

RICHARD HORNBY

The Almeida Theatre

THE ALMEIDA THEATRE IS LOCATED IN ISLINGTON, once a working-class section of north London (and home to bohemians like Joe Orton), but now thoroughly gentrified. The Almeida Theatre Company itself seems to be undergoing a similar upgrade. For two decades it has been housed in a scruffy, cramped little building in a dank alley off Almeida Street, but in recent years has also been operating in major theatres on the West End, and has just opened a new theatre in a reconstructed film studio east of Islington in Shoreditch. The Almeida has become the powerhouse of contemporary British theatre, with production after production scooping up awards, then transferring to the West End and to Broadway—Diana Rigg in *Medea*, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, and *Phèdre*; Ralph Fiennes in *Hamlet* and Chekhov's *Ivanov*; Kevin Spacey in *The Iceman Cometh*; and new plays from David Hare, Arthur Miller, Brian Friel, Harold Pinter, and Edward Albee.

This past spring, the Almeida presented four new, major productions. At the original theatre in Islington, there was a new play by Harold Pinter, *Celebration*, on a double bill with his early piece, *The Room*. On the West End at the Albery Theatre was a new play by Nicholas Wright, entitled *Cressida*. In Shoreditch, at the Gainesborough Studios (former haunt of Alfred Hitchcock), were Shakespeare's *Richard II* and *Coriolanus*, both starring Ralph Fiennes. The Almeida appears to be fast overtaking the Royal Shakespeare Company (now offering only a much reduced season in London), and giving the Royal National Theatre a run for its money.

Pinter's *The Room*, written in 1957, is quintessential Theatre of the Absurd. Influenced by earlier Absurdist playwrights like Ionesco, Genet, and Beckett (who became Pinter's friend, and made contributions to his plays), Pinter creates strange, dream-like worlds that are ominous yet strangely comic. Like the experimental movements of the 1920s, such as Expressionism, Surrealism, and Dadaism, Absurdism presents bizarre characters and situations, but unlike the earlier styles, the mood is not nightmarish and hysterical, but drab and mundane. The characters seem outlandish to us, but not to themselves; they accept their existence just as we accept ours, as a given, an unquestioned, unalterable, dreary presence. Theatre of the Absurd is Naturalism in an alternate universe.

The Room takes place in—what else?—a room, where an elderly woman named Rose lives with her husband Bert, a truckdriver. The

pirated home movie) who is naturalistically afflicted, demonized, and driven in more ways than a social worker could count. But, like the Dardennes' picture, *Affliction* is also about a stratum of society trapped in a societal jet lag, except that here Rosetta's medieval, female foraging has been replaced by frontier brawling, or the manifest, masculine display of raw, undomesticated bodily strength both for its own inexorable sake and as a form of surrender to the implacable imperatives of misshapen character.

Nick Nolte's acting of the part of Wade Whitehouse is almost dismayingly accomplished in its piercing conviction. I say "dismayingly" because, with hardly a single sympathetic or admirable action, Nolte makes his hulking, blustery brute of a character somewhat poignant. And it's Nolte the performer who does this—by continuing to find and reach into the bewildered Wade's deep recesses of feeling—not Banks the novelist or Schrader the screenwriter-director. The scenes, for example, in which this wrecked man refrains from releasing his fury on his abject, drunken, incoherent father after this man has allowed Wade's mother to freeze to death in her own bed, or where he tries to show some tenderness toward his daughter during their troubled visitations, are so remorselessly exact, so unerringly truthful, that they're difficult to watch without flinching. As Rosetta, Emilie Dequenne (Best Actress at Cannes), for her part, shows little tenderness toward anyone—including herself. Yet she is so thoroughly immersed in her otherwise unappealing (and most unglamorous) character's simmering fierceness—so free of the self-regard that can tinge even the best actors' work—that, by sheer force of will, she forces us to pay attention to Rosetta's appalling life in all its squalor.

Hence there was an extra-aesthetic pleasure in wondering what Dequenne herself is like and *was* like between takes during the shooting of *Rosetta*, so extreme is the role into which she has plunged herself. There was another kind of pleasure, too—one as damning as it is astonishing. That is the pleasure we take in paying rapt attention to, and thinking a lot about, characters and subjects in film (in theatre and fiction as well, but especially in cinema, the most wide-reaching and therefore the most democratic of arts) to which we wouldn't normally give a large amount of consideration in real life. This, of course, is the special, intriguing power that all art holds over us: the power to engage merely by the act of isolating and framing. I bring it up in the context of *Rosetta* and *Affliction* only because it is more pronounced in the naturalistic mode than in any other. And because naturalism, when combined with a spiritual or a transcendental style, has the power to exalt like no other mode: to shift our concern, to elevate our solicitude, from self to other, from man to God and thus to other men. Outstanding among them must be counted the wretched of the earth, the Rosettas of this world who race through their time here because they mortally fear to wade.

squalid lodging has a gas heater, a stove, a sink ("kitchen sink Naturalism"!), a table and chairs, a double bed. Noël Coward took one look at a grimy set for a Pinter play and decided he was about to see the epitome of everything he detested in the theatre, but then found that "somehow it seizes hold of you."¹ Here Rose speaks to her husband for six pages without the slightest response from him, who eats his breakfast while reading a magazine. Repetitive, fragmented, disjointed, her speech is nonetheless mesmerizing: "That's right. You eat that. You'll need it. You can feel it in here. Still, the room keeps warm. It's better than in the basement, anyway." The janitor who stops by is even more vague, unable to remember how many floors are in the building. ("To tell you the truth, I don't count them now.")

After Bert goes off in his van, a young couple are discovered lurking outside the door, who insist that the room will become vacant, enabling them soon to move in. Rose temporarily fends them off, but the janitor reappears, to announce the entrance of an old, blind black man, who is apparently Rose's father, though she is white. He calls her "Sal," and asks her to come home. During their conversation, Bert returns to beat the man senseless, while Rose clutches at her eyes and screams that she has gone blind too.

Nothing in the above description could not exist in the real world; nobody walks on air or turns into a rhinoceros. Yet there is a growing mystery to the play, because nothing seems to fit. Why does Bert not say anything? How could the visitors know that Rose is going to leave? (She does not even know it herself.) How could the black man be Rose's father, why does he call her Sal instead of Rose, and why does otherwise stolid Bert beat him up? The convention of Naturalism in the theatre is that we come to fathom the characters in terms of their social, historical, and psychological backgrounds, but here we understand less about the characters at the end of the play than we did at the beginning. The world of the play has become defamiliarized, and so has our own; after plays like these, we can never take existence for granted again.

Pinter himself directed the Almeida production of *The Room*, with an appropriate setting by Eileen Diss. (Pinter settings often end up looking like *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, when they should instead resemble *The Lower Depths*.) Lindsay Duncan played Rose, supported by an excellent cast. Duncan is actually an elegant, beautiful woman, but here she managed to seem old and drab, yet intensely anguished. She made it clear that Rose is a tragic figure in miniature; we do not understand her, but we certainly feel for her.

Celebration moves well up the social scale from *The Room*. Set in an elegant restaurant, it is an effective satire of British nouveaux riches of the Thatcher/Major era. At one table are a vulgar banker and his wife; at another is a wedding anniversary party of two married couples, who are brothers and sisters as well. The restaurant staff is a strange bunch; the *maitresse d'hôtel* sobs over a lost lover, while the waiter name-drops

¹ Philip Hoare, *Noël Coward: A Biography* (London, 1997), p. 458.

with the customers about his grandfather, who seems to have known every important person of the twentieth century, from Winston Churchill to the Three Stooges. As alcohol loosens tongues, we notice the fragility of the customers' relationships, with their underlying fears and hatreds. Beneath the brittle camaraderie of the restaurant, there are those Pinter staples of sexual betrayal, rancor, and vulgarity.

In Pinter's early plays, the characters are mostly cockneys, like Pinter himself; here, they are middle class, though perhaps only recently so, behaving as Rose and Bert would have done if they had suddenly come into money. What is lacking here is the usual Pinter pattern of the invasion of a personal space, as in all his early plays, including *The Room*. The unnamed restaurant here is neutral space, at least for the customers. Thus, although *Celebration* is funnier and harsher than *The Room*, the upscale characters and lack of territorial struggle also make it less terrifying. Pinter's best plays are all about territoriality, so that even Rose's shabby little room she shares with her loutish husband becomes a life-or-death refuge. If things were to go badly for the three couples in *Celebration* (and they do not, as far as we can tell), the characters still have a lot to fall back on, but Rose has nothing but a tiny room, constantly being invaded, to protect her from the cold, harsh world outside.

The cast of *The Room* of course overlapped with that of *Celebration*. Lindsay Duncan reverted to her usual elegant type as one of the married sisters in the second play, while Steven Pacey shifted from an impassive lout in the first to a loudmouthed one in the second. Pinter directed both plays with his usual meticulous care, showing that all those pauses and silences and ellipses in his texts have a precise meaning each time.

Nicholas Wright's *Cressida* turned out to be disappointing. It is a backstage play, set at the Globe Theatre in the 1630s, with Shakespeare long dead, and the glories of the English Renaissance theatre greatly diminished. (At the start of the Civil War in 1642, all the theatres in London were closed down and eventually razed, but they were long past their prime by that time.) Wright's characters are mostly based on real theatre folk of the period, but his historical research has served merely to render the play slow and clumsy.

John Shank, a long-standing member of the King's Men, is now running the company. Deeply in debt, he pins his hopes on a ragamuffin boy actor, Stephen Hammerton, whom he trains to play the title female role in Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*. Unfortunately, Wright shows little feel for the art of acting, either as practiced then or as it is today, so the training sessions do not catch fire. It would also have been better to have chosen a more well-known role for Hammerton than *Cressida*; the offbeat play is rarely done today, and appears not to have been successful when it was written. Besides, the decision to put Hammerton on stage in the role does not even arrive until the second act, with the first act given over to local color and much complaining.

Michael Gambon was superb as Shank, as usual, but otherwise *Cressida* was a dud.

Coriolanus opened too late for review here, but I did manage to catch a preview of *Richard II*, a play that has special meaning for me. Forty-three years ago, when I was an undergraduate, a friend recruited me as an extra for a college production of the play. I carried banners for the armies of both Richard and Bolingbroke, shifted furniture about, and tried to look serious and warlike when standing at attention. I helped carry John of Gaunt in a sedan chair (I got the back); when he soared into the great "This other Eden, demi-paradise" speech, I was never certain whether I should act interested, or bored, or severely disapproving. I myself had not a single line to speak.

Unaware that there were two Shakespearean *Richard* plays, I was disappointed to find no hump, and only one murder, of Richard himself. *Richard II* is a static play, ploddingly adapted from Holinshed; the big inciting event is a joust that does *not* take place. (Richard stops the trial by combat between Mowbray and Bolingbroke, unfairly banishing both, which ultimately leads to Bolingbroke's coup d'état.) I had not realized that something so purely lyrical could be so dramatic. Spellbound, I listened again and again to the famous abdication scene, even though it contains no suspense whatever, since Bolingbroke by that time has total control of the country. Richard is defeated, sarcastic, and self-pitying, yet his beautiful speeches make the underlying issue of the Divine Right of Kings versus realpolitik so clear and poignant that they become universal. The problem of what legitimizes government affects every age and culture.

Subsequent Richards whom I have seen never sounded so good as my memory of that undergraduate actor long ago, whose name I cannot even remember. Was he really that good, or was I just naive? Now it no longer matters, because Ralph Fiennes has surpassed him and all the others on a fast track.

Fiennes is a beautiful speaker of verse, as any actor playing Richard, Shakespeare's most poetic role, would have to be. His voice is light but resonant, with excellent diction, and dazzling variations and contrasts, despite a fast pace. The opening trial scenes were staged in a formal, ritualistic manner, against which Fiennes was flippant, even laughing at times. Yet he could also be magisterial, as when he suddenly roared at Bolingbroke, "We were not born to sue, but to command!" at the end of the first scene. He was wonderfully petulant in the deposition scene, clutching the crown to his chest like a child with a toy, yet serenely poignant in his final, death scene. I have always been impressed with Fiennes's screen acting, but it was inspiring here to see (and hear) how much more he is capable of.

The theatre at the Gainesborough Studios resembles the Théâtre National Populaire in Paris, a big unadorned space with many rows of seats on scaffolding, in front of a huge open stage. Jonathan Kent directed the show, with designs by Paul Brown, who covered the stage

with grass. Otherwise, there was little except bits of furniture brought on and off, sometimes as part of the action, as when Richard entered at the beginning on a gothic sedan chair. Nonetheless, the building itself, with its high ceilings and decaying brick walls (with holes blasted through for stage entrances and exits), provided a medieval atmosphere that was profound.

Unfortunately, the supporting cast for *Richard II* was not up to Fiennes's level. David Burke overacted horribly as Gaunt, bellowing his way through "This other Eden" until I wanted to weep in frustration. Oliver Ford Davies was a forgettable York, sibilant in speech and under-characterized. Perhaps the Almeida, which has rarely before done large cast shows, much less Shakespeare, cannot attract a company on a par with those of the RSC or RNT, or perhaps it is just too early to tell.

Like filmmaker Woody Allen, British playwright Alan Ayckbourn is a comic genius whose work is diluted by excessive productivity. Both seem compelled to come out with a new work every year, with results that are always interesting, but not always of their best quality. Nonetheless, when they get one right, the result is a comic masterpiece.

Ayckbourn's latest, *Comic Potential*,² gets it right. The play operates on many levels: as sci-fi, as a satire of television, as a rumination on the nature of acting, as a rumination on human nature, and as a Pygmalion love story. It is set in the future, when TV dramas are performed by "actoids," robots with unlimited memories and superhuman strength who can counterfeit the elemental, shallow emotions required in soap operas. The play opens in a woeful scene in a hospital room, where the four performers all turn out to be actoids, manipulated electronically from above by a boozy director and his cynical assistants. When the on-camera mother seems too restrained, a programmer turns a dial, causing her to weep hysterically.

Having totally docile and manipulable actors would indeed be the great dream of TV executives, but the joke is that the actoids develop special problems of their own. The doctor actoid has a defect, causing him to use the wrong vowels: "I'm going to remove the temporary pluster cust and umputate just above the uncle." More ominously, as it turns out, a nurse actoid named Jacie Triplethree (from its serial number JC-F31-333) starts giggling during the supposedly heartbreaking scene. The result of more than a mechanical defect, her lapse is the first sign of her becoming human; she is "corpsing" just as a human actor would if performing such tripe. She may have to be "melted down," which means having her memory bank wiped out and reprogrammed.

An officious female network executive, Carla Pepperbloom, arrives on the set with a young writer named Adam, whom she is trying to seduce. Nevertheless, Adam befriends Jacie, who is becoming more and

² *Comic Potential* will be performed in New York at the Manhattan Theatre Club from October 24 through December 31, 2000.

more independent. He would like to write for her, explaining his love for silent comedies of the 1920s, and teaching her some of their comic techniques. Thus Ayckbourn slyly sets up the first act climax, in which Jacie hits Carla with a pie in the face.

To avoid being melted down, Jacie runs off with Adam, to a series of hilarious adventures in a posh hotel, a boutique, a fancy restaurant, and even a brothel. Their growing love is unimpeded by her lack of sexual organs. ("I'm only constructed for simulated sex.") Adam is injured and nearly killed, while the vicious Carla seems about to get her revenge on Jacie, but it all ends happily, with Jacie escaping from the van taking her to the meltdown factory, to be reunited with Adam, and even beginning a new career as a director.

Bergson defined the essence of comedy as the mechanical encrusted on the vital. In this exquisitely constructed farce, this is literally true, but in reverse, with Jacie depicted as a machine coming to life. In the London production, directed by Ayckbourn himself, this basic device was maximized by the incomparable performance of Janie Dee, who won awards for her performance as Jacie. Reading the text of the play afterwards, I was amazed at how much she brought to the role. For example, the text provides no description of how Jacie is to speak. Dee used a flat, robotic monotone that still managed to be interesting and varied; her mechanical giggle in the opening scene was especially hilarious. Similarly, her movements seemed just a little too controlled, as if every gesture had to be transmitted through a series of invisible cogs and levers. She also had a touching wide-eyed look of amazed innocence, as one newly born yet fully grown. My only fear is that no other actress may ever dare play this role, after such work of farcical acting genius.

The American avant-garde director Anne Bogart began in traditional theatre, even running the Trinity Repertory Company in Providence a decade ago, but like others of her ilk shifted from scripted drama into pieces of her own devising. Her works are thus loose and rambling, like most avant-garde theatre, yet are dissimilar in being good-humored and unpretentious. Her recent work, *Cabin Pressure*, is a satire of theatre itself, including deft parody of the grandiose ideology of "performance theory," which seeks to justify every kind of theatrical experiment with fancy jargon and trendy cynicism. She is thus not afraid to bite the hand that feeds her.

I saw the production at the Freud Playhouse on the UCLA campus, but it has been touring the country, and is headed for the Edinburgh Festival. It starts with a scene from Noël Coward's *Private Lives*, which would seem the very opposite of Bogart's style of theatre, except that she has her actors perform it over and over as the audience files in. The numerous recyclings come to an end with a big, bogus curtain call. This is followed by a "discussion," in which the dishabille actors come out to hear comments from the supposed audience, who sound like the

inarticulate undergraduates in one of my dramatic lit classes. ("I liked it, I really liked it.")

Subsequent scenes send up a wide range of theatrical styles. A parody of Robert Wilson and his Theatre of Images has a man in a raincoat holding an envelope walking across the stage with excruciating slowness while a woman wearing a paper crown intones poetry. There is some eighteenth-century ballet, nineteenth-century melodrama, a 1920s silent movie, a murder mystery in the style of Agatha Christie, a scene from *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, and some modern dance à la Merce Cunningham or Twyla Tharp. The funniest moment of all, however, has a German intellectual sounding like Heiner Müller or Peter Handke, intoning performance theory with a heavy accent.

Cabin Pressure was performed by Bogart's own Saratoga International Theatre Institute (SITI) Company, who are mainly unexceptional. Their English accents in *Private Lives* were weak, for example. The avant-garde theatre of today is not an actor's medium (and certainly not a playwright's medium!), but a vehicle for directorial self-promotion. Nevertheless, *Cabin Pressure* is a rarity of its type by actually being fun.