the actress reveal that their names are Orpheus and Eurydice, we know exactly who he has in his sights.

The course of true love runs predictably unsmoothly. Orpheus is prone to gnawing jealousy; Eurydice has had an affair with her theatre company's unscrupulous manager. And when the manager tracks the lovers down, Eurydice does a runner, only to be killed in a road accident.

The solicitous M Henri, beautifully played by Desmond Barrit with sinister gentleness, slow, sly smiles, and a *frisson* of homo-eroticism in his dealings with the beautiful Orpheus, offers the grieving lover a second chance. If

he can spend the night with a revenant Eurydice without looking in her face, she will return permanently from the grave. But Orpheus, racked with jealousy, has to look into her eyes to see if she is lying. There is great beauty, genuine emotional profundity, in this haunting scene.

Yet the whole play is steeped with a sense of exhausted fatalism, perhaps because it was written during the Nazi occupation of France. Love and innocence can never survive, argues Anouilh. Only death is beautiful: "Only death provides the real climate for love".

I disagree with the play's counsel of wan despair, and fervently wish that Anouilh had curbed his tiresome logorrhoea. Nevertheless Godwin's production, evocatively designed by Agnes Treplin, combines lightness of touch with moments of startling dramatic power, and there's an outstanding supporting company.


Orlando Seale and Amy Marston achieve exactly the right rapt self-absorption as the lovers. Susan Tracy is memorably affected as Eurydice's actress mother, while Edward de Souza is in vintage comic form as Orpheus's magnificently debauched father, plummily extolling the joys of *prix-fixe* menus, a good cigar, and depraved sex on the sofa.

Anouilh wanted him to demonstrate the corrupt futility of life, making easeful death seem still more attractive. But in de Souza's lip-smacking and subversive performance the pleasures of the flesh have rarely seemed more alluring.

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