

Hare of the dog

Alcoholics Anonymous meets Casablanca in David Hare's new play about addiction

THEATRE
Susannah Clapp



My Zinc Bed Royal Court, London SW1
An Die Musik Tricycle, London NW6
Conversations After a Burial Almeida, London N1

DAVID HARE has written a searching new play. The first good thing about it is that its stern debates are delivered lightly, floated on the always colourful subject of alcohol. The second is that it plait together the personal and the political in an unexpected way. The third is that it teases. Buried in the names of its characters – Victor, Elsa – and its theme of a triangular love involving an older man and a Scandinavian woman, is the glow of *Casablanca*.

My Zinc Bed is about the addictions – to drink, to cults and to each other – with which people comfort themselves when they have lost faith. A young poet and recent convert to Alcoholics Anonymous meets an older man, an ex-communist turned millionaire. Recognising in AA the lure of the cult, a lure to which he himself has succumbed, the older man (Tom Wilkinson) tempts the younger (Steven Mackintosh) to drink, and to

a liaison with his wife (Julia Ormond).

There are all sorts of things to be argued with in *My Zinc Bed*, whose title refers to the bed on which we lie when we're dead. The play, which Hare directs himself, doesn't find a language, visual or verbal, which persuades you that it's inhabiting a dot.com world. A framing device in which the audience directly is awkward, not least because its relation to an Alcoholics Anonymous confessional is never made clear. The dialogue, though often shrewd and humorous, is prone to fits of po-faced explicitness: 'I'm not', the Ormond character is obliged to insist, 'a stranger to self-hatred.'

This play is less sleekly all-of-a-piece than Hare's most recent work, which makes it more interesting. It signals several liberating departures. It breaks with Hare's habit of depicting women with sentimental enthusiasm: there's nothing sanctified about the Julia Ormond figure here.

It shrugs off what was becoming a restricting naturalism in the design of his plays: Vicki Mortimer's set,



From left: Steven Mackintosh, Tom Wilkinson and Julia Ormond in *My Zinc Bed* at the Royal Court. Photograph by Neil Libbert

though insufficiently claustrophobic and threatening, contains no knives-and-forks domesticity, just a backdrop of zinc-coloured squares which looks first like a Zen-style interior, later like the outlines of a high-rise office block.

The play's riffs about drink are buoyant. And it contains a fascinating performance by Julia Ormond who sets the tone of the play's discussions: damped-down desperation masquerading as chic.

At the Tricycle, actors from the Jewish State Theatre of Bucharest are performing a drama that puts to shame the flashy posturing of Nazi atrocities. *An Die Musik* was created 25 years ago by the director Pip Simmons as a response to what he considered sentimental treatments of the Holocaust. It serves as a lesson on how the theatre can convey real-life tragedy.

The play has one flaw: its opening half-hour – a wordless operetta based on the diary of Anne Frank – is histrionic. But what follows is grave and hugely powerful. Concentration-camp inmates are ordered by a Nazi officer to produce an entertainment. The group of men and women – sunken-eyed, hollow-cheeked, with arms hanging down like broom-handles in their striped uniforms – are forced through a series of punishing keep-fit drills. Several are sluiced down with buckets of water; a young woman is ordered to strip, and hangs naked from a trapeze like a carcass on a butcher's hook. But mostly they perform, as if they were taking part in a concert party.

One man delivers a pantomimic version of Shylock, shrugging his shoulders and wringing his hands; one man juggles. A girl dances to music from *Tannhäuser*, wrapping herself in a band of cloth like a winding sheet; three men shuffle together to demonstrate a Jewish joke. And accompanying themselves raggedly but tunelessly on clarinet and recorders, looking frightened, stunned and wild, the company sing the Schubert song that gives the piece its name, a song which speaks of the consoling power of art. The title is a black irony: the play suggests that art – such as this drama itself – has no power to console. It is desolating.

It's a relief to know that *Conversations After a Burial* is Yasmina Reza's first play, not her latest. It shows how quickly a dramatist can progress to crispness from a mauling start. Reza's *Art*, the first of her works to be produced in England, is about to move on to its sixteenth cast, and its fifth year in the West End. Like the plain white canvas on which the argument between a trio of male friends hinges, the play has turned out to be a space waiting to be given significance by whoever plays in it. It opened with Albert Finney, Tom Courtenay and Ken Stott; it has given work to Jack Dee, Sean Hughes and Stephen Tompkinson. Next month, it will be performed by John Fortune, Ken Campbell and Warren Mitchell.

This earlier play at the Almeida is not subject, as *Art* has been – I think wrongly – to accusations of philistinism and self-conscious smartness. It is more obviously sensitive – and the worse for that. It teases the audience with its elusiveness, and bursts into a bewildering supernatural sequence towards the end. At the same time, its language is clumpily emphatic: 'Let me be your pain,' declares one lover as an enticement to making love on a grave. Its dialogue is unconvincingly stylised, too often composed simply of one banal phrase lingeringly repeated.

Rob Howell's beautiful set – creepers sprawling over crumbling stone – is dappled with an autumnal light which proclaims the play's Chekhovian aspirations. But after each significant moment, Dominic Muldowney's music – a composite of allusions – crashes in as if it were supplying the soundtrack to a Forties melodrama. Reza's characters provide no surprises: there is one uncle (jovial); one unmarried sister (soul); one literary critic (full of self-importance bile). Claire Bloom's performance – peculiar, modest and compelling – is the only solace.

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