

New Miller is no thriller

ARTHUR Miller is 85 this year. *Mr Peters' Connections*, receiving its British premiere at the Almeida, is a peculiarly surreal and, at points, clearly personal meditation on a man's passage from life to death.

Peters is an elderly man who feels exhausted and unfathomably sad at heart, but keeps doggedly searching for some ultimate meaning, constantly asking, "What is the subject?" He also runs back over times past and loves lost.

Most strikingly, he mourns a voluptuous dancing girl called Cathy-May who, we gather, died young and who sounds terribly like the author's former wife, Marilyn Monroe. (Someone mentions that all her underwear has been sold, stolen or given away, and she is crudely lusted after by males as an "accordion-pleated" sex object, reminding one of Monroe's billowing skirt.)

Stylistically, this piece shares some of the freely imaginative, mysterious and spectral qualities found in late works by dramatists as diverse as Shakespeare, Ibsen and Sean O'Casey. This is a strange, slippery play, in which Peters finds himself in a dilapidated night club with a miscellany of semi-ghostly characters.

In a preface, Miller suggests that we have entered into Peters's mind as he drifts in "that suspended state of consciousness which can come upon a man taking a nap". Unfortunately, in director Michael Blakemore's production, that is spelled out none too magically in a prologue where John Cullum's haggard, beaky Peters is seen coming home from shopping in

Theatre

Mr Peters' Connections

ALMEIDA THEATRE, N1

the everyday world, flicking through a tabloid newspaper and falling asleep in a designer armchair.

Peter J Davison's set isn't atmospheric either. There's one potentially haunting corner stacked with dusty chairs and an abandoned piano, but outdoor views of skyscrapers hardly draw you in to Miller's interior world.

Thankfully, Blakemore's leading players are engaging. Diminutive Nicholas Woodeson is particularly riveting playing Calvin. He might be Peters's sympathetic spiritual guide, but simultaneously he seems to be a mafia/media magnate and an impishly competitive brother.

Cullum, though he doesn't fully probe his character's sense of grief, mixes slouchy weariness with lively irascibility and brings out some of the poetry of Miller's vision. Unfortunately Rachel Woolrich's appearances as Cathy-May fail to touch the heart because they are so clumsily choreographed.

Peters's conversations are richly all-embracing, ranging across a century of American history. The irony is that, while Peters expresses his worries about everybody's unfocused surfing of modern life, *Mr Peters' Connections* itself proves to be nebulous and rambling.

Tickets: 020 7359 4404

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