

Reviews

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. . . *The Day of the Picnic* is a complete revision of the play that Russell Davis first wrote in 1983. “A good 80% of the old dialogue was tossed,” Davis said in a program note for the “World Premiere” production at the People’s Light & Theatre in Malvern, just outside Philadelphia. The playwright also explained that the political context was made explicit and that the not exactly gratuitous concern with “the redaction of the Hebrew Bible and New Testament canon” was added; the question of interpretation of those works washes from biblical scholarship to the protagonist’s sense of her own past. Betsy Fullbright is the widow of an African missionary, resident in a retirement home where, unlike her sharp-tongued friend Cookie, she seems ill-at-ease from the beginning. A black man in a wheelchair arrives, saying nothing for most of the play but keeping an accusing eye on Betsy. He is a witch doctor come to punish her for the sins of her husband: his part in the suppression of the Mau Mau movement in Kenya thirty years earlier—behavior that she understood and even deplored, although she has refused to admit what she knew. There are awkward passages in the play—notably the unnecessary appearance of biblical characters, conjured not so much by Betsy’s sense of guilt as by the playwright’s impulse to overemphasize material that is stronger when presented by implication. The frightened woman and her frightening nemesis are moving—although neither of them quite knows it—toward a reconciliation, a recognition of their shared humanity.

The actor David Strathairn, who played at People’s Light in an earlier Davis play—*Sally’s Gone, She Left Her Name* (1999)—has compared Davis to Pinter. I cannot quite make that jump, but I agree with the actor, who in his blog said of Davis’ work, “There’s always something apparent outside the membrane of the immediate event on stage.” It is a quality that feeds without fulfilling the expectations of alert audiences.

With Edward Albee’s *At Home at the Zoo*, the case is not so much one of rewriting (although there are some minor changes in *The Zoo Story*) as of enlarging. In 2004, Hartford Stage commissioned Albee to write a companion piece for *Zoo*, an introduction to Peter and his wife Ann in revelatory conversation before Peter takes up

his book and goes to read in the park. *Homelife*, as the new play is called, was paired with *Zoo* under the title *Peter and Jerry* in Hartford, as it was in a later production in New York. The new title with the home-zoo juxtaposition, used for the Philadelphia production I saw, suggests that the work has become Peter's play—which is a bit surprising to anyone who remembers the first impact of *Zoo* fifty years ago, when all eyes and ears were on Jerry as he confronted Peter in the park, insisted on describing his life in extravagant detail, and goaded Peter into killing him. Albee admits as much. In a *Playwise* (March/April 2009) interview with Mary B. Robinson, who directed the Philadelphia production, Albee said, "I think I probably felt that Peter was—if not contemptible, certainly not worthy of the attention I gave to Jerry." The implication is that the playwright has reached a point from which he can see Peter as more than the hapless tool of Jerry's suicidal game.

Yet *Homelife* is oddly bland. All the talk between Peter and Ann reveals their marriage as a refuge for Peter from a youthful attraction to outrage and as a trap for Ann, who would like more surprises in her life. That they seem to have reached a mutual understanding at the end does not hide the placidity of Peter, which will not be seriously shaken until Jerry impales himself on the knife Peter is holding. But that, as Jerry says in a quite different context, is "the jazz of a very special hotel." *Homelife* is never more than workmanlike, but the evening ends on a high note because *The Zoo Story* is still the incredible surprise it was when I first saw it in 1960.