

Apocalyptic, yet strangely trivial

CARYL Churchill is the least predictable of contemporary dramatists, and you are never sure where she is going to jump next.

Over the years she has moved from sexual politics to Thatcher-bashing verse-satire, from grim naturalism to dotty absurdism, and there is almost always a sense of daring and mystery about her work.

Hopes were therefore high for this new piece, particularly since it is directed by Stephen Daldry, that great master of *coups de théâtre*, now back at the Court after his great success with the film *Billy Elliot*.

Both director and writer, however, are in disappointing form. The brief play (50 minutes) seems much less original than most of Churchill's work, owing a heavy debt to Pinter's *Ashes to Ashes* in its edgy dialogue and paranoid portrait of an England taken over by death camps and other dystopian horrors.

And although early reports suggested that a cast of 100 were going to be let loose in the small Theatre Upstairs, it turns out to be a largely low-key and far from spectacular production, though there is one scene that sends shivers down the spine.

As you enter the theatre you are confronted with a painted frontcloth depicting

Theatre

Far Away
ROYAL COURT

an idyllic view of sunlit rural Britain, with a farmhouse nestling by a lake against a background of trees and mountains. In the course of the play this pretty, reassuring image is gradually shown to be a lie. England has in fact become a far from green and pleasant land, overtaken by brutality, world war and genetic and scientific nightmares.

In the first scene, Joan, a girl of about 10, is talking to her aunt. She has climbed out of her window at night and seen her uncle herding desperate prisoners into a shed and beating them with iron bars. In the next scene, Joan is now an adult, engaged in making absurdly extravagant and silly hats for a parade.

These, it turns out, are worn by chained wretches in rags, who have to sport the Ascot-style headgear in front of baying crowds before being led to their deaths. With some 30 extras playing the doomed men, women and children, this is a shocking moment, recalling the horrors of the Nazi camps.

In the final scene, another few years have passed, and we learn that the whole world

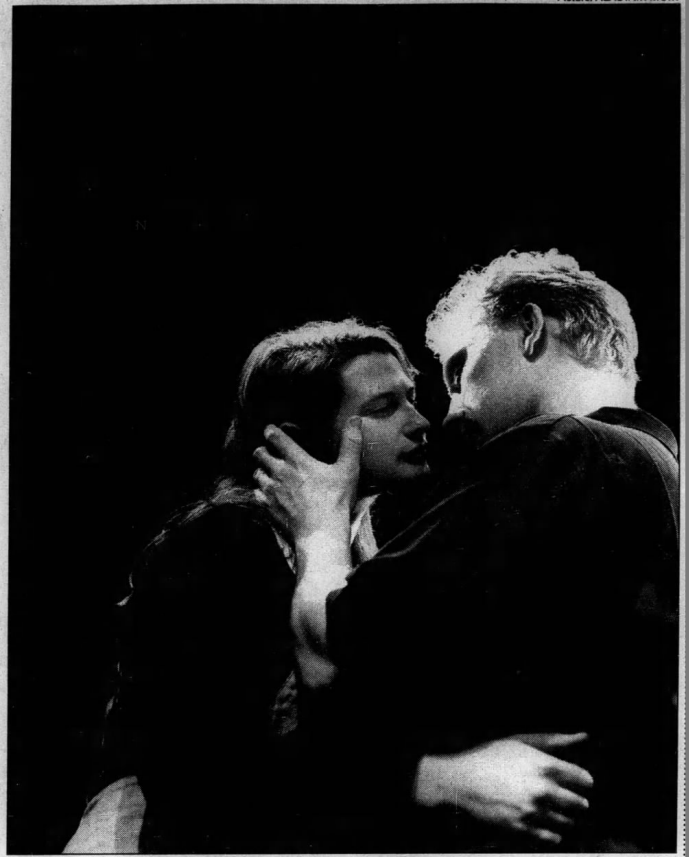
is at war. Children under five are legitimate targets. Nor is it just the humans that are in conflict. Animals have joined forces with the various factions. The cats, we learn, are on the side of the French, the deer have changed sides and are terrorising people in shopping malls. Even the weather, rivers, light and noise have been mobilised by the warring armies.

It's here that patience with the play finally snaps. Churchill's vision of a world brought to catastrophe by war, ecological disaster and scientific perversion seems merely silly rather than terrifying. When we learn that the "elephants have gone over to the Dutch", it proves impossible to stifle the giggles.

Daldry's production of a work that somehow contrives to be both apocalyptic and trivial achieves a strong atmosphere of unease and menace, and there are compelling performances from Annabelle Seymour-Julen and Katherine Tozer as the young and older Joan. There is, however, no disguising the fact that the drama's gloom-and-doom seems both glib and modish, nor is there enough detail in the writing to persuade us to care about the characters.

Tickets: 020 7565 5000

Charles Spencer



Picture: ALASTAIR MUIR

Katherine Tozer and Kevin McKidd in Caryl Churchill's *Far Away*

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