

While One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest enjoys a storming revival, Arthur Miller sinks without trace

THEATRE

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One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest

Barbican, London EC2

Mr Peters' Connections Almeida, London N1

Moving on Bridewell, London EC4

THE STEPPENWOLF Theatre Company of Chicago have come to the Barbican to show how a crack ensemble can light up a stage. *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is a hippy old piece, full of heart and full of holes. But as directed by Terry Kinney, a co-founder of the company, it storms along.

Dale Wasserman's play, based on the novel by Ken Kesey, was first performed in 1970 and made famous by Milos Forman's 1975 screen version starring Jack Nicholson. Its story – of a sane man who goes into a mental asylum to escape criminal charges and awakens its institutionalised patients to the knowledge of their abuse – is a real Sixties' creation. The authorities are repressive; the inmates are victims of the system; hardly anyone is really mad or dangerous. There is an amiable giant watching a flock of geese.

The play is a study of society in miniature. It has the anger and the kindness of the era. It also has a cruel blank spot: it's difficult to imagine anyone nowadays so confidently pitting the rights of a band of full-blooded fellows against an emasculating spinster.

The point of Steppenwolf is the company's wonderful pulling together: no nook of the stage is dead; everyone is always concentrated; something is always on the move; it makes you realise that stretches of most produc-

tions are vacant.

But the point of the play is anti-ensemble – it celebrates an individual's power to disrupt and change. And there's no question that a considerable part of the evening's power comes from the brimming-over energy of another Steppenwolf founder, Gary Sinise makes the Jack Nicholson part his own – he's so bristlingly full of himself as he struts around in his denims and lumberjack shirt that you feel his temperature rising. In one memorable moment, as he tries – and fails – to exercise his power, his whole face changes colour.

He helps make the play an infinitely more subtle occasion than Forman's film. As does Amy Morton, who plays the tyrant nurse with level-toned, syrupy compassion. You believe she believes in what's she doing, which make her much more dangerous. Anyone interested in acting should see this play.

This should have been a good month for another American playwright. The National is staging a full-on production of one of Arthur Miller's best-known plays, *All My Sons*. And now the Almeida has provided an English platform for a piece written 50 years later, and first seen in the US two years ago.

But *Mr Peters' Connections* is a dreary occasion. An elderly man's after-dinner sleep takes him into a limbo in which the past and present, the living and the dead, fact and speculation become jumbled, as fragments of his life occur to him. His middle-aged wife

appears, as does the ghost of a young lover. Played here as a curvy, fur-clad blonde, she inevitably evokes Monroe – and if Miller had wanted to avoid any possibility of an association with Norma Jean, he might have called her something less double-barrelled than Cathy-May. A young couple chat in a modern vocabulary which baffles him; a dead brother reminds him of halcyon days. In one corner, an all-seeing black hobo cackles and lets loose an occasional irritating general statement.

More than once, Mr Peters complains of a bewildering fluency in himself and others, and of an inability to find in this torrent of words a real subject-matter. It's a complaint that, not unreasonably, extends beyond his own troubles to embrace the condition of America.

The trouble is that the play merely mimics these complaints. It's all meander. Spurts of epigrams – 'I was never conservative enough to be a communist' – don't add up to an argument. A sentimental lurch at the end doesn't amount to a conclusion. Michael Blakemore's production creeps along. Peter J. Davison's design is awkward rather than unsettling: skyscrapers slant away in the background without looking vertiginous; a pile of furniture in one corner looks like a tidy person's attempt at putting a muddle together. As Mr Peters, John Cullum looks – as well he may – perplexed but never threatened.

The Bridewell Theatre has two musical modes. There's new and daring. This is the theatre that has brought the British musical a new, bluegrass hope by presenting the work of Richard Rogers's grandson, Adam Guettel. And there's assured and elegant – as in the new Sond-