

THE RED BARN: PRESS RESPONSES

National Theatre (2016)

Georges Simenon in a new adaptation by David Hare

directed by Robert Icke

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TIME OUT

Andrzej Lukowski

★★★★

Mark Strong is excellent as a man doubting his entire life in this stylish new production from Robert Icke.

'The Red Barn' is billed as a thriller. And it kind of is. Though if you're hoping for explosions, gun battles or large numbers of aggressively exciting events you may start to freak out a bit when the penny drops that wunderkind director Robert Icke's immaculately stylish production a) has none of these, and b) doesn't have an interval. Instead it's an unsettling study in masculine inertia, its exquisite stillness, bleak undercurrents and fascination with genre, sharing as much with the films of the Coen brothers – specifically 2009's 'A Serious Man' – as the usual stage influences.

David Hare's adaptation of a very obscure 1968 novella by prolific French detective writer Georges Simenon, 'The Red Barn' is, at first, a mystery about two couples – Ingrid and Donald Dodds, Ray and Mona Sanders – who head for the Dodds's Connecticut house on a blizzard-lashed night only to discover that Ray has disappeared.

As 'The Red Barn' develops it soon becomes clear that it's less about what happened to Ray, and more about what Donald did in the two hours he was out looking for him, and what those two hours mean for the rest of his life.

It's a starry production, with Strong giving a quietly devastating performance as Donald, a man slowly, painfully coming to realise that he has spent a lifetime trapped by his own mediocrity, that he's just a cog in the well-oiled machine of New England WASP society. But there is no pity to 'The Red Barn' or a sense that Donald has been hard done by: it is ruthless about his weaknesses and scathing about his awakening. Elsewhere, Elizabeth Debicki ('The Night Manager') is striking as the emotionally numb Mona. And US actor Hope Davis is understatedly excellent as Ingrid, whose manipulations are so subtle Donald half-doubts that they exist.

But the cast are all ultimately subsumed by Icke's daringly slow production, which carries them on with impassively glacial force. 'Cinematic' is a word that's flung around a lot, with varying degrees of meaningfulness. But this is as cinematic as theatre gets. Heck, it even has a title sequence, as the title is hesitantly typed out on a blizzard-drenched scrim.

Even if you hate Icke's production – and some people will surely find its slow pace unbearable – you'll have to admire the remarkable scene changes, where a moving gap in the screens pans like a camera, zooming in and out on the action, disorientatingly, sometimes playfully introducing us to a next scene that looks nothing like the last one. Designer Bunny Christie and an exemplary creative team have done a remarkable job, with stage manager Sarah Alford-Smith deserving massive credit for overseeing the transitions.

In a way, those transitions are the highest drama of the play, spiking its disquieting stillness and sly film noir nods with some startling old-fashioned stage magic. 'The Red Barn' will divide audiences, but if you can surrender to its crepuscular ebb and flow and wincing interrogation of masculinity then it will indeed thrill.

OBSERVER

Susannah Clapp

★★★★

How do you put on stage someone who is bored with being themselves? Without boring the audience. How do you suggest a dissolving identity in the fleshiest of forms, the theatre? This is the dilemma faced in The Red Barn.

David Hare's adaptation of Georges Simenon's novel *La Main* pulls the first-person narrative out of the troubled protagonist's head and puts it into dialogue. Robert Icke's production – performed to the sound of a metronome – turns its actors into mannequins: all withheld, all dancing to the same tune.

A man thinks he has committed one murder. He goes on to kill someone else. Yet this is hardly a thriller: there is no moment of total terror. It is darker than that. A novel of stealth and of watching, in which crime is daily life continued by other means. Dead marriages; dead bodies. Bunny Christie's design encloses the stage in black screens that slide around the action, opening and closing like the shutter of a camera, or the wink of an eye, ushering in the fiercest of storms, welcoming the grandest of beige apartments. Mark Strong moves from bland to bludgeoning as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Elizabeth Debicki – unruffled and immaculate – who shows her recklessness in the sudden drop of her voice. Not galvanising. But mesmeric.

DAILY MAIL

Georgina Brown

★★★★

The eyes have it in David Hare's play, an adaptation of detective writer Georges Simenon's psychological thriller *La Main*. The initial image in Robert Icke's stylish, achingly cool production is a gigantic iris. Almost the last word is 'eyes'. It's a play about what people see – or fail to see – on purpose or by accident; what they look for, fail to look for, or choose to overlook. All very different from what they perceive or observe.

It begins with two couples struggling back from a party to a remote farmhouse through horizontal wind and snow in backwoods Connecticut in the Sixties. Mark Strong's decent, dullish Donald, tellingly bespectacled, makes it back to the house but Ray, his oldest, best friend since Yale, also a lawyer, doesn't.

Donald's wife, Ingrid (played straight, staid and stoical by Hope Davis), urges Donald to get out and find Ray. When he returns two hours later, his parka looks dry. Left alone for one second, the exquisite, willowy young Mona (glacial, glamorous Elizabeth Debicki from *The Night Manager*), Ray's wife, sniffs the parka and looks through the pockets. What's she after?

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A metronome ticks, dungeon-heavy doors clang, things go bump in Tom Gibbons's spooky soundscape. Apertures expand and contract; screens slide in and out, teasingly concealing as much as they reveal. The cinematic becomes thrillingly dramatic.

There are moments when the play pretends to be a whodunit. 'I know what you've done,' Mona says to Donald. The local lieutenant throws in the word suicide and declares 'the press is going to take an interest'. Ingrid remarks that Mona is sleeping too much and not suffering as she should.

Mark Strong, Hope Davis and Elizabeth Debicki (above) all impress and the pace is self-indulgently leisurely, the tension coming from within the characters. But these are red herrings. The real focus is Donald's midlife crisis, triggered by seeing rich, successful, randy Ray, still having it all and a bit-on-the-side at the party, and the devastating realisation that he, by contrast, failed because he never dared.

He took the wrong path early on, as surely as Ray did on that fateful walk home. 'It's as if I've spent my whole life with the handbrake on,' he says. Until now. The pace is self-indulgently leisurely, the tension coming from within the characters, all of them tightly coiled and self-absorbed. Flashy yet forceful theatre.

THE TIMES

Ann Treneman

★★★★

The problem with psychological thrillers is that, on the stage, they are often just long pauses that do not thrill in any way. Director Robert Icke, only 29 and a man who has made no secret of his hatred of boredom, has tackled this problem head-on in a way that would make Hitchcock proud.

Here, he never lets us see the whole picture, only squares of light that enlarge into one scene or another.

It's a cinematic approach, the darkness filling the huge Lyttelton stage at the National Theatre, the banging music, the shuddering thrum, the occasional introductory conversation, until we see the square of light and lean forward to see more. The idea, with this new play by David Hare, based on Georges Simenon's novel *La Main*, which is set in the Sixties in Connecticut, is to make us feel always on edge.

The first square becomes an eye belonging to a woman. Her name is Ingrid and, as it happens, she does like to keep a watchful eye on her husband, Donald. Hope Davis plays Ingrid with an implacable blonde calmness. Mark Strong is Donald, a man feeling trapped by his life in a small town, jealous of his best friend, Ray, who's made it in New York City, and intrigued by Ray's wife, Mona.

They go to a party (again, we begin with a square of light). Everyone is dressed with Mad Men panache, drinks in hand. Donald glowers as Ray flirts. Mona, played by Elizabeth Debicki of *The Night Manager* fame, tall and willowy, is almost ephemeral. Ingrid, ever watchful, says the storm outside is getting worse, they must go.

It's a great storm. All four abandon the car in a snowdrift and make for Donald and Ingrid's home. Not everyone arrives. But the scenes that follow, which set the scene, are too slow. The best ones are fraught with uncertainty. The worst are tedious with Ingrid doing a lot of staring.

But the pace does pick up, the puzzle intrigues, the characters, very much in the mode of Richard Yates's *Revolutionary Road*, are pin-sharp. The sets, by Bunny Christie, are fantabulous. There is the perfectly constructed Sixties American suburban home. The party scene, always expanding, is almost too much fun. Mona's Manhattan apartment is ultra-cool, the only colour provided by the decanter of whiskey (much in use).

Whodunnit? Mark Strong is terrific, giving one of the performances of the year, repression never looking scarier. But it's Robert Icke who dares to make this work, take us into the storm, the white-out that is the inner fury here. Hitchcock would approve.

THE INDEPENDENT

Paul Taylor

★★★★

David Hare is our leading political playwright and a versatile adaptor; I don't think, though, that in any verbal association game, his name would be likely to elicit the word "thriller". But it turns out that the dramatist is a big fan of Georges Simenon, and his latest piece for the National is a taut, compelling and psychologically acute stage version of *La Main*, the Belgian author's study of jealousy, sexual obsession and of the impulsive action – or inaction – that can make a man's life unravel, set in Connecticut in 1969. The director, Robert Icke, might have seemed unusual casting for this project, too; then one remembers his expertise in ratcheting up the tension in such productions as his *Oresteia* at the Almeida. Icke's flair at merging a theatrical and a cinematic sensibility is certainly harnessed again here, almost to the point of overkill.

On their way back from a glamorous party, two couples are caught up in a howling snow storm and have to abandon their car. But Ray gets lost in the blizzard and only three of them – his beautiful wife Mona and the other more staid pair, Ingrid and Donald Dodd (Ray's best friend since Yale) – make it to safety in the Dodds' clapboard home. Where is Ray? Is he dead or alive? Has he been killed by accident, murdered or committed suicide? Spoiler warning here. I think it fair to reveal that, after Ray's corpse is pretty soon found, the story shifts from the circling suspicions of a conventional whodunit to a consideration of kinds of guilt and responsibility that no police investigation would be able to establish. Regardless of how it happened, what does Ray's death reveal about the living as Donald is drawn into an affair with his widow, obscurely connived at by the wife?

In the first scene, we're confronted by a massive projected retina at what proves to be Ingrid's check-up at the ophthalmologist. He assures her that she does not have glaucoma, a condition known as "the silent thief of sight" because you don't notice it happening. A metaphor there, I think. By contrast, Icke's production – with beautiful sets by Bunny Christie – makes you hyper-aware of the constraints on what you can see. Black screens slide together and pull apart like a camera lens so that we have to view the action through letter-box-shaped apertures that differ in size and height. This enables the production to induce dread, as when a particular scene descends

from aloft like a fateful lift, or to create horribly gradual reveals, as when the aperture dilates as Donald walks towards the bathroom at the party and a spectacle that will change his whole perception of himself, or to frame certain details in close-up, such as the (book's) eponymous hand.

It's amazingly well-sustained if a trifle po-faced and the laden-with-significance atmosphere veers near to spoof at one or two moments. The excellent performances, though, are unflinchingly committed. The impossibly elegant Elizabeth Debicki (of *The Night Manager* fame) exudes, like an expensive perfume, the emotional carelessness of the privileged as the widow, while Hope Davis beautifully communicates the manipulative self-control and controlling nature of the wife. Mark Strong, back on stage for the first time since his triumph in *A View From the Bridge*, excels as a man in mounting explosive recoil from the dull life he now discovers he chose not from principle but from a cowardly need for protection. An unbroken 110 minutes, well worth catching.

FINANCIAL TIMES

Sarah Hemming

★★★★

Storms in drama tend to be revealing: consider *King Lear*. In David Hare's *The Red Barn*, drawn from the Georges Simenon novel *La Main*, it's a snowstorm that proves pivotal. When two couples stagger back from a party through a blizzard to an isolated house, one of their number doesn't make it. We suspect a classic murder mystery. But it is something much slower, colder and subtler that Simenon, Hare and director Robert Icke provide — a creeping psychological chiller about the banality of evil, about masculinity, misogyny and 1960s America.

At the eye of the metaphorical storm is Donald Dodd, a small-time lawyer in late 1960s Connecticut: a decent type who has doddled along, doing the right thing, until that night in the tempest brings him to an epiphany: "I've lived my whole life with the handbrake on," he says. From that realisation onwards, he slowly eases the handbrake off and we watch, powerless, as corrosive jealousy and a growing sense of dislocation consume him.

It's a bleak, pitiless depiction of an individual at odds with his own life and Mark Strong is brilliant in the role: a man initially so anodyne that he blends into his dull background, he gradually hardens before your eyes until his every move makes you jump. Which of the people who prick his sense of crippling inadequacy might bear the brunt of his cold, escalating fury? His implacable, sweetly contemptuous wife Ingrid (Hope Davis)? His effortlessly successful "friend" Ray (Nigel Whitmey)? Or Ray's beautiful, emotionally anaesthetised wife Mona (coolly enigmatic Elizabeth Debicki)?

It's a slow, slow burn to find out, with Icke and his designer, Bunny Christie, coming up with a spectacular, cinematic aesthetic to frame Donald's descent. Sliding screens widen and narrow to create apertures through which we peer into the scenes: a tactic that emphasises the significance of limited perception in this ambiguous piece. And boy, are those interiors unsettling. Forget the snowstorm, it's much, much chillier inside — both in Donald's cheerless home with its muted, beige fittings and in Mona's arctic-white upmarket Manhattan apartment.

The pace of Icke's production is boldly, even provocatively glacial, adding to the icy depiction of alienation. It's difficult to sustain this suppressed tension and deadpan tone and rather too often the staging slows to a halt: tedious rather than depicting tedium. But gradually, the sense of accumulating dread pays off and takes over as the storm building inside Donald breaks.

DAILY TELEGRAPH

Dominic Cavendish

★★★★

David Hare has mounted a remarkable rescue operation. From beneath the avalanche of novels left by the prolific Belgian writer Georges Simenon – the man who gave the world Maigret – he has plucked one slim, neglected volume, *The Hand* (1968) and turned it into a gripping interval-free two hours of theatre.

Assisting him in his mission are whizz-kid director Robert Icke (making his NT debut in sensational style) and a cast led by the to-die-for talent of Australian actress Elizabeth Debicki

(who seduced millions of viewers, as well as Tom Hiddleston, in *The Night Manager*) and screen and stage star Mark Strong.

The essentials of the story, retained by Hare but restructured to add suspense, are simple. There's murder, mystery and an almighty snow-storm, with an investigating police officer flicking open his note-pad in the cold-light of day.

Bearing a striking resemblance to *Mad Men's* Don Draper, the rugged Strong plays an upright Connecticut lawyer called Donald Dodd who lets go of the hand of his friend Ray, a successful ad-executive, while the pair are making their blizzard-bound way home with their wives after a party with a rich local.

Ray perishes in the cold and the extent of Dodd's efforts to save his pal raise questions about the nature of criminality, the fragility of the mid-life male ego and the insubstantiality of conformist affluence. It becomes clear that Ray's cheated-on wife Mona (played with statuesque allure and the minimal signalling of intent by Debicki) is open to overtures from Don. Is this done with the complicity of the latter's homely, quietly controlling spouse Ingrid (a self-contained, watchful Hope Davis)? Who knows what happened in the barn? The psychological plot thickens.

Those familiar with the novel may mourn the passing of its bitterly sour first-person narration. Strong, though, lends the anti-hero a fascinating inscrutability, a stiff understatement that makes what he does a shock even to himself, while the women have a greater life of their own, not just butts of Dodd's judgmentalism.

The even bigger plus lies in Bunny Christie's astounding stage-design, which discloses a range of beautifully realised period interiors (and whirling snowstorm too) with a cinematic fluidity that seems to defy logistical possibility; black screens serve as grand apertures, narrowing in on telling visuals or widening out, tracking across. Icke quickens our pulses too with an eerie soundscape.

I don't think it ruins the occasion to advertise the fact that Debicki strips to the waist at one crucial point, summoning memories of Nicole Kidman in David Hare's version of Schnitzler's *La Ronde*, *The Blue Room*, a generation ago. I suspect this adaptation possesses a similar box-office potency but its chief asset lies in its valuable rediscovery of a haunting tale and laying it bare for all to see.

THE ARTS DESK

Aleks Sierz

★★★★

At first, I was a bit confused by the play's title. After all, David Hare gave his 1998 adaptation of Arthur Schnitzler's *La Ronde* the moniker of *The Blue Room*, which coincidentally is the same title as Mathieu Amalric's very recent adaptation of a thriller by Georges Simenon. Now Hare has taken another Simenon thriller, *La Main*, and called it *The Red Barn*, which immediately suggests the murder of Maria Marten in 1827.

But Hare and Simenon's barn is not in Suffolk; it's in Connecticut and the year is 1969. Hope that's clear. Even if not, a brilliant cast headed by Mark Strong and Elizabeth Debicki, seen in *The Night Manager*, means that this 110-minute thriller has the power to surprise at every turn.

Initially, everything seems simple: two professional couples – glamorous Ray and Mona Sanders and the more prosaic Donald and Ingrid Dodd – attend a nice upper-middle-class party. As the January weather turns stormy they decide to go home, but their car gets bogged down in a violent snow storm. They battle against the whiteout on foot, but only Donald, Ingrid and Mona reach safety. Ray has been lost. So the first question is: where is he? Is he dead or alive? Has he been murdered, accidentally killed or committed suicide? And can the local police lieutenant, Olsen, solve the mystery?

Then it becomes apparent, in typical Simenon fashion, that we are lost in a story as dense as any snow-storm, and that what will most surprise us is that the victim is quite other than we originally thought. On the way, we will have enough time to examine the blackness of the human heart, and ponder how near each of us might come to committing murder. There's a chilly amoral atmosphere that hangs around this story, which is as much about the way we seem to be actors on the stage of life as it is about jealousy and dissatisfaction.

As the situation develops, *The Red Barn* becomes a study of the triangular relationship between lawyer Donald, his wife Ingrid and Ray's wife Mona. Fortysomething Donald and Ray have been

best friends since college so this is an account of male friendship which considers how men compete through their possession (there is no other word) of the women around them. At the same time, this is a play about self-knowledge and how we form our ideas about our lives, and about our spouses. Yes, it is a bit uncomfortable. It also contrasts the sense of community in rural Lakeville, Connecticut, with the alienation of urban East River, New York, but never uncritically, and it plays delicious games with the metaphor of sight: how much do we see? Of ourselves? Of others? And, of course, looking is never the same as observing.

Aptly enough, Robert Icke's superbly compelling production begins with a giant eye and has a cinematic sense of constant movement, with fade ins and fade outs, which suits Hare's script. On Bunny Christie's lovely, elegant sets, and helped by Paule Constable's lighting and Tom Gibbons's soundscape, the three main actors (pictured above) perform an elaborate game of chess: Strong's Donald at first timid behind his glasses then almost hoarse with emotion, while Debicki's light and flighty Mona contrasts well with Hope Davis's calm and protective Ingrid. With each scene telling us something new, there's a real sense of revelation as the evening progresses, so it seems ungenerous to carp that most of the dialogue is too clear, and too lacking in subtext. Better to sit back and enjoy the ride - right into Simenon's dark nights of desire.