

## Royal Court

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Michael Billington

# Hush

AFTER the flash emptiness of *Six Degrees of Separation* (now removed to the Comedy), it's good to find the Royal Court putting on a real play: *Hush* by April De Angelis is weird, surreal and sometimes a bit impenetrable but it is also wry, witty and genuinely imaginative.

De Angelis's theme, which emerges gradually and elliptically, is clearly the crisis caused by the death of the Left. The action moves between a seaside cottage and the adjacent beach where Louise is marking the first anniversary of the death by drowning of her hardline communist sister, Jo. Louise cannot wait to rid herself of Jo's memory, clothes and political detritus. But she also faces the responsibility of rearing her sister's disturbed teenage daughter, Rosa. And the real crisis comes when her weekend retreat is invaded by a deranged punk, Dogboy, who barks and snarls with canine ferocity, who brandishes a flintstone and who has incidentally impregnated Rosa.

Clearly De Angelis deals in symbols rather than in statements. Dogboy — a naked, canine Poor Tom — stands for everything that is wild, untamable and primitive. The test is how the other characters react to him. Louise, an apolitical magazine writer, wants to phone for the police. Tony, her wet liberal novelist lover, first ties him up and then offers him charity. Denise, a self-absorbed Buddhist house help, is only concerned with how Dogboy reacts to her. The one shred of sympathy comes from Rosa who, we assume, is a chip off the old communist block.

Bald summary, however, does scant justice to De Angelis's darkly haunting play. For a start, it misses out its all-pervading humour: Louise, attempting to pass off the tethered Dogboy as her cousin, is asked by an understandably puzzled visitor "Do you treat all your relatives like this?". De Angelis also

snows a welcome sympathy for the dilemma faced by her characters. What she seems to be saying, like Brenton in *Berlin Bertie*, is that the decay of old certainties has left almost everyone floundering in the dark. But what makes her a natural playwright is that she shows as much intuitive understanding of Louise, who has had to cope with bringing up a difficult child, as she does of Jo's ex-lover, Colin, who remains obstinately faithful to his Marxist convictions.

There are some loose ends in the plotting but De Angelis has managed to express a political dilemma through poetic metaphor. She also benefits from Sally Jacobs's surreally witty design that imprint marine images on a box set and from Max Stafford-Clark's production that scrupulously blends dream and reality. Excellent performances too from Marion Bailey as well-modulated middle class Louise, and from Debra Gillett as the very funny New Age cleaner. But the bravest performance of the season comes from Andy Serkis who as Dogboy barks, yelps and quivers while, in the words of one of the characters, showing off all his bits. A good play, I would say, for the dog days.

● *Until September 5.*