

30/06/2009 Tales from the side of the stage: Alan Bennett's 'Talking Heads'

The English Theatre Berlin's new staging of the British cult classic, "Talking Heads," embraces the monologues' marginalized characters with aplomb.

The curtain never fully opened at the English Theatre Berlin's presentation of three monologues from Alan Bennett's *Talking Heads* last week. That is to say, when actress Kim Eustice began her account about her unwitting marriage to a slaughterhouse worker-cum-murderer, she spoke from only a sliver of the stage – her movement relegated to a cramped kitchenette that, tellingly, had no signs of life other than a mess of cleaning products and a pair of brand new green rubber gloves. The rest of the stage was dark.

The show's Spartan set design, like the rest of the production, is perfectly in step with the British playwright's tales of the twisted underside of supposed normalcy. Bennett's series of monologues, originally written for the BBC in the late 1980s and then expanded into a second set of monologues in the late 1990s, movingly take up the stories of the marginal, the abject and the usually unheard. Though his characters may seem, at first, to be in the middle of things (suburbia, supportive communities, the lower-middle class), in reality, they sit firmly at the sidelines. These are people who have slipped through the cracks of society's "social net" and who speak, in turn, about a society that is slowly cracking up.

Take, for instance, Eustice's abandoned, neat freak housewife, Marjory, in the production's opening monologue *The Outside Dog*. Left at home while her husband goes to work, in her words, to slit "some defenceless creature's throat," Marjory is a sardonic ball of rage, soothed only by her husband Stuart's occasional offers of sex. But as Stuart becomes increasingly implicated in an investigation regarding serial murders that are happening around the neighbourhood, Marjory becomes ever angrier with the circumstances of her life – her husband's progressively erratic and violent behaviour, the incessant yapping of his mutt, Tina, the aggressive attentions of the paparazzi and the police's invasive intrusions into her house. With no one to vent her emotions to but herself, Marjory veers between seething ire, sudden vulnerability and, at times, utter bewilderment at her own situation. Eventually, she resorts to shutting off all the lights and sitting alone in her living room, pretending not to hear the reporters' calls begging her to tell "her side of the story." By the end of her monologue, she is completely immersed in her tiny, compulsively clean, world.

This is not to say that Bennett, or the cast, present the characters as innocent victims. On the contrary, most of the series' characters are deeply unlikable, and at times disturbing. For all her unluckiness (few, one hopes, intend to marry psychopaths), Marjory is also implicated in her own situation, at the very least because of her passivity. And, to her credit, Eustice does not shy away from her character's unpleasantness. In Eustice's hands, Marjorie is a modern-day harpy. And whenever she briefly stops grouching and lets down her guard, these moments of open emotionality come as a great relief.

[!break!]

Jesse Inman, in his role as Wilfred, a reformed paedophile living under a false identity and working as a maintenance man at a local park, is tasked with embodying an even more troubling character. At the heart of Wilfred's monologue, *Playing Sandwiches*, a reference to a kids clapping game he made up, is Wilfred's struggle between his appreciation of children and his tendency to sexually abuse them: "I didn't foist them off like grown-ups do," Wilfred explains of his particular relationship with kids, "I looked at them. I listened to them." Yet, while Bennett can be credited with writing a more complex portrait of paedophilia than many (there are many ways in which Wilfred is humanized and endearing), there is something cloying about this monologue. This is in part because the story is so fraught with familiar clichés about paedophilia. Wilfred, for instance, is obsessed with candy – specifically liquorice allsorts that he uses, occasionally, to bond with children – and even formerly held a job as a "lollipop man," the English term for a school crossing guard. His characterization also plays into the well-worn trope of the meek,



almost childlike paedophile who is somehow ill adjusted to adult life (for a recent example think Jackie Earle Haley's character in the 2006 movie Little Children). Inman's deliberately soft voice and timid demeanour reinforce this association and ultimately produce a hackneyed, yet acutely creepy, portrait.

After the first two, difficult monologues, the show's final act, "Nights in the Gardens of Spain" played by the superb Monica Solem, is deeply refreshing. Of all the monologues in ETB's production, the story of Rosemary, the winning but lonely housewife married to a man with a dark side, is the most uplifting.

Rosemary's tale begins when she discovers her neighbour Fran in her home, shortly after Fran has murdered her long-abusive husband. Deciding that they are never sure "what constitutes an emergency," the two have a cup of tea before calling 999. Their sweet and lasting relationship takes off from there.

Of course, to focus on the upside of Rosemary's story would be to miss the point of Bennett's overarching narrative thrust. But by the end of Talking Heads, the audience was clearly ready to mine Rosemary's story, recounted with thrilling poignancy by Solem, for optimism. On this muggy Berlin evening, they laughed uproariously at her acerbic jokes and listened attentively to her confessions of the mutual love between her and Fran. Whether tenderly handling a tomato Fran gave her or remembering how the two held hands, it was impossible to resist succumbing to Rosemary's hopeful attitude.

Yet, while we are allowed to briefly revel in Rosemary's genuine expressions of happiness, Bennett never lets us forget that she is, in the end, condemned to her life as a submissive, forgotten wife. As her spotlight finally fades away to darkness, we are reminded that, as the play's title suggests, her monologue is just that: a monologue. We may keep Rosemary company as she speaks but at the end of the day, we, as an audience, can offer her no reciprocity, no kind words or touch. She is left, finally, alone. A talking head.

Talking Heads by Alan Bennett is running June 30 and July 1 to 5th at 8 p.m. at the English Theatre Berlin: <http://www.etberlin.de/>

Jessica Dorrance/Expatica