

Stay at home and read the book

Theatre

Brighton Rock

ALMEIDA THEATRE

TWO things struck me as I read Graham Greene's *Brighton Rock* last week for the first time since adolescence. The first was that the book remained the compulsive page-turner I had found it at 14, its atmospheric evocation of gangland Brighton in the 1930s, and its portrait of Pinkie, the psychopathic teenage anti-hero, both proving as chillingly addictive as ever.

My second impression took me by surprise. *Brighton Rock*, I discovered, is a truly nasty piece of work, a deeply misanthropic novel that betrays a continuous disgust at the depraved appetites of fallen humanity. Worse still, it seems to divide the world into Roman Catholics, who are interesting and worth saving, and the rest of the world, who aren't.

The book's earthy, good-hearted heroine, Ida Arnold, with her healthy appetite for booze and sex, is continuously mocked and degraded by Greene, for her concern is only with right and wrong. Greene's interest, however, is in good and evil, viewed from a strictly religious perspective, and he has far more sympathy with the vile Pinkie, a Catholic who knows he is damned, than with anyone else. Greene, in short, seems capable of loving the sinner, while openly despising everyone else.

It would be unrealistic to expect a stage musical to do full justice to the novel's fascinating spiritual and eschatological arguments, and I suppose we

should be grateful that they at least get an airing.

After all, the first words we hear Pinkie sing are "It's too late for salvation but I don't care/It's hell and damnation, too late for prayer."

Those lyrics could be by only one man, the egregious Don Black. When it comes to trite end-stopped lines, rhymes that never take you by surprise and ponderous statements of the bleeding obvious, he is in a class of his own. As on past occasions, the almost insulting



Memorably creepy: Michael Jibson and Sophia Ragavelas

superficiality of his work here once again scuppers the show.

The music is by the great film score writer John Barry. During passages of atmospheric incidental music, he is in fine form here, but he has been less successful with big, memorable tunes and, as a result, whenever the dialogue stops and the singing starts, it feels like an unnecessary interruption of the

narrative, rather than the vital heart of the show.

Giles Haverall has adapted the novel with fidelity and skill, with a couple of nods to the film version, and it's a real relief to encounter a proper book musical, rather than a turgid, sub-operatic through-sung affair. But director Michael Attenborough is unable to disguise the fact that Greene's story is far more potent than the songs and choreography that have beenrafted on to it, and when the cast started performing a ludicrously perky dance routine with deck chairs I felt like borrowing Pinkie's razor and slitting my own throat. What purpose is served by turning this great and disconcerting novel into yet another second-rate tune and toe show?

There are some strong performances. Michael Jibson makes a memorably creepy, pallid-faced Pinkie with a fine line in sudden violence, while Sophia Ragavelas is genuinely affecting as the pitifully innocent waitress who falls into his coils. And Harriet Thorpe captures the brassy brashness, if not the great heart, of Ida. There's also an evocative pier design by Lez Brotherston, and a hard-working supporting cast who do all they can to inject the show with the required edge of sleazy menace.

Nevertheless, one emerges from the theatre feeling that the whole elaborate exercise has been almost entirely pointless, and that audiences would be far better occupied staying at home and reading the book.

Tickets: 020 7359 4404.

This review appeared in later editions yesterday.

Charles Spencer