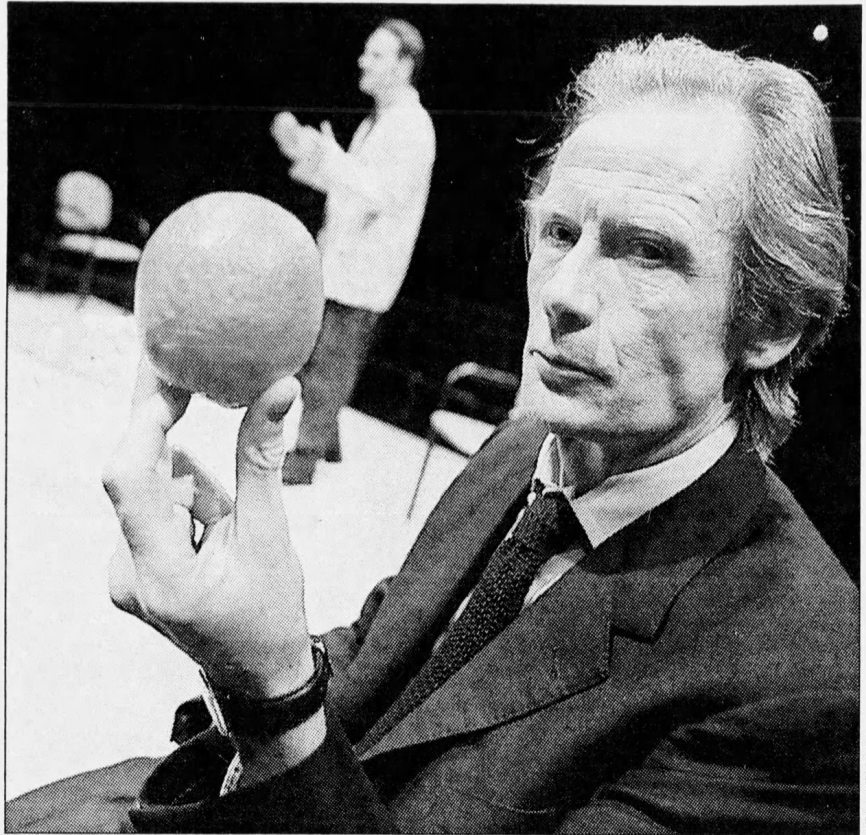


Ringside view of warring shrinks

THE stage-space for Joe Penhall's enthralling new play, which clasps you in tension's grip, resembles a boxing ring. The audience, seated in diamond-shaped formation within the steeply-raked auditorium, peer down upon three chairs ranged around a small table. This setting is no designer's accident or conceit. *Blue/Orange* turns out to be a full-scale contest, a battle of minds, in which a consultant psychiatrist and his young registrar, passionately slug it out in argument over whether to release the young African, Christopher, who has been hospitalised with symptoms apparently bordering on the psychotic.

This case rings alarm bells. It relates to public concern about schizophrenics and other sorts of deranged people who have murdered or attacked strangers after being released to so-called care in the community. How do psychiatrists assess who should be freed and on what basis of certainty? *Blue/Orange* does not directly answer such questions. Penhall contrasts the necessarily unscientific methods of two white shrinks struggling to understand a black man from a different culture. A discomforting comedy, streaked with excitement and emotion, is created in Roger Michell's stylish production.

Interest teeters on a knife edge of suspense: until the final scenes of irritating caricature when the psychiatrists lose their professional balance and cool, with the furious registrar virtually breaking down and the consultant exulting in his power, Penhall scrupulously gives both men a case. The state of Christopher's mind remains mistily unclear. The audience



Alastair Muir

The real thing: Bill Nighy gives a knock-out performance in Joe Penhall's new play

BLUE/ORANGE ★★

Cottesloe, National Theatre

Nicholas de Jongh

plays the role of umpire. Bill Nighy's hip and sympathetic, Laingian-inspired consultant is eager to save Christopher from being institutionalised and to prevent any black man's symptoms of alienation and loneliness from being diagnosed as psychoses. Andrew Lincoln's obstinate registrar wants to keep Christopher hospitalised to protect him from himself. Penhall's ironic conclusion leaves you brooding.

Christopher's aggressions, neuroses and

sheer bemusement in the sight of the warring shrinks are vividly conveyed by Chiwetel Ejiofor and Andrew Lincoln's registrar maintains a fanatic's dogged obstinacy. Bill Nighy's consultant is an overwhelming knock-out performance. This is an exposé of the compassionate ego in dramatic, vehement engagement. Nighy's emotionally and intellectually charged acting is stamped with naturalness and conviction. Each nuance of the role, from passion to swaggering vanity, is discovered. Actors, like Ralph Fiennes, who cannot transmit authentic emotion on stage, should come to watch Nighy and marvel at the real thing.

●Box Office 020 7452 3000. In repertory. Until 17 June.

Blue / Orange de Jongh Standard

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