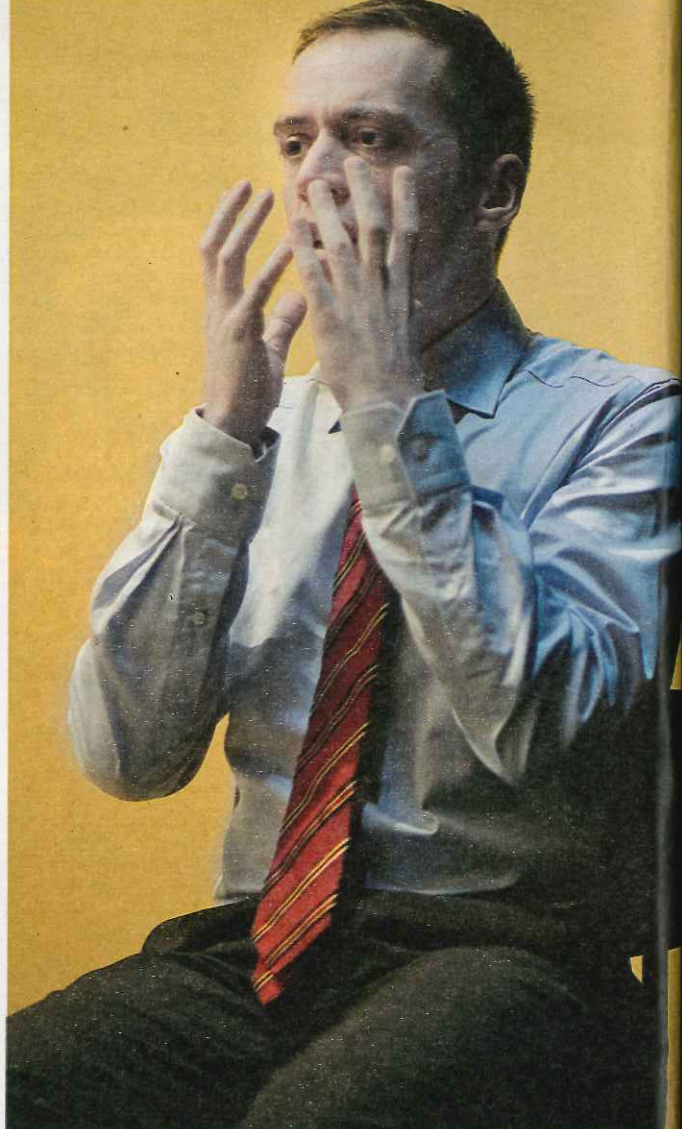


## The Young Vic's latest brings out the inner philistine in Christopher Hart

**S**imon Stephens received huge acclaim for his adaptation of Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, which won seven Oliviers, five Tonys and countless admiring theatregoers. He's also written powerful and impressive plays of his own — an early one called *Punk Rock*, set in a northern grammar school, was one of my favourites. Now he has decided to write something more poetic and lyrical, experimental, slow-moving, dreamlike...

Willem is a 34-year-old, mostly homosexual Dutchman with a little touch of hetero round the fringes. He's living in New York when he receives news that his younger brother, Pauli, has died. He flies back to Amsterdam for the funeral, just like Catullus returning home across the seas for his brother's burial in the famous 101st poem. He has a few drinks, smokes some American Spirit cigarettes, spends time with his parents, grieves, ponders, goes for a walk in the snow, feels a spasm of rage. Goes back to New York again. And, er, that's it. Oh, and he spends much of the time on stage with his kit off. I think this is meant to indicate that he is baring his soul to us, albeit in a woodenly literal kind of way. But you never feel he does. Willem remains a stolidly unengaging and uninteresting character. And since he's the only character here, that's a bit of a problem.

He's played by a Dutch actor, Eelco Smits, and the director is Ivo van Hove, who got raves at this same theatre last year for his *A View from the Bridge*; the production is a joint effort between the Young Vic and van



# The agony

Hove's Toneelgroep Amsterdam. Occasionally there are the sort of rants that hold our attention. Willem is quite funny on the insufferable smugness of certain European cities these days — Amsterdam, Berlin and Stockholm being particularly notable examples, along with London, of course — which fancy themselves such beacons of liberal enlightenment, tolerance and diversity. I wonder if it has anything to do with a

hangover from Protestantism?

"It struck me this morning that the windows in this city aren't there just so that people can look out of them. The windows in this city are there to demonstrate to the world just how civilised we are. Our tolerance shines like the snow in our windows and the warmth and the beauty of our interior designs and the generosity of the fruit in our fruit bowls. We can shove the f\*\*\*\*\* Africans and the Turks and the Surinamese out into Slotervaart and then congratulate ourselves with how tolerant we are and go and have another waffle."

These moments of bristling energy are all too rare, however, and much of the play passes in a fog of maundering, uninspiring reminiscence that tells us nothing and leaves us desperately bored. The minimalist beige and oatmeal interior of the set, containing



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**His occasional rants hold our attention** Eelco Smits as Willem

perfect summary of the mood of the entire western world. But here he only touches on this mood, lightly and delicately, lyrically and fleetingly, leaving you unsatisfied and wanting more, a lot more.

Plays as sensitive one-hour soliloquies aren't exactly to my taste, I must admit. I much prefer love stories, comedies, family squabbles, stirring battles (ideally against the French), people running off stage pursued by a bear, that sort of thing. "Comedy, love, a bit with a dog — that's what they want," as Geoffrey Rush's Philip Henslowe so memorably puts it in Shakespeare in Love. The action-free, drama-free hour-long emote, without highs or lows, twists or revelations, is not so much to theatregoers' taste, generally speaking. Song from Far Away even employs that tireddest of actorly tropes, the naked actor crouching down against a wall and howling to express grief. In the real world, people don't express grief in this way. Not ever. But on stage they do it all the time. Perhaps actor and director here should both have a look at I, an Actor by Nicholas Craig: Another Great Actor Explores Himself.

And when I'm faced with an actor with his kit off, for no discernible reason, telling me, "We exist in the gaps between the sounds that we make. We all die interrupted," my yawning inner philistine really starts clamouring to get out, down a swift pint and head for the nearest Billy Smart's circus. Perhaps one should at least applaud Stephens's artistic bravery here in trying something new. Nevertheless it's pretty much a failure as a piece of drama. **C**

■ **Song from Far Away**  
Young Vic, London SE1

★★

**THE CRITICS**

**of it**

only a standard lamp and an air-conditioning unit, doesn't help much either. The only other promising moment is when Willem describes a little girl dancing around the garden with a sparkler, writing her name in the night. Being in the melancholy mood he is, he reflects how "she had no idea how much sadness she was going to experience in her life", and soon he is having all sorts of apocalyptic thoughts about what's going to happen when the money runs out, when the antibiotics stop working and the oxygen thins. "It's done, we're done, it's over," he says.

Stephens observed in an interview only recently that although we live in times of profound safety, we all have this powerful sense that something terrible is about to happen: a