

## REVIEW

# There's noir in the red barn but too few thrills

## BRIDGET GALTON

finds a new thriller by Hampstead playwright David Hare offers style over substance

**THE RED BARN**  
NATIONAL THEATRE  
★★★★☆

What pushes a decent man to commit terrible acts? That's the project of David Hare's psychological thriller, based on one of Georges Simenon's many novels.

Set in Manhattan and rural Connecticut at the fag end of the 60s, four middle-class suburbanites returning home from a boozy Mad Men-style party struggle through a snowstorm and one gets lost.

This act of God plus an act of will (coveting his dead friend's wife) adds up to the trigger for buttoned up lawyer Donald Dodd to fall apart.

Married to the dauntingly omniscient and serene, Ingrid, (Hope Davis) Mark Strong's decidedly beta Donald oozes repression and later murderous frustration.

Nixon's in the White House, the swinging sixties have swung, but unlike playboy college pal Ray, conservative Don has missed the sexual revolution.

Realising he's lived his whole life 'with the handbrake on' he embarks on an affair with



■ Mark Strong and Elizabeth Debicki in *The Red Barn*

Elizabeth Debicki's glacial Mona.

Despite Tom Gibbons' atmospheric, portentous score and Hare's masterfully controlled revelations, the prodigiously prolific Simenon was never much for a plot.

With little tension or jeopardy the thrill of this thriller lies in what he called 'looking through the keyhole' at the instincts of others.

This is emphasised by Robert Icke's cinematic staging noirishly framing the action with

black shutters to close in on scenes.

But these characters are so clenched and shallow it feels more like examining frozen specimens under a microscope.

While there's much to enjoy in Icke's stylish, visual staging, Hare's insight and turn of phrase, and a trio of watchable performances, *The Red Barn* leaves your heart cold, pulse steady, and head clear.

You can't help feeling there could have been a better vehicle for Strong's remarkable talents.

## REVIEW

# Insightful, funny, perfection

**THE BOOK CLUB**  
KING'S HEAD THEATRE  
★★★★★

PRs can be prone to rather over-egg the pudding they have been charged with selling. Oddly, the press release in advance of Roger Hall's hilarious *The Book Club* seemed to have a shortage even of powdered egg.

Debra is a woman of a certain age. She is financially secure, married to Wally (a hard working lawyer, paranoid about youngsters snapping at his career heels and training for a marathon). Her children have let the nest and Debs is wondering what life is all about.

In this electric one woman show, she is played by the uber-buoyant Amanda Muggleton (perhaps best known to UK audiences as Prisoner Cell Block H's Chrissie Latham). Debs introduces us to the members of her book club and mimics all of them in wince inducing detail. During the course of the play she produces a dozen regional and class accents to perfection, mocks affectations and punctures pomposities.

The dialogue is peppered with funny and insightful one-liners: "Just when my children grew up,

my Mum became one." The pure physicality of Amanda's performance is a spectacle in itself.

She introduces bestselling author Michael Gordon to the club and, well, one thing leads to another to another to a missing sock with a hole in (inevitably discovered by Wally in the communal laundry bag). Debs gives us elation, confusion, guilt, lying, betrayal – all brilliantly portrayed by an actor at the top of her game.

In one scene she tells of a clandestine overnight stay in a motel with lover Michael and Debs' disappointment as he discovers that the room has access to Sky sport. Muggleton manages to reduce the audience to helpless laughter.

I have never seen a work induce so many spontaneous contributions from the sell out audience – whoops of recognition, delight and shouted advice.

Roger Hall has updated his 1999 work (this is the first time it has been performed in London) and there is a superb reference to a breast feeding baby looking like Trump.

Go and see this before the inevitable transfer up West.

David Winskill



■ Amanda Muggleton in *The Book Club* at the King's Head Theatre

## REVIEW

# Anne-Marie Duff is magnificently complex

**OIL**  
ALMEIDA THEATRE  
★★★★☆

How has oil, that precious but dwindling resource, changed our way of life and what might come next? Ella Hickson's long-gestating play tackles those big questions in a sprawling, magic-realist epic, stretching from 19th century Cornwall to a dystopian future. If occasionally unwieldy, it's still a rich work, and an all-too-rare female odyssey.

The play is anchored by Anne-Marie Duff's fiercely uncompromising May. We first meet her as a pregnant housewife, desperate to escape candlelit toil and oppressive in-laws.

A visiting American offers a revolutionary source of light, warmth and independence: kerosene. May –

never ageing – then pops up as a serving girl in 1908 Iran, where the British are trying to control resources; a Hampstead-based CEO in the Seventies, learning that Gaddafi's Libya is seizing her oil company; in Baghdad in 2021, arguing Western policy; and in 2051, where, coming full circle, another stranger appears with a new energy source, this time harvested from the moon.

Hickson deconstructs everything from feminism – May is increasingly liberated, but isolated – to imperial land grabs, capitalism and technology distancing us from primal experiences.

May's co-dependent relationship with anagrammatically named daughter Amy parallels colonial attitudes, and we're asked to examine

whether we mask greed and ambition behind the excuse of making a better world for our children.

It occasionally strays into lecture, but Duff is an eternal fuel source, powering the play with her magnificently complex May: carnal, caustic, loving and steely. Yolanda Kettle is excellent as her wilful, narcissistic child, and there's good support from Ellie Haddington's curmudgeonly matriarch, Patrick Kennedy's smooth-talking cad, Lara Sawalha's challenging local, and Nabil Elouahabi's shrew emissary Carrie Cracknell's stylish production is constantly absorbing, with Vicki Mortimer providing everything from a painterly tableau to a feast of Formica.

Vivid and unsettling.

Marianka Swain



■ Yolanda Kettle and Anne-Marie Duff in *Oil*

Picture: RICHARD H SMITH