



ters

Theatre

The Shape of Things

Almeida at King's Cross, London

★★★★★

What is art? Does creation carry with it any moral responsibility? These — and a host of other topics — are raised by Neil LaBute in this tantalising two hour play: the problem is that the twist comes three-quarters of the way through which means that the really big issues kick in very late in the day.

Given LaBute's portrait of corporate brutality in his movie *In the Company of Men*, this piece at first seems bland. Evelyn, working on a graduate art project, picks up the nerdy Adam in a mid-western museum where she is about to paint a graffiti penis on a sculpture. Soon we see her doing a similar makeover job on Adam: through her love he becomes a leaner, sexier, better dressed figure. So much so that he rekindles the affections of ex-classmate Jenny who is about to marry his best friend, Phillip.

What exactly is LaBute up to? To explain all would be to kill the play. But literary clues are scattered throughout, with references to Pygmalion, Frankenstein and

Metamorphosis. Just as Shaw's Higgins tried to turn a flower girl into a duchess, LaBute's Evelyn transforms a shy klutz into a sex object. So strong is her hold over him that when she asks him to ditch his old friends to save their relationship he has little hesitation.

The Shavian comparison is illuminating. Where Shaw threads his moral debate through the whole of *Pygmalion*, LaBute reserves his dialectic for the final scenes. Only then do we get to the big issues: the relation between morality and art, society's preoccupation with surfaces and the thin dividing line between genuine provocation and attention seeking. It is fascinating territory that relates to our own preoccupation with Tracey Emin's bedsheets; but too much of LaBute's play feels as if he is vamping till he gets to the climax.

His own production also has too many between-scene pauses for minimal changes to Giles Cadle's set. But there is a knockout performance from Rachel Weisz who makes Evelyn a fizzingly erotic companion while also hinting at a serene detachment that treats Adam as a scientific specimen. And, even if Paul Rudd's Adam could initially be more of a clueless no-hoper, he is good at conveying the joy of trans-

formation. Frederick Weller as the philistine Phil and Gretchen Mol as the piratical Jenny complete a glamorous cast. But, although LaBute's play is clearly on to something, it would be better still if it cut more quickly to the intellectual chase.

Michael Billington
Until June 23. Box office: 020-7359 4404.

Classical

Alfred Brendel

Royal Festival Hall, London

★★★★★

There are two possibilities when you reach 70; go into hiding or face reality. I have decided to do the latter. Whatever the implications of the reality that Alfred Brendel, quoted at the front of this programme booklet, was referring to, on one level it involves a busy year giving birthday concerts worldwide.

Why on earth this most distinguished pianist should have considered going into hiding will be a mystery to the admirers who packed the Festival Hall last night to hear the first in a month-long series celebrating Brendel as recitalist, concerto soloist, chamber musician, accompanist, poet and writer: one of music's most eloquent renaissance men.

Perhaps the reality is the fact that, inevitably, his dexterity may lessen with time. But Brendel's trump card has always been intellectual clarity rather than showmanship; he has a no nonsense approach that works because he knows exactly which notes need a performer's help and which will speak for themselves.

And he need not fear that he is turning into an elderly pianist: his playing is as robust, as free of sentiment as ever. In recent seasons he has concentrated almost exclusively on the classical repertoire, a direction that this programme reflected.

Haydn's Sonata in G minor was played with a matter of fact firmness that occasionally gave in to a hint of wistful nostalgia, revealing a sense of unease.

Brendel has called Beethoven's Diabelli Variations a humorous work in the widest possible sense. Yet there is genuine emotion in it too, and this reading was distinguished by the subtle mediacy with which Brendel switched between affectionate send-up and utter sincerity.

The changes came thick and fast towards the end, seeming to suggest that the line between good and trite music is thinner than one might think, and that this is something to be celebrated rather than reviled. Certainly the audience, who roared their approval, seemed to agree.

Alfred Brendel's 70th birthday series continues until June 30. Box office: 020 7960 4242

Erica Jeal