

British Theatre Guide

News, reviews, features and podcast on theatre across the UK

A Mirror

Sam Holcroft

Almeida Theatre

Almeida Theatre

15 August–23 September 2023

The foyer and theatre are decked out for a wedding with balloons, pink and blue ribbons and flowers; there is a wedding cake on the table just inside the theatre, the audience are the guests.

“We’ve been here before,” do I hear you say? No. It’s not another immersive show, at least not that wedding one, for, as the front of the programme clearly tells you: *This Play is a Lie!*

A Mirror is a play about censorship and a play about theatre. “Hold a mirror up to nature.” That is what Hamlet tells the players who turn up at Elsinore.

Maybe the wedding seemed like real life with its bride and groom, best man and officiating officer, but it is a cover for a quite different play. As soon as they are sure there are no unwanted observers and the coast is clear, the same actors can start the “real” play. We are now the audience for an “underground” performance in a state which controls its culture very closely. The play they now begin is a satire in which a first-time playwright is called in to the Ministry of Culture censorship office to be given guidance.

The tyro writer, Adem, doesn’t know much about writing or theatre, but he has written down what he has heard through the thin walls of his lodging, such as a conversation between a prostitute and a client. So there is another play within this play, but which of them is a mirror and what is allowed according to the Ministry, which has its own guide as to what subjects and words may be permitted?

Čelik, the censorship officer who has called in Adem, is no philistine moron but a cultured man who cares about theatre, dramatic writing and construction, though his idea of the purpose of theatre is to give the state service.

With Jonny Lee Miller, sinisterly black-gloved and never relaxing as Čelik, matched with naïve former soldier and mechanic Adem, played by Micheal Ward in his first professional live theatre role, this is a productive pairing, Adem takes what he is told literally. The next script he produces is their conversation, verbatim.

Čelik also appoints himself mentor to the new assistant assigned him: Meia (Tanya Reynolds), a young female soldier who has served on the border. She is beautifully awkward until she gains confidence. Her boss has them all reading scripts together, so excruciatingly badly it is funny.

Čelik has an older protégée too: Bax (Geoffrey Streatfeild), who with his briefing has become a top name with plays that please the Ministry and support the regime. In an episode that goes on a tad too long, we get an extract from one of his patriotic military dramas, which twists the truth to suit its purpose.

There are false alarms when things revert back to the wedding and a further intervention before things come to their conclusion, but this isn't really a theatrical narrative but rather a dip into considering what theatre is for and the problems of censorship. Though official government theatre censorship was ended in the UK in 1968 (before then plays had to be licensed by the Lord Chamberlain's Office), there are all sorts of reasons that make writers self-censor.

Sam Holcroft certainly wants to stir up our ideas, and she holds our attention with the theatricality of the game of invention she is playing and, given the sectarian setting, her structure is like a succession of babushka dolls, one play inside another one, and so on, with Čelik providing a great opportunity to get Jonny Lee Miller back on stage with reptilian threat and Aaron Neil bringing a final cold douche as *his* boss.

Reviewer: [Howard Loxton](#)