

Violence with a sense of place

Theatre

THE NEW WORLD ORDER

THE MAIDS Brighton Festival BRIGHTON

★★★★★ / ★★★★★

This performance that weaves together five of Harold Pinter's short political plays is in the setting of Brighton's 19th-century Town Hall. The audience is invited on a tour before a press conference begins. *Press Conference*, *I knew*, was one of the featured works, but is this tour of the building for real?

For a moment I'm not sure. Then, as we follow our guide up grand flights of stairs and around galleried landings, he begins to talk about the changes the new "minister of culture" is making. We are, it seems, already in another country, this one a mirror for any number of abusive regimes found across the world.

The press conference takes place in the council chamber, with journalists

questioning the new minister and former head of secret police, chillingly played by Hugh Ross. Yes, he says, in the same soothing tones of reasonableness that so many of today's politicians adopt, yes, he has killed children. But only because they were a threat.

This is disturbing enough. But the sense of being trapped within a brutal state machine builds and intensifies during this brilliant site-specific production by Hydrocracker. We're invited to the state room for drinks with the minister, who is now Nicolas, the sadistic interrogator in *One for the Road*. Sitting in semi-darkness around a leather-topped table, we are complicit witnesses as Nicolas helps himself to the whisky decanter and taunts Victor, a badly-beaten dissident. Other works – *Precisely*, *Mountain Language*, *The New World Order* – are intercut as we descend from the superficially civilised heights of power to the old police lock-ups.

The New World Order takes place in a cramped cell where two men talk about

ering before them. One begins to cry because he loves the feeling of purity that he gets from torture, the other tells him that he's right to feel like this because he's "keeping the world clean for democracy". Then, in a basement room, Nicolas arrives to interrogate Gila, Victor's wife – a woman with death in her eyes who doesn't know how many times she's been raped.

Pinter's words couldn't be more full of menace and threat. But when the audience is physically placed in his world with no separation from the actors, there is no longer even a comfort zone to watch from, even though we know that – unlike the people who suffer torture and human rights abuses for real – we get to escape and go home safely.

There's also secrecy and intrigue in the cleverly conceived setting of this Brighton Festival performance of Jean Genet's *The Maids*. From the lobby of the Old Ship Hotel on the seafront, the audience is taken through the hotel carpark and up the back stairs of what were formerly staff quarters to reach a specially



Tour de force: the audience is taken to old police cells for the site-specific 'New World Order' in Brighton
MATTHEW ANDREWS

constructed studio theatre above. A single bed stands on a dusty stage, with rose petals and broken chandeliers on the floor and rails of dresses in the background. There's a sense of escaping to an attic where you can dress up – perfect for a play whose characters slip between reality and fantasy. Genet based his 1947 drama on the true story of two housemaids in France who, with no apparent motivation, murdered their mistress and her daughter in a particularly gruesome

manner. In his fictionalised three-hander, the maids become the sisters Claire and Solange. When the mistress who toys with and dominates them is away, the sisters give vent to their feelings of humiliation and rage. Claire becomes the melodramatic Madame, and Solange the vengeful Claire.

This new translation and staging by the former artistic director of the Lyric Hammersmith, Neil Bartlett, adds another dimension by having the actresses, Geraldine Alexan-

der, Hayley Carmichael and Kathryn Hunter, switch roles each night. All are excellent, but I'm not sure what difference the switching makes on any one night.

What's more, figuring out what pushes the women over the edge is a bit of an intellectual exercise. It's difficult to truly identify or sympathise with them.

JANE HUGHES

'The New World Order' at the Town Hall until Saturday; 'The Maids' at the Old Ship Hotel to 26 May (01273 709709)