



Alastair Muir

Linguistic dynamite: Anastasia Hille and Neil Dudgeon in *Ashes to Ashes*

Pinter's power games

KATIE Mitchell's production starts with an adrenaline surge, as darkness falls suddenly on the auditorium like an ambush, and audience members' ears are invaded with the hostile sounds of dogs barking and helicopters whirring. It feels as if each individual has been shoved rudely from the world of civilisation encapsulated in the Royal Court auditorium, and into the world of obscene and cruelly whimsical power games that we so comfortably associate with other political regimes.

Mountain Language was first performed in 1988, and *Ashes to Ashes* in 1996, but the two fit together as neatly as consecutive clauses in Pinter's tightly constructed argument on aggression that goes back to plays like *The Caretaker*. By placing the darkly comedic *Mountain Language* before *Ashes to Ashes*, Mitchell robs the latter of its much-criticised obliqueness, so that instead of viewing this second play as a domestic drama that escalates from the personal to the overtly political, through visual echoes, the warscape is there from the start.

MOUNTAIN LANGUAGE/ASHES TO ASHES ★★

Royal Court Theatre

Rachel Halliburton

Pinter has often been attacked for focusing his lens more closely on politics in his later works, but Mitchell's beautifully controlled aesthetic and imaginative use of sound reveals two plays where the language games and the scalpel-sharp dissection of human relationships carry an intriguing universality.

In the first, seemingly more simple piece, soldiers play power games with a group of mountain inhabitants who have been waiting in the snow for eight hours. In the second, a woman gives her husband a fragmentary account of her involvement, through her lover, in wartime atrocities.

Ironically, the power of *Mountain Language* manifests itself less in words than

in its pictures, because Mitchell has turned it into starkly painted tableaux of terror. An old woman with a bandaged hand freezes in dismay and a soldier — in a gesture reminiscent of Prussian soldiers in Guy de Maupassant's *Contes de Guerre* — eats the apples she has brought for the man they have tortured. Paul Constable's lighting design, by suddenly highlighting expressions and creating shifting shadows, reveals the layers of terror in each situation, while the stage curtain narrows into telling close-ups.

In *Ashes to Ashes*, Anastasia Hille's gently intelligent performance demonstrates Pinter's psychological acuity about the impact of aggression.

Her elusive, fragmented description of her love evokes the mental dislocation of trauma at the same time as revealing the defused aggression inherent in all acts of human intimacy. Each word is linguistic dynamite.

At 70, it shows that Pinter's power is not diminishing.

● Until 14 July. Box office: 020 7565 5000.