

Reviews: Theatre

# Futuristic chatter is indulgent and limp

EVENING AT THE TALK HOUSE  
NATIONAL THEATRE  
★★★★☆

Wallace Shawn doesn't write easy plays. One of his most revived works, the 1990 monologue 'Fever', is a sort of sweaty dream speech designed to make liberals squirm. His plays are described as 'challenging, oblique', 'contradictory'. Sounds like bloody hard work, doesn't it? At his best, Shawn can rattle our brains and crawl under our skin but this world premiere is an indulgent and dramatically limp affair.

Director Ian Rickson is a pro at creating darkly simmering plays and he's thrown everything possible at this. Lights flash ominously and the Quay brother's elegant set (all tall windows and classy furnishings) seems to grow colder as the night goes on. But despite these attempts at a creeping sense of tension and loss, the show feels strangely flat.

The play unfolds in the 'Talk House'; a fancy (but fading) club renowned for its tasty snacks. This is where writer Robert (Josh Hamilton) and his arty pals – including a producer, writer and actor – have



■ Cast of Talk House picture: Simon Shepherd

gathered for a ten year reunion. Over one long and increasingly uncomfortable evening, these old friends talk – and talk and talk.

As the smug chatter winds on, we discover the play is set in a curdled future; a time when citizens work as murderers and nearly everyone has dabbled in 'foreign targeting'. These easy discussions about murder are meant to sting those who read about 'foreign' wars, whilst delicately sipping cappuccinos. The cruel way the gang overlooks their badly beaten friend Dick (Wallace Shawn) speaks of a time when

each person – each country – is a (self-preserving) island. Juicy ideas, then, but there's so little drama, spark or danger.

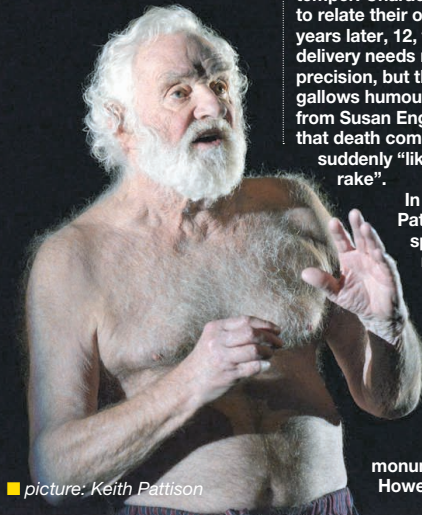
The actors look out of sorts and lurch between brittle debate and awkward dialogue. There's a stormy encounter between Hamilton's slimy playwright and Sinéad Matthews' suicidal waitress but their pain seems lifted from elsewhere. Shawn speaks little but, when he does, he sounds hollowed out – filled with billious loathing. If only his play had been packed with such potent venom.

Miriam Gillinson

## Musing on death; you'll lose the will to live

HERE WE GO  
NATIONAL THEATRE  
★★★★☆

It's life and death in Caryl Churchill's new play, a 45-minute Beckettian triptych on mortality. At 77, she can still be relied upon to challenge in



■ picture: Keith Pattison

both content and form, with her latest effort guaranteed to polarise.

Well-wishers gather after a funeral, conveying the dead man's identity via patented Churchillian fragmented dialogue. He was anarchistic but an MP, once good-looking, hated dogs, loved cats, had a temper. Characters break off to relate their own deaths, 26 years later, 12, tomorrow. The delivery needs more clarity and precision, but there's wry, vivid gallows humour, particularly from Susan Engel, who quips that death comes at you suddenly "like stepping on a rake".

In part two, Patrick Godfrey's spotlight, half-naked elderly man is trapped in a pitch-black liminal space – a striking, painterly image created by Vicki Mortimer's monumental design. However, his afterlife

philosophising doesn't quite match up to the towering visual. Is there a guiding force? Do we get what we deserve? What about ghostly hauntings, Hell, reincarnation? Another go "would be welcome", except for the risk of losing his essential identity. Gently probing rather than gripping.

The closing section is where some viewers may lose the will to live. Godfrey's invalid is painstakingly aided in the process of dressing and undressing by his stoic carer (Hazel Holder), again and again, in an endless Sisyphian loop. Poignant and effectively purgatorial, but the impact dissipates over a gruelling 20 minutes.

The fatal error is programming an understated piece that needs immersive intimacy in the cavernous proscenium arch Lyttelton. Churchill's elliptical work leaves us in an appropriately unsettling void, but Dominic Cooke's remote staging means too many of her ideas are merely communicated, rather than brought to full dramatic life.

Marianka Swain

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