



Picks and pans: It's well performed, but Cabin

The pressure gets too much

Theatre has become increasingly sidelined at Edinburgh, reports JOHN PETER, and the strain is starting to show

I have been thinking, enviously, what a wonderful time the music critics must be having up here. Look at the choice before them. Dohnányi and the Cleveland Orchestra. Boulez and the LSO. Mackerras and the Czech Philharmonic. Schiff playing Bach. Gunter Wänd conducting Bruckner. The Scottish Opera's new Rheingold, plus Anne Evans, Brendel, Terfel ...

I am sorry about this long list, but it helps to demonstrate just how much the theatre has become a stepchild of the Festival. With all due respect, and so forth, to the companies from Dublin, Stockholm and Hamburg, the theatre programme has nothing comparable to offer to the musical line-up. I know, and agree, that the purpose of the Festival is not to present unchallenging, comfortable, mainstream drama; but the eccentricity of some of this year's choices could threaten its already beleaguered reputation.

If Barbaric Comedies is not doing well, it is not because of a couple of sex scenes, but because it is a rowdy, sometimes obscure account of a minor play by an important but little-known author, and its rewards do not match its immense length. Word of mouth is important in Edinburgh, but I cannot imagine anybody urging this one on a friend.

Which brings me to the latest official offering: **Cabin Pressure** (Lyceum), by the Siti Company of New York, conceived and directed by Anne Bogart and "created and written" by the company. (Note the scrupulous but vague distribution of credits.) It is about the relationship between actor and audience: a subject that tends to worry people in the theatre when they have neither a decent text nor a viable theatrical idea to hand.

The five actors (3m 2f) are already on stage, chattering away, as you go in: a device that serves to massage the cosy idea that the theatre goes on, like another form of life, independently of your presence. The "dialogue" consists of snatches of old plays, which either you recognise or you don't; of jokey, cheeky

chatty, breezy and insufferably bland panel discussions, which, I suspect, are meant to make fun of chatty, breezy and insufferably bland panel discussions and thus inevitably disappear up their own arguments; and of the actors trying to share with the audience the experience, wisdom and bewilderment they get from their work. From these you learn that the theatre gives you "all that has ever been in this moment"; that it "asks you to participate intellectually and emotionally"; that what the actor does is "play with his humanness"; that Shakespeare said that actors were monstrous (he did not); et cetera, *ad absurdum*.

What you get here is the opposite of the star-struck spectator sucking up to the actor because he wants to feel part of the theatre. No, this is the self-important, navel-gazing actor snuggling up to the audience for reassurance and admiration. Impersonation is a lie, isn't it? But still, it's important, isn't it? You share it with me, don't you?

This earnest, self-conscious, ingratiating show, played with immense skill by the five actors, will tell you nothing of value about the theatre. If you want to understand something about how the theatre functions, how it feeds on both actors and spectators, go and see *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Pirandello's *Six Characters*, Molnar's *The Guardsman*, Stoppard's *The Real Inspector Hound* and Frayn's *Noises Off*. If you want to know how your presence, your intelligence or stupidity, your attention or indifference affect the actor when he's playing, try to talk to one who does not much like talking about his work. If he does talk to you, you will learn more in five minutes than from this whole 90-minute exhibition.

PS: I have no idea what the title means.

PPS: Such a show won't do much for the theatre.

The Fringe, meanwhile, goes on its unpredictable, infuriating, intoxicating way. You follow your hunches; you win some, you lose some. I struck lucky with *History of Communism as Told for the Mentally Ill* (Gateway), a company creation by the Eugene Ionesco Theatre of Moldova. The idea is that, shortly before Stalin's death, a new doctor tries to cure the patients of a Moscow asylum by enlightening them on the blessings of Soviet communism. Of course, the cure does not work because this is a Stalinist community writ small, in which the braindead rule the mad.

The acting is as broad as it is wide, but that is not the point: this is a thrillingly brutal and humane burlesque that stabs you into laughter. Finally Stalin dies, then appears, com-

need him as much as he needs them, and joins them in a wild celebratory dance. This show is quite safe for Stalinists of any age: they won't get the point.

Molly Bloom (venue C) is a musical dream based on the final section of Joyce's *Ulysses*. A grand piano serves as Molly's bed, and Anna Zapparoli, a voluptuous woman, half-English, half-Italian, with a pleasant mezzo voice, sings 18 songs to music by her husband, Mario Borciani, who leads a three-piece band on the aforesaid piano.

The music does not always suit the mood: rap, for example, sounds too hard and aggressive for the private pleasures Molly is recollecting. The words, if my memory still functions, are all Joyce's own, which actually made me want to read the book again.

Artaud in Wonderland (Southside) is a disappointment. The Lewis Carroll connection, which sounds so bizarrely promising, never quite materialises: "I am a spiritual Alice exiled from Wonderland" is as meaningless a phrase as they come. Damian Wright's Artaud is a hero and a martyr: you do not get the sinister young angel so brilliantly described by Anaïs Nin. References to his electric-shock treatment are simplistic, you do not find out much about his theatre and his insane admiration for Hitler is treated as near-comedy.

At the Assembly Rooms, Rodney Bewes returns with a new solo show: his own adaptation of *The Diary of a Nobody*. This is a gem of a performance. Bewes, like the Grossmiths, achieves the seemingly impossible: irresistibly entertaining comedy based on tedium.

Mr Pooter, with his harmless pomposity, his not-quite-harmless snobbery, his demented attempts at home improvements, his batty pieces of worldly wisdom and his ghastly puns, embodies the invincible respectability of the English urban lower middle class now almost eradicated by prosperity, truculent public services, hip-hop politicians, football, television and the digital culture.

What a pity. Since the Restoration of 1660, class has been the lifeblood of the English theatre. If the prime minister really brings what he calls class war, with all its wonderful semiotics of body language, clothes and accent, to an end, what will playwrights write about? Ah, well.

Meanwhile, observe Bewes, alternately solemn and twinkling, both actor and entertainer, handling his audience like a master. It is not, praise the Lord, an intellectual show, but it tells you something quite real about the relationship between actor and audience — which