

"The Secret Rapture"

British playwright David Hare's X-Ray of the Soul

"David Hare's great gift as a dramatist," critic Michael Billington wrote recently, "is for relating private despair to the public world." One of England's most stimulating and unpredictable playwrights, Hare unflinchingly explores large social and political themes alongside a wide range of human emotion with clarity, sensitivity and, invariably, elegance and wit. *The Secret Rapture*, which opened at the Ethel Barrymore theater in New York on October 26, 1989, is a landmark in the 42 year-old playwright's twenty year career. It consolidates themes from his previous work and introduces what may be some of his future concerns.

In *The Secret Rapture*, two sisters, Isobel and Marion (played in New York by Blair Brown and Frances Conroy respectively) face a crisis on the death of their father. The deceased man's considerably younger second wife, Katherine, is an emotionally unstable alcoholic with no means of supporting herself. The sisters are diametrically opposed in their political beliefs and innate sensibilities. Isobel is an idealist, and her sister, Marion, is a Junior Minister in the Conservative government. Isobel takes on the responsibility of look-

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ing after her stepmother, eventually paying a price for her kindness. Her decision, which triggers off a series of reactions from the other characters in the play, becomes the means by which Hare



defines the moral climate of contemporary England.

"I am a writer who can only write about people in terms of their whole historical situation," says Hare, who, in the seventies, belonged to a group of left-wing playwrights which included Howard Brenton, Snoo Wilson, and Christopher Hampton. In *Plenty* (London 1978, New York 1982), his best-known play in this

country, Hare ambitiously attempted to create what Robert Brustein described as "a comprehensive X-ray of England's soul following World War II." The moral collapse of post-war England is captured

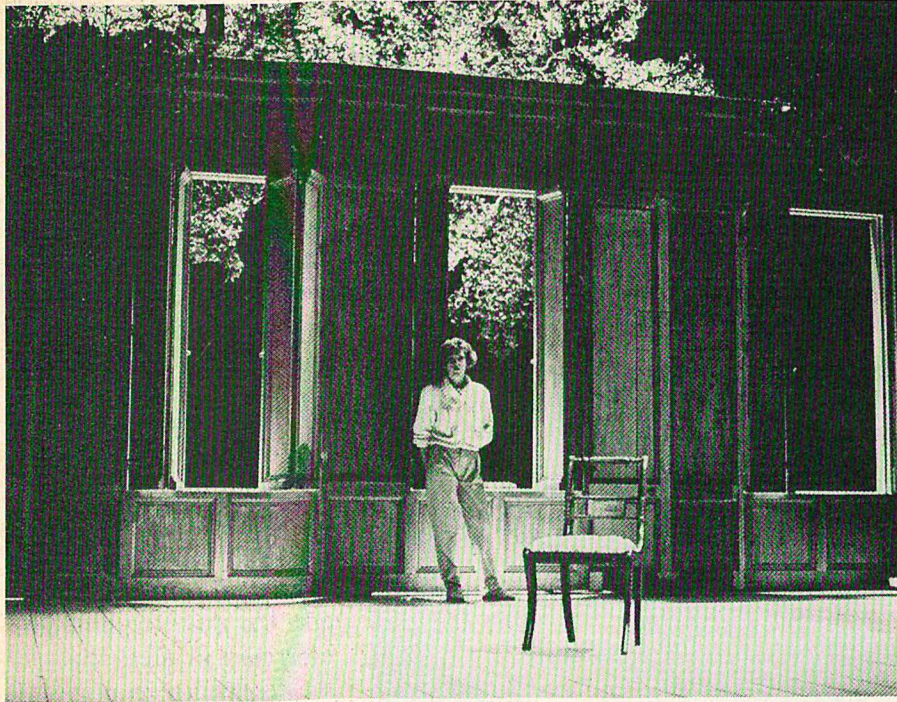
through the nervous collapse of the heroine, Susan Traherne. "A sense of politics has nothing to do with preaching, polemics, or ideology," Hare points out, "it is about the effect that dominant beliefs of the day have on us." In *The Secret Rapture* the governing principle, overriding all moral values, is the "sanctification of greed" and Hare explores its results.

Hare notes that there has been a "considerable body of plays and films about the economic results of Thatcherism" but almost nothing of consequence has been written about the "characteristics and personalities" of the leaders of the Conservative Party which, led by Margaret Thatcher, has been in power since 1979. While Hare attacks the values and actions of right-wing conservatives, he also tries to understand where they are coming from. In his play *A Map of the World* (London 1983, New York 1985), which is essentially a debate on the insidious effects of post-colonial aid to developing nations, he took the controversial step of focussing on an intelligent and charming right-wing character. In *The Secret Rapture* Hare presents Marion, the Conservative Junior minis-

Above: *Playwright David Hare directing his Paris by Night, 1988.*

by Gerard Raymond

“If you do not live through a war, or are not overwhelmed by the loss of someone through some terrible accident, it is likely that romantic love will be the most profound thing that happens to you in your life.”



AMELIA STEIN

Jill Baker as Isobel in the London premiere of The Secret Rapture, 1989.

ter, with compassion.

“I think what haunts those of us who have lived under Thatcherism is the question: Is there a human being in that suit, under that hairstyle and under that unblinking cruelty?” Hare feels that one way to be convinced of a politician’s humanity is by “thinking of mortality. The thing that you notice about somebody who has been a complete nightmare in office is when they are out of office, and disease, old age or whatever has taken over, they suddenly become sympathetic, they seem to become human.

In the play, Marion’s husband cannot understand his wife’s constant belligerence. “She’s got everything she wants. Her party’s in power. Forever. I just don’t see why she’s angry all the time.” Hare pokes fun at the predictability of Marion’s typically Conservative attitudes to each situation, but he also elicits our pity for her when she admits, “It frightens me what people want. I don’t have the right equipment. I can’t interpret what people feel. It’s made me angry. I’ve been angry all my life.”

At the close of *The Secret Rapture*, a death brings about a revelation for Marion. She appreciates for the first time “the human stuff” for which she previously had no time. Hare acknowledges that some of his friends told him that “the Marions of this world don’t change, and that to suggest that they can be thawed by grief is a very sentimental ending to the play. But I believe there is a person inside Margaret Thatcher, and I believe she has an immortal soul like other people — although there is so little evidence of it.”

David Hare is clearly drawn to the new breed of Tory woman that has sprung up in the wake of the Iron Lady. When he wrote *The Secret Rapture* he was working simultaneously on the screenplay for his film *Paris By Night*. The central character in the film, Clara Paige (played by Charlotte Rampling), is a Conservative Member of the European Parliament. She shares with Marion an arrogant belief that her party is beyond the law. But like Marion, she is portrayed as a well-rounded human being. Hare has stated

that his purpose in the film was to “disorient the audience and sweep away the usual concept of how people judge complex moral issues.”

It is no coincidence that Hare chooses to look at the human side of the Conservative Party through the Tory women. His interest in writing about women has been evident since his first full length play, *Slag* (gals spelled backwards), which was produced in 1969. Reversing the plot of Shakespeare’s *Love’s Labor Lost*, *Slag* features three school-mistresses who take a vow of celibacy. Writing about women “is just a temperamental preference,” for Hare. “Writing involves an act of imagination. For me to begin to get my juices flowing I like having to guess and there is nothing harder than guessing what it is like to be the opposite sex.”

In the 1970s, Canadian actress Kate Nelligan exemplified the quintessential David Hare heroine. Her first Hare play was *Knuckle* (1974), which assailed capitalism within the format of a Mickey Spillane-type thriller. She also played the lead in Hare’s television drama *Licking Hitler*, which dealt with an anti-Nazi propaganda unit based in England during the war. One of the highlights of Nelligan’s career to date, the part of Susan Traherne in *Plenty*, prompted Jack Kroll to write “this must be the most extensive woman’s role in contemporary English language theater.”

The American actress Blair Brown typifies the new David Hare heroine. He acknowledges that his current romantic friendship with Brown, whom he first met in 1980 in a production of *Plenty* in Washington, D.C., has encouraged him to write “more ambitiously.” For the first time he has started writing with someone specific in mind, and Brown, he feels, “undoubtedly brought out in me a positive way of looking at the world.” In addition to a pair of one-act plays, Hare wrote his latest film *Strapless*, and the part of Isobel in *The Secret Rapture* for Brown.

“The traditional complaint against my



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SECRET RAPTURE *continued from page 32*

ities of a London production. "It is the failure over which I and those who created it have spent most time agonizing." To this day, says Hare, Joe Papp feels "it is the most incomprehensible failure of his career as a producer."

It is easy to see how a writer like Hare, with his great curiosity about women, would be interested in exploring the psyche of a man who actually *becomes* one. Everyone involved in *The Knife* had a different theory as to what went wrong but Hare mentions that Blair Brown came up with the most practical explanation: "She said a musical about a man who chops his cock off is never going to go in New York and I was a fool to pretend it ever will." Hare recently heard the score again and says he was reminded it was "the most breathtakingly beautiful music I know," and concludes "the only place the trouble could have come from is me."

Hare finds himself completely exhausted after directing a play. He explains that his impression in the theater is one of "giving energy out on to the stage so that people may one day be able to perform the play without the director being necessary to it." He finds the process of filmmaking, on the other hand, far more rewarding. "With film you are drawing in energy. The impression on a film is of being given gifts all day. People offer you light, design, performance — bits and pieces. You gather them in and store them away in the editing room. At the end of a film I am completely exhilarated."

But Hare professes that he still loves writing for the theater. Indeed writing is integral to his personality. As the character Victor Mehta in his play *A Map of the World* says, "the act of writing," for Hare, "is the act of discovering what you believe." In his intrepid quest to understand the psyche of our times this "detective of the soul" (as Kathleen Tynan succinctly put it) can be cerebral, even cynical. But in his best work there is a passion and a generous humanity that fuses with his intellectual ideals, making it profoundly unpredictable. *The Secret Rapture* also reveals a mystical, visionary element, that cannot be communicated logically.

The title, *The Secret Rapture*, Hare

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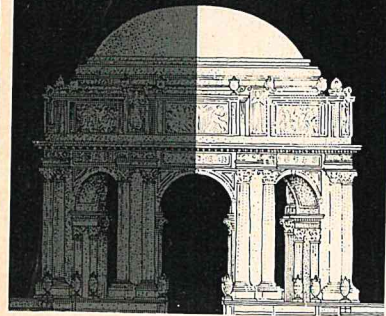


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work was that it was cold, chilly or forbidding," Hare concedes. (Some critics found Susan Traherne irritatingly willful on a path to self-destruction.) "To now work with an actress who has all the depth and seriousness of the other leading ladies I have worked with, but who also brings a sense of practicality, of everyday life and warmth to things, is fantastically invaluable to me."

Isobel, with her inherent goodness in *The Secret Rapture*, is certainly different from previous Hare characters. He has actually taken a great risk placing a near-saint in the center of his play. Hare once explained that Susan, in *Plenty*, is driven mad because "society doesn't offer any good way to live." In *The Secret Rapture* Isobel has found a good way to live but her sister, stepmother, and lover cannot seem to appreciate it.

With *The Secret Rapture*, Hare intended to write a contemporary play about the 1980s without resorting to "malign energy," which he describes as "the force that is sweeping through the decade." Plays like Caryl Churchill's *Serious Money* and his own 1985 hit *Pravda* (co-written with Howard Brenton) celebrate this destructive energy. Although the works satirize the values of the protagonists (the money hungry denizens of Wall Street and the City of London in the former and a Rupert Murdoch-like newspaper baron in the latter), audiences loved these villains for their vitality and the excitement they generated.

There was a danger of this very same phenomenon affecting the London production of *The Secret Rapture*. Both Blair Brown and Hare were busy elsewhere when the play opened last October at the National, where it ran successfully for a year in repertory. So precise was Hare's characterization of Marion — with her sharp attacks on the Green Party and her brisk efficiency — that English audiences found her hilarious the minute she walked on stage. "People are shocked" by Marion's cruelty, in New York, Hare notes, whereas "in London they take the cruelty for granted and they find it funny."

The New York production, directed by Hare, is less comic than the London production, but it is closer to the author's

vision of the play. No longer is the "malign energy" dominant. Hare strengthened Brown's role for this production giving the two sisters, Isobel and Marion, equal weight. "I have done more to stop Isobel's passivity." As originally written, the part was "very reactive."

In the London production, Isobel was played as a completely blameless 35 year-old woman. But Hare didn't find that portrayal very convincing. "Very few people are innocent at thirty-five," he comments drily. Brown has been able to suggest that Isobel's actions in the first act spring from a positive kindness, not martyrdom. In the second act, rather than being "put upon," as in the original version, she plays "very strongly, as a woman who is sorting out her life." Hare hopes that in the second act "Isobel is as strong a heroine as Susan Traherne is in *Plenty*. A real heroic part."

Hare may be able to write wonderful parts for women, but he has not always been as successful writing for men. One of the least effective features of *The Secret Rapture* is the portrait of Irwin, Isobel's lover and co-worker. "It has become a sort of cliché in my work that there is a strong woman and a weak man," he admits. "I find I tend to get one or the other sex right," he adds. "In *Pravda*, the men are great but the women are hopeless." But he is very pleased that in his new film, *Strapless*, he has succeeded in achieving a balance with the character called Raymond (played by Bruno Ganz).

Like *The Secret Rapture*, *Strapless* features a pair of siblings (played by Blair Brown and Bridget Fonda). Brown, a doctor, is the elder sister and supposedly the more responsible of the two. But when she meets Raymond and falls passionately in love with him, she learns that "if you have feelings you've got to pick up the bill afterwards." Raymond is by no means perfect. Very much a Don Juan, he is in fact, as Hare describes, a "romantic love/junkie." Nevertheless he is charming and extremely likeable. "This is the first time that I have portrayed a man who has many virtues and he is a real hero in spite of his shortcomings."

The film's theme of romantic love is something new to Hare's body of work. "If you don't live through a war, are not

once explained, refers to "that moment at which a nun expects to be united with Christ. In other words, it's death." Indeed, Hare frames the play, both at the beginning and the end, with death. And the climax of the play brings about a kind of redemption for Marion who learns to deal with passion and the inexplicable things in life. She better understands the fact that she doesn't need to "take some simple point of view, just in the hope of getting things done" nor does she have to "try to understand everything" which, incidentally, is what destroyed Susan Traherne in *Plenty*.

Marion realizes that her sister Isobel might have found a way to cope with life. Isobel returns from a trip overseas with as Hare describes, "a lucidity about her own situation which is close to a mystical state." She has made a decision and "it has no rational justification." But when it comes to elaborating on the exact nature of Isobel's secret rapture, the remarkably articulate playwright becomes reticent. "These are very difficult things and I am not comfortable talking about them. The reason I write plays is so as not to have conversations about the soul. A sense of the soul is obviously what I aim for in writing. I don't want to say anything about it because it surely is in the work." □

A David Hare Chronology

- 1969 *Slag* Directed by Max Stafford Clark
- 1972 *The Great Exhibition* Directed by Richard Eyre
- Brassneck* (co-authored with Howard Brenton) Directed by Hare
- 1974 *Knuckle* Directed by Michael Blakemore
- 1975 *Fanshen* Directed by William Gaskill & Max Stafford Clark
- 1975 *Teeth n' Smiles* Directed by Hare
- 1978 *Licking Hitler* (BBC) Directed by Hare
- 1978 *Plenty* Directed by Hare
- 1980 *Dreams of Leaving* (BBC) Directed by Hare
- 1983 *Saigon, Year of the Cat* (Thames Television) Directed by Stephen Frears
- 1983 *A Map of the World* Directed by Hare
- 1984 *Wetherby* (Film) Directed by Hare
- 1985 *Pravda* (co-authored with Howard Brenton) Directed by Hare
- 1986 *The Bay at Nice and Wrecked Eggs* Directed by Hare
- 1987 *The Knife* Directed by Hare
- 1988 *Paris by Night* (Film) Directed by Hare
- 1989 *Strapless* (Film) Directed by Hare
- The Secret Rapture* Directed by Howard Davies (London)



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