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Easy come, queasy go

It's got cancer, autism and marital break-up – not to mention the Nazi connection. Spoonface Steinberg tries too hard to make us weep

THEATRE

Susannah Clapp

Spoonface Steinberg
New Ambassadors
Volpone Baribican Pit

I NEVER THOUGHT I'd sit in a twenty-first century theatre and watch an adult actress, decked out as a tot, enthusing about butterflies flying up to God. Or hear the same actor talking about the Dotty coming down to touch her 'soft spot' – her skull, that is. I'd thought that such sentimentality and sanctimoniousness died out with TB. But, like TB, they're back, in a dramatisation of Lee Hall's *Spoonface Steinberg*, which has been hailed as the most successful radio play ever.

When Hall's monologue was first broadcast on Radio 4 two years ago, it was said that lorry drivers pulled into lay-bys to sob into their handkerchiefs – colourful, spotted kerchiefs, no doubt.

It went on to win prizes, to sell more than 30,000 cassette and to be adapted for TV. It has now been put on stage at the New Ambassadors, with Kathryn Hunter directed in the title role by Marcello Magni and Annie Castledine. It is a queasy occasion.

Spoonface Steinberg has in it a dash of J.M. Barrie and a dollop of Susan Coolidge, author of *What Katy Did*. Spoonface is an ailing child who lights up the lives of those around her or, as she puts it, dedicates herself to 'finding the sparks inside of

you and setting them free'. She is also a holy fool, a servant who spells out dark truths in fractured grammar and hit-or-miss phrases. She is both damaged and gifted. She is autistic.

Nothing is spared in the effort to wring the audience's heart. Not content with making his heroine emotionally impaired, Hall gives her terminal cancer as well. He makes her a witness to the painful break down of her parents' marriage, and the cause of its partial healing. And then he brings in the Nazis. The specialist who treats Spoonface turns out to be the descendant of concentration-camp victims, who recounts the sufferings of his family to his young patient, apparently in an attempt to reconcile her to her imminent death.

None of this rings true. The picture it gives of the child's illness and her treatment is a sanitised one. The account it gives of autism is almost perversely sunny. Far from being locked into herself, Spoonface is expressive, and communicative. She has winning ways and she has particular, cherishable talents.

There is nothing awkward or embarrassing about her obsessions. She is no collector of doorknobs or burglar alarms but a connoisseur of operatic arias, particularly those in which divas claim to be dying. She also has a phenomenal way with numbers.

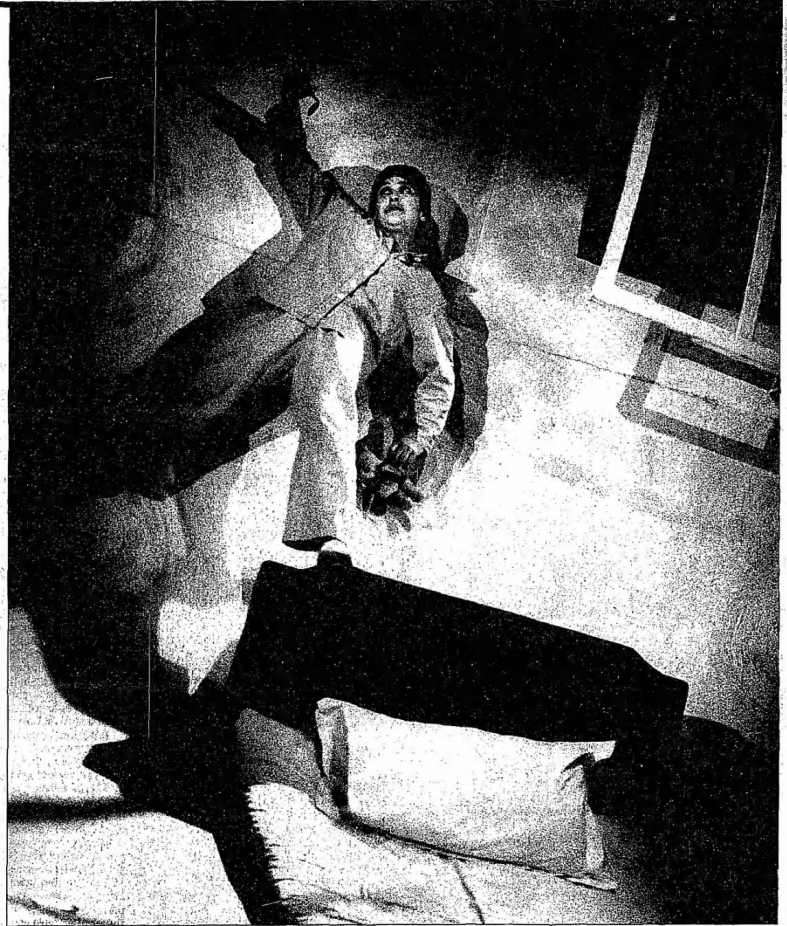
Hers is a glamorised, almost alluring condition. Of course *Spoonface Steinberg* has made people cry, but crying doesn't prove much. I'd bet that more tears have been shed (mine included) over the death of Beth in *Little Women* than over the demise of King Lear.

A lot of theatrical talent has been expended on this piece. Liz Cooke's design is disconcerting and imprisoning – it suggests a cosy cell viewed in a distorting mirror or in the bowl of a spoon. This child's bedroom is wrapped around a concave curve, patterned with whorls; its window is striped by outside bars.

Kathryn Hunter supplies another of her miracles of impersonation. Tiny in pyjamas, sandals and woolly hat, she exercises all the physical skills which have made her famous as an actress with Theatre de Complicite. She rehearses her compulsive rituals as if in a trance. Mysteriously transfixed by some objects, mysteriously repelled by others, she draws on a small repertoire of gestures, continually revolving anything she picks up, continually pressing things to her forehead.

Her movements are rapid and nimble – she scampers up the curving walls of the set to alight on her bedhead, alert as a marmoset. At the same time, she seems physically awkward, moving as if her limbs have been stuck on backwards. She has even lost the trademark throatiness of her voice, finding a lighter, wispier register. She not only looks but sounds about eight years old.

Lee Hall is a talented,



Kathryn Hunter in *Spoonface Steinberg*. Photograph by Neil Libbert

very versatile writer. His raunchy *Cookin' with Elvis*, due soon in the West End, arrived up last year's Edinburgh Festival. His version of Goldoni's *The Servant of Two Masters* is currently playing at Stratford. His adaptation of Brecht's *Mr Puntila and His Man Matti*, directed by Kathryn Hunter, was startlingly vivacious. It would be a pity if he were to

be always identified with this latter-day *Love Story*. Lindsay Posner's production of *Volpone*, first seen last March at Stratford, has come to the Pit. It's a brisk affair, though hampered by the over-explicitness which is an RSC bugbear. Jonson's fabulous grotesques are constrained by Ashley Martin Davis's literal-minded design – doublet-and-hose

costume; lots of fabric, cardboard-chicken feasts and a bluebottle as an opportunistic parasite. And Malcolm Storry, a commanding Enobarbus in the *Antony and Cleopatra*, which comes to the Barbican later this month, is tremendous as the many faces of Volpone. By turn slack-jawed, lusty, wheedling and voracious, he is, as he should be, both utterly repulsive and completely vital.

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