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Rachel Weisz as Tracey Emin? Strindberg in the original Swedish? Time to send for the Pet Shop Boys

THEATRE



Susannah Clapp

The Shape of Things Almeida at King's Cross, London N1
A Dream Play Barbican, London EC2
On the Razzle Chichester Festival Theatre, West Sussex
Closer to Heaven Arts Theatre, London WC2

THERE'LL be no difficulty in selling tickets for **The Shape of Things**. It's by Neil LaBute – the film-maker whose *Bash* was one of last year's most corrosive and compelling theatrical premieres. It stars Rachel Weisz. It puts on the stage a really interesting debate about the use an artist makes of her or his life, and it gives this debate a fashionable, Tracey Emin-style twist. It's inventive and it's pugilistic: it will be one of the season's talking-points.

In brief scenes punctuated by ear-blasting music from Smashing Pumpkins, a campus romance unfolds. A nerd – played by Paul Rudd with impressive sureness and delicacy – is seduced by a glamorous and bold student of art: Weisz brings candour and ferocity to the part, as well as a full-throttle allure which makes the enslavement completely persuasive. She changes his appearance and his view of himself; there are scattered references to *Pygmalion* and to *Frankenstein*. She takes pictures of his penis under the sheets. And she disrupts his relationships with his closest friends (excellent Gretchen Mol and Frederick Weller).

She does all this with a purpose. This purpose, which is the engine of the play and the source of its originality, can't be described without ruining the LaBute experience for future audiences. But it ushers in one of the questions raised by Tom Stoppard last week at the Royal Academy, when he derided Tracey Emin's display of knickers: is the intention of the artist enough to define a work of art? And it touches on the perennial question of the way artists exploit the people who are close to them.

The Shape of Things is in a tradition of provocative recent drama: it has the clarity of Yasmina Reza's *Art* and the attack of David Mamet's *Oleanna*. It also has its own distinctive lack of resolution: LaBute is never afraid of leaving an audience with a nasty taste in their mouths. This always intriguing play should be a marvel. It isn't. It's imprecise: what era is this in which installation art and female physical agression co-exist with a spooky Fifties conservatism in which a girl is defiled by a snog on a swing? It creeps so slowly towards its central idea that you're able to guess what's coming. It's too explicit about that idea when it gets there, literally reading the spectators a lecture. And it doesn't – strangely, for LaBute is brave – take things far enough. There is no curtain call: quite rightly, for this is a piece which requires an audience, who have been thinking about the thin line between life and art, to consider themselves as actors.



Rachel Weisz and Paul Rudd in Neil LaBute's The Shape of Things at the Almeida. Photograph by Neil Libbert

'The Shape of Things is inventive and pugilistic. It will be one of the season's talking points'

Anyone who had a shiver of anxiety for the Barbican on hearing that the RSC will no longer be resident there, should have been at the first night of **A Dream Play**. Robert Wilson's production of Strindberg's surreal drama comes under the umbrella of this year's BITE, which for the last four years has provided the most vital events held in the building. Here's a notoriously obscure play, which was performed – as if to test the limits of endurance – in Swedish. And the theatre was packed.

It's hard to believe that anyone has ever cared about the characters or plot of this play, in which the daughter of a god descends to Earth in order to find out whether the moaning of the human race is justified. Wilson's glacial production will not change that. His series of dazzling tableaux amount to an investigation of what makes an experience dreamlike. Bright lighting drains away warmth and flattens figures so that they look like cardboard cut-outs. Sounds are exaggerated so that the biting of a piece of bread sounds like an avalanche. Movements are slowed down to underwater walking speed. Actions – the working of a pump, the milking of round white cows – are repeated with great deliberation, but to little consequence. It's an arresting rather than engaging occasion, more revealing about Wilson than Strindberg.

Chichester's summer season contains some tempting items, but it has opened torpidly. **On the Razzle**, Tom Stoppard's 1981 farce, based on a nineteenth-century play by the Austrian Johann Nestroy, is a jaunty, mildly disconcerting affair in which masters and servants find love and promotion in old Vienna. Short on character and heavy on repartee, it can only come off if it's sparky, swift and tinged with darkness. Peter Wood's production is consistently slow, tame and amiable.

The dialogue is not so much batted as lobbed. John Gunter's chirpy, determinedly Anglo-Saxon design looks as if it were made to house Ronnie Barker. David Bamber is wan; Desmond Barritt blusters. Only Anna Quayle looks at home as she mantles and arches her brow. Cross-dressed as a young male servant, Daisy Donovan is appealing – but it's hard to see the point of what can only be called her pants part.

The West End deserves **Closer to Heaven**. It sets winsome gladiators pelvic-thrusting in chains and silver breastplates. It sends toned bodies in bondage gear and glittery gold knickers scampering up the aisles. It opens with Frances Barber as a ridiculously overblown rock star snorting a line of cocaine. It closes, almost, on the funeral of a dealer, and follows the progress of a male innocent moving from obscurity to celebrity – and from girls to boys.

In collaborating on the show, the Pet Shop Boys (music and lyrics) and Jonathan Harvey (script) aimed to provide an antidote to the sentiment and elephantiasis that have sapped the modern musical. It's true that *Closer to Heaven* is small, loud, thrumming and gay. But it's in the way it mixes talent and tosh that it really inverts convention. It delivers its tat with fervour, and its giftedness lightly: the music is better, the rhymes sharper than most of what cruises round the West End. It's essence of camp.

Shape Clapp Observer

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