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First Night reviews - Theatre

Woyzeck

Jeremy Kingston at the Gate, W11

THEA SHARROCK inaugurates her new regime here with a truly thrilling production by Daniel Kramer of Büchner's drama. Written just before the author's death from typhus at the age of 23, the work survives in five versions, leaving a director unusually free to discard minor characters and even entire scenes. So Kramer leaves out the Idiot and the scene at the morgue, and it is not a group of children but Marie, Woyzeck's mistress, who asks the old woman to tell a story and is rewarded with the bleakest fable yet told.

The play's 24 short scenes, darting from parade ground to barrack room, from street to a remote pond, throb with an Expressionist tremor that Büchner created 80 years before that "ism" received its name. His fusilier hero is persecuted on all sides. Condemned as immoral for fathering an illegitimate child, he is patronised by his officer, cuckolded by the Drum Major and fed nothing but dried peas by an army doctor conducting scientific experiments. Understandably, the world seems to him to be splitting open on all sides, spewing forth weird sounds and voices urging "Kill".

Kramer emphasises the inhumanity of a regime that treats Woyzeck as a puppet by introducing a fierce alarm bell to regulate his duties. Edward Hogg's haunted, timid, trembling soldier races off the stage, races on again, scrambles on to his red tricycle and frantically circles the stage to reach his next appalling task.

The tricycle is an obvious oddity in a play written in 1837, and it is the chief anachronism. But after the initial surprise (and why shouldn't we be faced with surprises?), it becomes a vivid metaphor for Woyzeck's forced retreat to a frenzied infancy.

Hogg's performance gives this so-called simple man a sensational physicality. There is a moment when he creeps along the walls like Conrad Veidt in *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*. When surging emotions struggle against imposed duty, he makes limbs, face and voice tremble with a poignancy that is also noble.

Birdcages, religious pictures and knives hang down on wires in Neil Irish's design, and the production includes a scene juxtaposing the acts of shaving and wringing out washing that displays the delicate elegance of dance. Hogg is supported by notable performances from a surrounding cast that includes Myriam Acharki as a lustrous-eyed Marie, Tony Guilfoyle's effete prim Doctor and Tim Chipping as the brutish Drum Major.

Kramer's astonishing climax first takes us below water, and while we are still open-mouthed with wonder at this, he caps it with a cataclysm in which the heavens open. Unforgettable.