

Cornelius – review

Finborough, London

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Michael Billington

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Romance and realism ... Col Farrell and Alan Cox in *Cornelius*. Photograph: Donald Cooper

Often pigeonholed as a comfortable, middlebrow dramatist, JB Priestley was in reality a restless experimenter – which may be why this play, although dedicated to and starring Ralph Richardson, ran for only seven weeks in 1935. Revived now for the first time, it's an intriguing piece that not only offers a vivid picture of office life, but also addresses the dire problems facing small businesses in the economic blizzard of the 1930s.

Cornelius
by JB Priestley
Finborough, London

Until 8 September
Box office:
0844 847 1652
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The eponymous hero is partner in a struggling import firm, on the verge of bankruptcy, that sells aluminium. Cornelius is both a romantic, who would rather read HM Prescott's The Conquest of Peru than a ledger-book, and also a realist: confronted by the firm's creditors, he launches into a passionate tirade against an international capitalist system that turns modest private trade

into a "lunatics' obstacle race". Priestley clinches his argument by showing how Cornelius's partner, out on the road touting for business, is turned into a suicidal forerunner of Arthur Miller's Willy Loman in Death of a Salesman. Even if Priestley occasionally lapses into cliché, as in his portrait of the desiccated secretary nursing a hopeless passion for the widowed hero, he provides a combative state-of-the-nation play at a time when British drama was filled with gossamer-light escapism.

He also comes up with a monumental leading role, which Alan Cox here fills to the brim, conveying the pipe-smoking decency of a man who will do anything to stop the firm going bust out of loyalty to his partner. At the same time, Cox suggests Cornelius is a poet and dreamer who sees through the futility of petty commerce and yearns for a life of adventure. It is a wonderfully two-toned performance well supported in Sam Yates's lively production by Col Farrell as a methodical pen-pusher, Annabel Topham as the love-smitten secretary and Beverley Klein as a grumbling cleaner for whom Eastbourne represents utopia. The public in 1935 may have flocked instead to Novello's Glamorous Night, but Priestley's socialist time-bomb offers far more substance.

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