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One character made little sense

TEDDINGTON Theatre Club's production of Stephen Poliakoff's disturbing play Strawberry Fields, achieved only partial success at Hampton Court Theatre under John Buckingham's direction, which I saw on Sunday.

The basic problem lay in the director's unwillingness to insist on intelligibility from one of the main characters, Kevin. Admittedly, this man is 30 years old, and considerably disturbed mentally, but to allow actor Kevin Browne to punctuate every phrase with a quick intake of breath made the sense of what he was saying very obscure, particularly as he tended to gabble at times — this is not characteristic of Mr. Browne, whom I know to have a fine understanding of the weight of words and the rhythm of their delivery.

This major imbalance meant that the burden carried by Annabel Giles, as the ice-cold fanatic Charlotte, was almost impossibly heavy; nevertheless, she rose to the challenge magnificently, and the implacability of her psychotic execution of the gentle Nick was terrifying — but quite spoiled by the use of music as a fade instead of the crescendo of traffic noise.

Nick was played superbly by David Lewsey, whose every word was audible, but who needs more discipline in stillness when other characters are speaking.

There were two fine performances in small parts from Georgina Davis as the middle-class bigot Mrs. Roberts and from Lorna Richardson as a cafe cleaner with pretensions to higher things.

Gary Jones made something of the role of the Kid, a drug-dependent 17-year-old, and David Tickner made a brief appearance as PC Taylor, the first victim of Charlotte's gun.

I was much impressed by Mart Stonelake's ingenious set based on two revolving walls — it was always apt and caught the atmosphere of motorway England admirably.

The play could, I feel, have been more disturbing still, had there been a tighter control from the director.

GEORGE ALLAN

STRAWBERRY FIELDS

1980

Surrey Comet 16/8/80

Thumbing a lift for a nightmare

STEPHEN POLIAKOFF'S 1977 play, Strawberry Fields which he wrote when resident playwright at the National seems to be failing to draw the audiences at Teddington Theatre Club's Hampton Court Theatre.

At least this seemed to be the pattern on the opening night on Saturday (the piece runs until this Saturday).

Why this should be it is hard to say. Perhaps the play's theme—the turning of the optimistic Sixties into the more cynical Seventies—may not have seemed attractive enough to entice people from their gardens or television. Or, possibly, the comparatively new name of the author or the fact that the cast is mainly drawn from Youth Action Theatre members or ex-members may have something to do with it.

Be that as it may John Buckingham's direction is both swift and sure and the only two criticisms of the entire production are of the leading lady Annabel Giles who, on the opening night, I found difficult to hear at times and although undeniably a very beautiful girl did not really succeed in putting the part completely across.

There were also, I thought, some rather clumsy set changes. This apart sterling work is being done by a hard-working cast, Kevin Browne and Georgina Davis in particular and Michael Elgey's lighting is excellent.

Sound performances are also given by David Lewsey, David Tickner, Lorna Richardson and Gary Jones.

The story tells of a young student teacher who thumbs a lift from a seemingly innocent - looking couple which turns out to be something of a nightmare journey.

JA

Fanatics on the road to destruction

In addition to providing welcome escape routes from real life, the drama should also reflect what is happening in society. Many would argue that television drama does this so often and so well that there is no need for social realism in the theatre.

But some writers prefer to put their views across to a live audience and Stephen Poliakoff is one. His best known stab at social realism, Strawberry Fields, is being done at Hampton Court Theatre this week, under the direction of John Buckingham.

Written in 1977 it reflects the growing threat of National Front agitation in the seventies through the agency of Kevin and Charlotte, the precise nature of whose mission is never divulged, but who are travelling north to perpetrate some act of terrorism in the name of nationalistic fervour.

Nick, an affable liberal-minded young teacher, hitches a lift on the motorway and gradually cottons on to the sinister nature of the bandwagon he has boarded. After the cold-blooded murder of an interfering policeman, Nick sets about seriously trying to dissuade Charlotte, the more intelligent and susceptible of the two fanatics, from further acts of violence. He also fancies her, which introduces a welcome strain of sexual tension.

Thanks to the excellent casting of Annabel Giles as Charlotte and David Lewsey as Nick, this prickly pair prove perfectly plausible and give the play its dramatic impetus: the voice of reason versus the fanatical will of iron. These are thoughtful, well-judged performances, echoing two distinct facets of today's youth.

The role of Kevin, half-blind and half-baked, not the sort of bloke you's trust with a bread knife let alone a gun, was played by Kevin Browne. The director probably wanted it that way, but I found Kevin's over-emphatic, staccato delivery extremely trying after a while, though you couldn't help admiring the intensity of his performance.

Nice cameos by Lorna Richardson as a garrulous waitress, Georgina Davis as an NF stereotype, and Gary Jones as an unwanted hanger-on.

John Buckingham's meticulous production ensures that the lighting (Michael Elgey) and utility sets (Mart Stonelake) evoke the starkness and menace of the narrative in visual terms. It depends a lot on mood and atmosphere for its success, because one is often left in the dark plot-wise. You are never sure whom Charlotte and Kevin represent nor what they are about.

The fact that this intentional denial of the facts doesn't alienate you from the piece is a tribute to John Buckingham and his company. — NS.