

This'll put bums on seats

Theatre de Complicite has pulled off its greatest theatrical coup yet – defrosting a Neolithic man

THEATRE

Susannah Clapp

Mnemonic Riverside Studios
Peggy For You Hampstead
Our Father Almeida

NOTHING STAYS STILL in a Theatre de Complicite show. Everything is always on the point of changing into something else: one episode into another, one character into the next, one object into an animal. It's the tumble of images that makes this company so exciting to watch – it's like watching a waterfall crash on to the stage.

In Complicite's new production at the Riverside Studios, Simon McBurney has come up with, and directed, an idea which goes to the root of the company's interests. Mnemonic is an investigation of memory. It asks how this faculty works. It answers by saying that recollection is not simply mechanical retrieval, but an imaginative act. It illustrates this by creating two interlinked stories: the recovery of the frozen body of a Neolithic man, and the recovery, via a mid-European journey, of a woman's immediate family history.

McBurney supplies a pungent definition of the process of remembering and of the technique of this show: 'Demented, high-speed orienteering round the landscape of the brain.'

Mnemonic cannons from a blue-ilt glacier to a solitary man talking on the phone to a girl he loves; a photograph of her face appears, projected on his chest. Its scenes are sharpened or occluded by being set against banks of clouds or behind translucent curtains. It includes some brisk farcical interludes,

with the edgy Katrin Cartlidge and goofy Richard Katz, which show Complicite's assurance with conventional theatre forms. It contains the heart-lifting sight of a group of actors working together without jostling for attention. Casually, it throws off feats of acting which would be hailed as remarkable in most productions; these performers are required to go from frozen to fluid and from farce to earnestness in the space of seconds.

Mnemonic also has its infuriating moments when it patronises its audience and tells rather than shows. At the beginning of the evening, everyone is issued with a *Blue Peter*-style bag: a memory kit. A caressing voice gives instructions on its use. I never again want to sit in a theatre blindfolded, fingering an ivy leaf, being told to think about my granny.

At Hampstead, an effervescent script by Alan Plater gives a power behind the throne a throne of her own. Theatrical agent Peggy Ramsay has been celebrated in prose by Simon Callow, who was one of her clients, and played on screen by Vanessa Redgrave. Now she has been put on the stage, rendered in full-throttle coloratura by Maureen Lipman.

Peggy For You traces an imaginary day in Ramsay's life. A hopeful, would-be dramatist is putting on a piece called *Shades of Nothingness* at the back of King's Cross station; he is advised to give it some upbeat publicity and 'let the gloom come as a lovely surprise'. One client commits suicide



Simon McBurney in Mnemonic. Photograph by Neil Libert

'Lipman is a meticulous, manic card – well observed but not convincing'

(offstage), an act more despised than mourned by Ramsay. A very cross northern dramatist explains that the writing of a play is 'a fart in the face of destiny'.

The day's events are shaped by a Shakespearean reference: Ramsay sees herself betrayed by one of her male protégés, much as Falstaff was betrayed by Prince Hal. The dialogue is larded with theatrical teases: Alans Ayckbourn and Plater are middled with one another by their agent, who maintains, with a certain amount of scatter-brained posturing, that they must always be running into each other in

Yorkshire. The epigrams – 'its wonderfully written; I think that's probably the problem' – are all to do with the theatre. This is a sparky, well-worded coterie piece.

Actually, it's really a one-woman show, in which every one who isn't Ramsay is grist to the mill of her character. As in life, it seems, where she was a man-eating orchid, bullying, vamping and interfering with her clients' private lives, behaving, in fact, like someone who might expect to have a play written about them.

Lipman is a meticulous, manic card – well observed, but not convincing. She

moves like a marionette manipulated by quarrelling puppeteers: every other word ends in an upper-class explosion. What she lacks is the nonchalance which might make this irresistible or truly alarming.

In putting on *Our Father*, Edna O'Brien's new play, the Almeida are breaking with their traditions of re-animating ossified classic plays and producing jaggedly contemporary pieces. *Our Father* has never before been staged, but it is drenched in conventions of Irishness. It toys with these conventions but is also sometimes engulfed by them. Here is the sophisticated

daughter returning to a rain-drenched rural home after urban success and dissipation. Here is the put-upon mother, always poised to drop to her prayerful knees. Here are quarrelsome siblings, ready to rise to a song. Here, too, are several Hilbertian curtsies to Chekhov: the trees of the homestead are about to be chopped down.

O'Brien's linguistic gifts touch these ingredients with lyricism: This shades into blarney and into twinkling insight; there's a boy's bottom here which is apparently 'like two white eggs tied up in a handkerchief'. But there is another impor-

tant ingredient, a pulse of real feeling which runs through the play, a pulse which is often lacking in more sleekly turned dramas. It is apparent in a presumably autobiographical vein, when the glossy visiting daughter is told that the books she writes and sends to her mother are regularly buried in the garden. It is apparent in the subtle relationship between three sisters. And it flares into dramatic life in David Troughton's formidable performance as the tyrannical, perhaps incestuous father – sad-jowled, slack-limbed and furious.

Mnemonic & Peggy Susannah Clapp

Clipped By:
ianlharris
1 Dec 2024