



Ron Cook, whose 'magnificent performance' as Katz saves the evening at the Cottesloe

Alastair Muir

## All heat and little light on the male menopause



First night  
by Nicholas de Jongh

Howard Katz  
Cottesloe Theatre

**Y**OU would not expect a 30-something playwright to have significant things to say about that clichéd place and state, the twilight world of the male menopause. And so it sadly proves. Patrick Marber follows up his first two plays, the remarkable Dealer's Choice and Closer, with a superficial wallow in the miseries of Howard Katz, a 50-year old showbusiness agent who's depicted inexplicably falling out with his wife, father, brother and agency, not to mention life itself. This is hardly any laughing matter, though Marber thinks he's "loosely" written a comedy. Instead ridiculousness, of the unintentional sort, tends to break out. Hollow, uneasy laughter is raised. "Burn me to nothing. Strike me down with lightning." Katz commands when, having carelessly sacrificed everything from wife to job, he rages around in a real storm, like a bargain basement King Lear.

What a falling off was here, as the Ghost more or less said to Hamlet: I refer to the inferior quality of Howard Katz when compared with Marber's earlier plays, not to the remorseless detailing of the Agent's decline and fall, which puts such repetitive strain upon the audience. Marber is little concerned to show what long-term pressures hustle Katz into break-down or why the Agent hates himself so. That male menopausal process is what interests him. The action begins and ends on a park bench, where on two successive mornings a young vagrant discovers Katz loitering on suicide's verge. Between these two crisis points scenes from the Agent's life flash before his eyes, and ours.

John Osborne and David Mamet have been here before, in similar dramatic terrain where men crack up, and dug deeper. Marber, self-indulgently directing his own, aimless play, sets it in vague limbo land, adorned with dark walls. Rob Howell's dull and blankish set centres upon a park bench, where a

befuddled Ron Cook, at first looking just like Antony Sher's twin brother, looks back in anger. The flashback scenes tend to skim all brisk and banal across life's surface. In his office Katz is all rude candour to clients, though his invective never rises much above basic sneering, with touches of comic relief.

"The camera hates you. That's why you don't work," snarls the Agent, who has all the disturbing unpredictability of a loose cannon. His magnificent performance saves the evening. He galvanises the banal scenes with the force of his seething resentments and rages, his tears and obscure self-loathing: Katz, who like Marber is Jewish, finds family life an all-round trial in all the predictable ways. Communication fails. Quarrels keep breaking out with melodramatic results. He's bored with his wife. He goads his philandering father, whom Trevor Peacock plays exquisitely with quiet desperation, to accuse him of not believing in anything.

He can't express his love to anyone, not to his timid son, Paul Ritter as his aggressive brother or an affecting Cherry Morris as his put-upon, dying mother. There's little relief or shade. Katz rains down a steady drizzle of anger and angst. Hotel bell-boy and prostitute, staff at the gambling palace where he loses a tiny fortune in a blackly comic scene, brother and wife, all take their share of abuse without effective retaliation. So monotony keeps setting in. Howard Katz is all heat and little light.

Ratings: — ○ adequate ★ good, ★★ very good, ★★★ outstanding, ✕ poor  
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Katz de Jongh Standard

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