



David Hare's new play, *My Zinc Bed*, at the Royal Court, London Photograph: Henrietta Butler

escape that have been lacking in her life.

This is a domestic drama — sometimes, in this somewhat uneven production, something of a melodrama — and some of

the play's meanings remain obstinately hidden. But de Wet writes with tremendous power, creating a world both familiar and out-of-kilter, ordinary and magical, and whose surface is

like that of a deceptively calm river under which terrible currents rage.

Lyn Gardner

Until September 30. Box office: 020-8237 1111.

Theatre

Illusions of choice

My Zinc Bed

Royal Court Theatre, London

★★★★

Faith has long obsessed David Hare. After dealing with convictions in *Via Dolorosa*, he returns in this new play to contemporary England and to our various substitutes for political or religious belief. The result is dense, rich and engrossing, even if you sometimes feel the social commentary is shadowed by Warner Brothers melodrama.

Addiction is one of the prime themes: addiction to alcohol, love or to the transient adrenalin of business as a substitute for ideals. Thus we see a penurious poet and reformed alcoholic, Paul Peplow, hired by an ex-Marxist millionaire, Victor Quinn, as a copywriter for his burgeoning internet business.

But Quinn has a young Danish wife, Elsa, who has also been rescued from drugs and drink. Clearly Quinn is playing some strange Mephistophelian game in which he seems to be luring the poet back into alcoholic degradation to solace his wife and relieve his deadlocked marriage.

On one level the play is a bizarre triangular drama with odd echoes of an old Ingrid Bergman movie, as when Elsa cries "I'm not a stranger to self-hatred". But Hare's real theme is the echoing insecurity of modern life, in which compulsions take the place of convictions. It is no accident that two of his characters are addicts, reformed or otherwise, and that

Quinn has replaced his one-time Marxist beliefs with the capitalist illusion of control. We are all hooked on something, Hare suggests, and if business is largely a matter of creating a nebulous confidence, then so too is love.

If anything, Hare floats too many ideas. But he is very good on the acrid solitude of a staled marriage and the difficulty of conquering one's debasing compulsions. And, as always, his writing is laced with a sharp, suggestive wit. "Never underestimate the illusion of choice," cries the empire-building Quinn, neatly harpooning the paradox of capitalism. And when he announces that the modern newspaper interview is a form "as rigid and contrived as the 18th-century gavotte," journalists will flinch.

Observant wit mates with a yearning for lost ideals; and two sides of the triangle in Hare's own production are perfectly formed. Julia Ormond as Elsa hauntingly creates a woman who is irreparably damaged. Steven Mackintosh has the right hollow-cheeked intensity as the poet who cannot quite quash his faith in the liberating embrace of alcohol. Only Tom Wilkinson, while conveying Quinn's capitalist grandeur, seems to offer an unfinished sketch. Even so, the play remains a fascinating work, analysing our modern malaise while implying that somewhere along the way we have lost any settled beliefs.

Michael Billington

Until October 28. Box office: 020 7565 5000

★★★★★ Unmissable
★★★★ Recommended
★★★ Enjoyable
★★ Mediocre ★ Terrible