

The spirit of the dotcom age, but not the heart



First Night
Charles Spencer

My Zinc Bed
Royal Court Theatre

DAVID Hare is best known for his sharply observed, elegantly constructed state of the nation plays.

It's been well said that when historians want to learn what Britain was like at the end of the 20th century, he will be the first dramatist they turn to.

But that compliment also suggests a degree of limitation.

We don't turn first to Shakespeare to find out what life was like in the Elizabethan age. We read and watch him because of what he has to tell us about the eternal verities of human nature and the human heart.

Here Hare is sometimes less successful. As well as being a famous dramatist he is also an enviably good journalist, and in his weaker plays he sometimes seems to be offering top-class journalism rather than top-class drama.

There are times when Hare seems more interested in

ideas than in people, more concerned with capturing the spirit of the age than flesh and blood characters.

My Zinc Bed isn't devoid of these weaknesses. It's typical for instance that Hare should be the first major dramatist to set a play in the dizzying sphere of dotcom commerce and the internet, but having chosen this brave new world he doesn't seem to have much more to say about it than what we could read in a 1,000-word article.

One is also growing slightly tired of that recurring character, the former hard-line Marxist who has lost his faith in the power of politics to change the world.

He's represented here by Victor Quinn, a disillusioned communist who's made it big with a computer company called Flotilla, one of those turbulent entrepreneurs who seem to fascinate Hare.

Rather improbably, Victor (a powerful Tom Wilkinson) invites the alcoholic young poet who has come to interview him for a newspaper to join the firm. And here Hare reveals yet more conscientious journalistic research.

There is a long debate about whether Alcoholics Anonymous, on which the desperate young writer Paul is pinning all his hopes, is actually the wholly benign organisation most of us take it for. Doesn't it just substitute one form of addiction for



Picture: ALASTAIR MUIR

Flayed emotion: Julia Ormond, in a thrilling comeback performance on the stage

another, asks Victor, trapping people not only with a feeling of unworthiness, but with an endless desire to confess it? Is alcoholism really a disease at all?

There is a fine dramatic tension in Hare's own production as we wonder whether Paul, played with a raw vulnerability by Steven Mackintosh that is as comic as it is touching, is going to fall off the wagon.

And this somewhat worthy, wordy drama suddenly sparks into passionate and erotic life when Paul falls for Victor's much younger wife,

herself a recovering alcoholic and cokehead.

She's played here with a combustible mixture of sensuality and increasingly flayed emotion by Julia Ormond in a thrilling comeback performance that should establish her as a major stage actress after her less than happy time in Hollywood.

The anguished love scenes with Mackintosh, who splendidly captures the sudden bewilderment of passion, remind you that Hare has a heart as well as a head, as he proved in *Skylight*. Never-

theless, despite gripping scenes, *My Zinc Bed* finally strikes me as a dramatic failure. Hare, that most fastidious of men, may have carefully researched alcoholism, but he never really gets inside the heads of habitual boozers, or conveys the hell of a terminal hangover.

Nor do I buy his contentious conclusions that addiction has replaced political idealism, or that booze adds a spark to life that reformed alcoholics can never recover.

Only so sober a writer as Hare could indulge such a romantic fallacy.

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