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The White Crow at the Theatre Royal, York



Dr Baum (Sonia Petrovna) interrogates Adolf Eichmann (Robert Pickavance)

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Forty-nine years ago next Monday a certain Ricardo Klement, living obscurely in Buenos Aires, was identified by a group of Nazi-hunters as the man responsible for arranging the transport of millions of European Jews to the death camps. His true name was Adolf Eichmann.

He was smuggled out of the country — illegally, but only diplomatic pedants protested — and in Jerusalem he was tried, found guilty of crimes hitherto thought unimaginable, hanged, cremated and his ashes dropped into the sea.

It is all too easy to call such men evil and leave it at that, but so many questions then remain unanswered, including the fundamental one of “How did this person come to commit such crimes?” Donald Freed’s gripping drama, subtitled “Eichmann in Jerusalem”, presents us with an attempt to understand.

A glass-walled room occupies the centre of the Theatre Royal Studio stage, but this is not the famous glass booth that enclosed Eichmann during his trial. The trial is still months ahead; what Freed shows us is an exploration of his state of mind by a Dr Baum.

She is an imaginary character hoping to penetrate Eichmann’s craftily sustained defence that, when sitting at his desk in Vienna planning the timetables to keep the death trains going, he was a mere functionary obeying orders.

The room has bars on all sides, often obscuring facial expressions. But Robert Pickavance’s gaunt features unnervingly resemble Eichmann’s, so that I wondered why Damian Cruden, the director, should want to hinder us seeing them.

The answer emerges after the interval when the glass walls have vanished and we in the audience have, so to speak, entered the room and become that much closer to Sonia Petrovna's Baum as she urgently seeks the answers beneath the answers.

She may seem cool and collected, but with each failed attempt to flush out some wisp of pity from her prisoner her objectivity weakens.

We watch Pickavance apparently playing their grim game on her terms, only to see him wriggle around and outwit her yet again. His is a riveting performance, mocking her, mocking Himmler (never Hitler), and never permitting himself to show humanity as she defines it.

Cruden's direction expertly monitors the tension, aided by the half-heard sounds of moving train and song. Some people, Freed argues, will always defend their crimes by playing the obeying-orders card, which gives Eichmann's statement — "I am guilty only in the eyes of God" — an unnervingly contemporary ring.

The White Crow

May 12, 2009



Production: The White Crow
Venue: York Theatre Royal
Rating: ***

Donald Freed's play portrays Adolf Eichmann's interrogation upon apprehension in Argentina. Eichmann, (commonly acknowledged as the "architect of the Holocaust") is loudly rendered by Robert Pickavance in a play which polemically seeks to re-evaluate his contribution to the genocide and re-establish his sense of humanity.

The performance is sustained by just two actors for the vast majority of the play's two-hour exploration of the psychology of a war criminal. Whilst Sonia Petrovna convinces as Dr Baum, the unconventional interrogator, at times the tension and essential connection between the two characters is made too explicit and thus less effective; something exacerbated by the harrowing subject matter.

Impressive, however, was the use of stage space, and the shift of set between the first and second acts. The interrogation cell housed the first half, with the audience readily aware of our act as a voyeur: peeping through shutters. The glass windows enabled the viewer to create a conceptual distance between Eichmann's complicity in atrocity and the old man shuffling before us in loose pants and large spectacles.

The crux of the second act though, in which Eichmann is whipped, prostrate on the floor, was a rather blunt touch.

The White Crow is showing at the York Theatre Royal until Saturday 23rd May