



Spellbound by sensuality

Ismene Brown reviews *Play Without Words* at the Lyttelton Theatre

Ismene Brown

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Beaufort Street in south-west London is a most desirable neighbourhood: tall, white terrace houses, bright-red phone boxes, silent squares echoing with the clippety-clop

stiletto heels of sophisticated Chelsea girls and their dopey Etonian boyfriends.

The Salisbury pub nearby is deliciously low, as Professor Higgins might say, brown-stained, old-fashioned, the one place where all sorts meet. Manservants may sit alongside potential employers, wideboys may eye up young ladies in Hardy Amies. The sinewy sounds of jazz thread enticingly through the air and *The Avengers* are on TV. Matthew Bourne brings the 1960s to life in his astonishing *Play Without Words* at the Lyttelton Theatre, in an atmosphere that's almost unbelievably erotic.

This is about sex - no, sexxx, since the story's done in triplicate.

It would be hard to guess from the sweet, childlike naughtiness of his Nutcracker!, currently at Sadler's Wells, that Bourne could have come up with something as darkly adult as this. It's a sort of theatrical grenade, of vivid surface attractions but explosively complicated in content, and so exactly conveyed that it denies the need for words at all.

Made experimentally for the National last year, Play Without Words is not a dance but a drama of dazzlingly choreographed body language. An ardent tribute to 1960s new-wave cinema, particularly Joseph Losey's *The Servant*, it evokes the disturbing ghosts of young Dirk Bogardes and Albert Finneys - but Bourne poses their questions again, with the awareness of 40 years on.

It was class war waged through sex, and the first moment has the menace of mythic poetry. A louche man in a checked shirt plays his trumpet in the night, calling, like Pan on his pipes, on natural forces. Enter the people who will be his puppets - the posh new resident of Beaufort Street, Anthony, his girlfriend Glenda, and the insidious couple hired as servants.

But the coup de theatre is that we have three of each - and not quite clones, either. It almost overwhelms the senses just to watch the trio of Glendas strutting about with sinuous hips in their pale suits and lipstick. But the actresses fascinatingly invest the character with faintly different overtones - sultry Michela Meazza, vulnerable Saranne Curtin, wary Emily Piercy - as if choice were a mirrorball.

Sex and class revolutions batter Anthony's house: from below stairs, where the menacing Prentice (half Dirk Bogarde, half gutter Iago) and his slutty assistant Sheila hatch their plans, while out in the street the checked-shirt job screws any class, any sex, anywhere.

The flirting is spellbinding. Prentice dressing/undressing his master is one of the great comic dances; Glenda having her cigarette lit, half-naked Sheila trailing her foot over the slaving Anthony in the kitchen, these are details of irresistible allure, and the cast are uniformly magnetic.

Terry Davies's jazz score is quite superb, delivered by a splendid band side-stage. Lez Brotherston's revolving stairs are a brilliant, deceiving, all-in-one, upstairs-downstairs, inside-outside, Earth/Hell.

Because this is all about great forces, not domestic ones. Hell is out there, in anarchy, in the breaking of social rules - and yet the '60s brought freedom and progress, too, didn't they?

- In rep until March 6. Tickets: 020 7452 3400

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