Playing with Politics?

Sun, 09/01/2005 - 23:00

Rachel Hodgins reviews Playing with Fire by David Edgar, National Theatre to 21 October

The past few years have seen a welcome revival of political theatre in Britain. David Edgar started his career as one of a generation of political playwrights and, unlike many of his contemporaries of 30 years ago, has been producing political drama since then.

Edgar’s Destiny (1976) dealt with the rise of the far-right and sought to expose the National Front as a fascist organisation. Playing with Fire covers some of the same ground 30 years on, but this time Edgar has a more complicated message to convey about the state of the nation.

The play opens as New Labour apparatchik Alex Clifton – first politicised by Live Aid and with a history of feminist activism – is dispatched up to the fictional borough of Wyverdale to introduce performance indicators and diversity criteria to a solidly Old Labour, and failing, council. Edgar makes good use of the scope for humour in the ensuing clash of ideas, and it isn?t until the end of the first act that the real dangers of the incompetence of the Labour group, and the cuts and targeted spending they are forced to implement, become apparent. When a young white man is killed in a fight in an Asian area, the council?s planned ?celebrations of faiths? on St George?s day turns into a race riot.

Edgar’s perspective on what happens is unusual and sometimes frustrating when the violence erupts, the audience has spent most of its time watching meetings about New Labour local government reform. The second act doesn?t bring us much closer to an understanding. Our information comes from the soul searching of the councillors and their horrified adviser, and from the testimony of many of the characters at the subsequent inquiry.

?Britannia?, a BNP-like party that wins two councillors after the riots, blames showy spending of EU grants on Asian areas. A muslim community elder blames a health project for white prostitutes set up on a mainly Asian estate, and the racial abuse suffered at the hands of local football fans. Alex blames herself, the Labour council leader despairs of everything he has ever done in politics. The audience is left piecing together what has gone on off-stage from these subjective and half formed impressions.

Edgar’s understanding of how Wyverdale ? and Burnley, and Oldham ? got to the point of such racial segregation and hostility is also unclear. When we see glimpses of Wyverdale?s citizens they appear in the first act as jovial stereotypes and in the second as groups divided by insubstantial cultural categorisations and united by a number of common needs. Edgar is clearly not a fan of identity politics. But while cross-cutting racial and gender oppressions come in for some interesting scrutiny in several scenes, the issue of class is left to the Labour Council leader to refer to in the most oblique and emotive of speeches about public funding and the days when politicians stayed within range of the people their decisions were affecting.

New Labour gets an easy ride, too. Apart from some gentle teasing in the first act and some sympathy-
eliciting hand-wringing in the second, Alex and her minister boss are portrayed as genuine people trying to make Wyverdale perform better for its own good. Edgar’s decision not to look at the international or even the national context for what is happening in this one borough means that there can be no real analysis of where Alex’s misguided targets have come from. Racial tensions can only be explained by individual incidents on the estates and a local segregationist housing policy. “The cause that matters is the cause you can address?” repeat Alex and her minister, and Edgar seems to have decided to keep the field of his search for causes to a manageable size.

Playing with Fire is clever and entertaining. Anyone working in or near local government will recognise that Edgar has managed to create a very watchable drama about the results of the past few decades of reforms.

In the current context, when the bombings in London, an increasingly racist political and media debate about citizenship, and more racist asylum policies have made his subject matter more and more relevant, Playing with Fire seems to skirt around the edges of the debate.

Source URL: https://fifthinternational.org/content/playing-politics