

Theatre

A jagged journey

Mr Peter's Connections

Almeida Theatre, London

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Memory has always been a key feature of Arthur Miller's work: either the collective memory of a nation or the haphazard one of an individual. But in this free-floating 80-minute piece, here getting its British premiere, it becomes the entire theme.

The action takes place in the mind of Harry Peters: an ex-Pan Am pilot and Princeton lecturer who, in a derelict New York nightclub, conjures up figures from his past and present. We get to meet, in an echo of *Death of a Salesman*, his globe-trotting, wise-cracking brother and a blonde, voluptuous ex-lover called Cathy-May — a name that reminds you of Marilyn Monroe, christened Norma Jean.

We watch, bemused and disengaged, as Miller's hero ruminates on the social upheavals of the American century, and searches for "the subject", the single idea that will make sense of his life. At last he seems to find it, through the character of a pregnant woman called Rose, in the love of a father for his child.

Miller undeniably captures the discontinuous nature of aged memory. He also shows his gift for distilled aphorism: "How like sex the trumpet is," mutters Harry at one point, "it always leaves you kind of sad when it's finished." And Miller evokes an American past in which you never locked your

front door and American presidents were morally righteous, "rather than just entertaining".

The problem with the play lies in its form. The characters have no objective existence: they simply become figures in Harry's dream, which rules out external conflict or internal development. A black bag lady seated in the corner may symbolise Harry's marginalisation of a whole race: we never, however, get to hear her story. Equally, Cathy-May is simply seen as a sex-object used and abused by men. How, one wonders, does she see herself? Running throughout the play is a vein of bullish locker-room sexism which Miller may record rather than endorse — but it is none the less dramatically limiting.

Miller, at his best, documented the failure of the American Dream; here he is simply charting the time-bending dreams of an individual. The result, while psychologically accurate, is stubbornly undramatic. Not even Michael Blakemore's atmospheric production or Peter J Davison's set, which turns Manhattan's concrete canyons into a dissolving hall of mirrors, can compensate for the absence of internal tension. One is left admiring John Cullum's craggy, intransigent selfhood as this latterday Prospero, the dutiful support of Nicholas Woodeson as the Grouchoesque brother and of Jan Waters as Harry's ex-Rockette wife. But what you finally get is a jagged journey through Miller's psyche rather than an authentic dramatic event.

Michael Billington

Until September 2. Box office: 020-7359 4404.