

## Edinburgh Festival 2000

# Audience laid low by cabin fever

21/08/00

TWO questions posed repeatedly by *Cabin Pressure* are: what is an audience, and what does it want? Brian McMaster, the Edinburgh International Festival supremo, must be wondering the same thing, following the savaging of his opening theatrical offerings. One answer seems clear from this latest helping: an audience does not want a cringemaking "performance essay" on the subject.

The text of *Cabin Pressure* is stuffed with selections from theoretical works, quotations for all the family and performed extracts from *Private Lives* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*. Members of the *Private Lives* cast reappear for a self-consciously hesitant "post-show discussion" in which the punters' remarks they give voice to (the gushings of 57 ordinary Kentuckians) are supportively saccharine.

To be fair, Anne Bogart, the show's originator and director, keeps her five actors on their toes in artfully arranged toings and froings, but the underlying premise is objectionable. Audiences don't need to be told that theatre is a magical communal experience; talking about it is no substitute for feeling it. The greatest sense of unity on opening night was a collective restlessness — old men snoozed and whole rows headed for the exit.

But there is life on the fringe. At the Traverse, Jeroen Willems is giving a tour-de-force performance in *Voices*, a one-man show based on the writings of the Italian film-maker Pier Paolo Pasolini and statements made by the former chairman of the board of Shell, Cor Herkströter. Hunched at a long

### Theatre

*Cabin Pressure*  
ROYAL LYCEUM  
*Voices*  
TRAVERSE  
*Hopeless Games*  
KOMEDIA@SOUTHSIDE

banqueting table strewn with the remnants of a feast, the besuited Dutch actor portrays representatives from our not-so-great corporate age: a twitching intellectual, an inscrutable criminal tycoon, his half-admiring, half-revolted sidekick, a vampish stripper with a Faustian parable about power and the honey-tongued Herkströter himself, pleading the relative impotence of multinationals. Willems is so facially expressive that a crocodile smile or bat of the eyelid can send up whatever has just issued from his mouth.

*Hopeless Games* by the German-Russian clown collective Do-Theatre, a returning hit from last year, never quite matches its extraordinary opening *coup de théâtre* in which a headless, coated being waddles across the stage, while a clothes-rack stirs into life. Although the tenor of the wordless melancholic sequences of dance and movement that follow is clear, there isn't enough of a storyline to prevent some of the twists in mood from seeming capricious. For all that, though, this is precisely the kind of theatre-affirming import that the main festival urgently needs.

Tickets: Royal Lyceum, 0131 473 2000; Traverse, 0131 228 1404; Komedia@Southside, 0131 667 2212

Dominic Cavendish



Poor service: Stephen Webber, foreground, with Ellen Lauren and Barney O'Hanlon, in *Cabin Pressure*

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