

THE FEVER: PRESS RESPONSES

Almeida (2015)

written by Wallace Shawn and directed by Robert Icke

www.roborticke.com

THE TIMES

Dominic Maxwell

★★★★

Wallace Shawn's eye-opening monologue about the haves and have-nots has surely never found a smarter setting — in both senses — than a Mayfair hotel suite. The American actor and playwright first performed his socio-economic epiphany to small groups in private homes in 1990. Now Robert Icke's luxuriously intimate production for the Almeida Theatre gets its audience of 25 sipping complimentary wine or nibbling complimentary choccies. The performer, Tobias Menzies, pads around in bare feet as he talks about travelling to an unnamed third world country where he saw death squads, civil war and endemic poverty. We are like arthouse veal calves, being fattened up for this takedown of our first world blinkeredness, but aren't we glad to be here?

What makes these 90-odd minutes unforgettable, though, is both their feverish intensity and their ambivalence. Our unnamed narrator has suddenly come face to face with his good fortune, has come to see how puny his bourgeois dilemmas must seem to most of humanity. He describes going to see *The Cherry Orchard* and being left cold by the fate of Chekhov's fading aristocrats: "Why exactly were we supposed to be weeping?" Our western life, he explains, "is irredeemably corrupt".

Here's the thing, though. He likes that western life and doesn't want to give it up. He likes violin music, magazines, clever chat, comfort, the consolations of art: "There is never enough consolation." He's no teenage posh boy in a Che Guevara T-shirt. He is a middle-aged man who no longer thinks what he has is his by right, yet still wants it anyway.

Menzies, his cultivated tones a perfect analogue to Shawn's Manhattan ones, is fluid, vivid but restrained. When he guides us into his chic bedroom, when his voice loses its audiobook neutrality as he makes this dark night of the soul ever darker, he carries us with him. His soft touch in this setting makes for a poetical, economical, bleakly witty and self-aware exploration of luck, money and the limits of empathy, which leaves me with only one question: should I be sad that so few people will get to see a show that benefits so much from its intimate, insinuating surroundings, or thrilled that I was one of them?

TELEGRAPH

Dominic Cavendish

★★★★

We're so busy talking, helping ourselves to the courtesy glasses of wine, dipping into the bowl of chocolates, taking in the luxurious trappings of this five-star hotel suite just off Piccadilly, that it takes a while to register that the performance has begun. In a corner of the room a man stands silently, expectantly, and gradually a hush spreads across the assembled group – 25 in all – like a sort of shame.

The little disguised aim of *The Fever*, Wallace Shawn's oft reprised 1990 monologue, is that such discomfort should seep through the pores and be felt on the bone; that we get infected by a trembling sense that something is very wrong with the way the world works and that we are to blame.

For 90 minutes, this unnamed figure – affluent, cultivated, well-travelled, of no openly declared employ – confides his (it could equally be, and has been, her) thoughts. He's in a nocturnal hotel room "in a poor country where my language isn't spoken". Outside an uprising is in progress, but the speaker is experiencing his own civil war, contending with a fever that makes him shiver and a deeper existential nausea. He's revolted by – alienated from – his life and his wryly detached, blistering confession circuitously traces how he came to this crisis-point.

The smartest thing that Almeida associate director Robert Icke has done isn't the relatively common coup, these days, of turning a real-world hotel environment into a "site-specific" theatre

space but casting Tobias Menzies in a role initially taken by the lefty American actor–author himself.

Menzies, 40, has the sort of looks and charm that would hold your gaze even if he were standing on a soap-box down the road at Hyde Park Corner but there’s nothing preachy or hectoring about his manner. He’s the more effective for being understated, affable and thoroughly middle-class, one of us in his jogging-pants and T-shirt, arms often folding across his chest as, barefoot, he paces, recounts, reflects, not just searching for the right words but at a loss to locate who he is.

The style is a form of conversational delirium; anecdotes blur into self-accusations, connections between First World privilege and Third World pain rear into view, arriving with the sudden, soon-dissipating force of revelation. You could accuse the script of muddled anti-capitalist thinking. But many of the phrases are too incisive to be easily disregarded. “Something – a part of myself – has been hidden from me, and I think it’s the part that’s there on the surface, what anyone in the world could see about me,” the man says, appalled at the slim volume of deeds his good intentions amount to.

With the West in the firing line of so much violent grievance, now might seem like a bad time for more breast-beating about how it may all be our fault. But this potent, if too exclusive, soiree suggests that a long hard look in the mirror shouldn’t be ducked.

THE SUNDAY TIMES

Maxie Szalwinska

★★★★

Don’t be fooled by the exclusive bubble-of-luxury setting — a swanky hotel suite. The Fever, performed here for an audience of 28, is about as cosy as a bout of dysentery. The narrator (Tobias Menzies, nicely blurring the line between sensitive and self-satisfied) is holed up in a hotel in a poor country where civil war rages outside. Over the course of one long, delirious night, he becomes infected by an idea he can’t ignore: that his privileged western existence is the “life of someone who has got away with something”, and rests on the suffering of others. Gradually, he sheds his idea of himself as a decent person. Wallace Shawn’s 1990 monologue is both the apogee of sanctimonious white liberal guilt and a bilious critique of it. Robert Icke’s production is queasily spot-on.

THE INDEPENDENT

Paul Taylor

★★★★

What gives us the right to be better off than the poor? How can we enjoy the privileges of a comfortable life in a Western democracy when these advantages owe so much to the misery of the exploited in repressive regimes? Why do we insist on demanding more of the best for ourselves and our children when other people have next to nothing? These questions, which a lot of us spend our lives trying to ignore, are implacably raised in Wallace Shawn’s unsparing 100-minute monologue, which is revived now by the Almeida in Robert Icke’s powerful, site-specific production.

Shawn always wanted the piece “to arouse thought and action, not appreciation and enjoyment” and so initially performed it in apartments, and private homes, resembling – in John Lahr’s description – “a Marxist Ancient Mariner” – eschewing a conventional theatrical set-up. The twist in the Almeida revival is that Tobias Menzies delivers the monologue in a luxury hotel suite to an audience of just 25 people each night. A verbal attack on exclusivity unfolds, discomfitingly, in an exclusive environment, with glasses of wine and bowls of posh chocolates laid out for the punters’ delectation as they await the arrival of the actor.

There is another ironic aptness in the location, for the monologue keeps returning to the long dark night of the soul when the speaker, taken ill in a hotel room in some unnamed developing world dictatorship, succumbed to all-encompassing guilt about the gulf between the haves and have-nots. Shawn has written that the role is “designed to fit a very wide spectrum of performers”. Barefoot, in a grey T-shirt and casual trousers, the excellent Menzies is the essence of a well-bred, liberal-minded English thirtysomething. He’s sensitive, affable, intimate, and hypnotic as he stares into our eyes tries to win us over to the idea that there’s no morally respectable justification for our pampered way of life and he makes us almost taste the “horrible rotting lovelessness” of his alienated state.

The Fever has been decried by critics such as Frank Rich as “a musty radical chic stunt destined to be parodied”. But here it seems more than ever to be not a wallowing in liberal guilt but a shrewd analysis of why such guilt is not enough. When we are ushered through to the plush, untidy bedroom, Menzies’ speaker suggests both slow-release mental breakdown and angry, intense lucidity.

He describes not just the twisted thought-processes and the barbarous lengths to which prosperous liberals will resort to hang on to their privileges but the impotence of bleeding-heart compassion. Sympathy will not improve the life of the poor; a philosophy of gradual change will better their lot, nor will artists who fashion works of art that inspire fellow-feeling with their condition.

Their misery will end only when they rise up against their oppressors. The luck of birth has not been divinely ordained; commodities do not drop from heaven with their prices on them. The Fever, in the final analysis, is reminiscent of King Lear rather than a Marxist sermon.