

Life & Times Theatre

I'M NOT RUNNING

National Theatre, London,
until 31 January 2019

WILL SHE? WON'T SHE?

In the 2001 general election Dr Richard Taylor, previously a consultant physician at Kidderminster General Hospital, stood as an independent candidate, largely on the single issue of the closure of the hospital's Accident and Emergency department. He annihilated the opposition, unseating the Labour member and coming in with a majority of 18 000. He remained at Westminster for 10 years.

During the previous decade David Hare had written three highly acclaimed plays about British institutions — the clergy (*Racing Demon*, 1990), the law (*Murmuring Judges*, 1991), and politics (*The Absence of War*, 1993). In 2006, *The Vertical Hour* opened on Broadway, not in London, because of a falling out with the National Theatre. The central topic of the play was the Iraq War. One of the characters, played by Bill Nighy, was Oliver Lucas, who had been a renal physician, now working in general practice and palliative care. He described the Iraq campaign as a botched operation carried out by inept surgeons.

Now, in *I'm Not Running*, Hare takes on the health service and Labour politics among, characteristically, a handful of other big ideas, and one of his recurrent themes — the interplay between private lives and public action.

Siân Brooke and Alex Hassell in *I'm Not Running* by David Hare. Photo: Mark Douet.



Patricia Gibson trained in medicine at Newcastle where she had an unsatisfactory relationship with handsome Jack Gould, son of a famous left-wing academic. Her mother, meanwhile, was drinking herself to death in Hastings, the town of Hare's birth. Later, while working in Corby Hospital, she is warned by a patient whose life she has saved by doing an emergency tracheostomy, that the hospital has become the target of government cuts and will be closed down. She leads a successful campaign to save the hospital, and becomes a celebrity — the angel of the NHS. The world of public life is at her feet. She, like Richard Taylor, is elected to parliament where, unsurprisingly, she comes across Jack, now a smooth career Labour politician with high ambitions. The power relationships and emotional dynamics of their student affair come back to haunt them as they manoeuvre and bicker about who should be going for the top job — will she run or won't she?

Gibson's press officer and Gould's parliamentary assistant bring additional interest to the story, although it could almost have been told without them. Indeed, I enjoyed this play partly for what it didn't contain — there was no clever dickery with sets or special effects, no music as far as I can remember, and no daft costumes. The action — most of it two-handed dialogue — takes place in a kind



Joshua McGuire and Siân Brooke in *I'm Not Running* by David Hare. Photo: Mark Douet.

of three-dimensional triangle of which the audience is the hypotenuse, placed in the middle of a large dark stage, which focuses the mind on the words. There are also some very funny press conferences and a lot of memorable sparring in the general areas of male:female relationships, fidelity, and honesty. My attention hardly wavered, and I would certainly have given the play more stars than a number of the broadsheet reviewers.

Seeing *I'm Not Running* was a nice counterpoint to Alan Bennett's new play *Hallelujah*, which I saw at the Bridge Theatre — the beautiful new theatre bang opposite the Tower of London — a few weeks ago. Bennett's was an altogether more jittery and anxious portrayal of the declining health and social care infrastructure, and the dubious joys of community singing in an old people's home. At 71, and 13 years Bennett's junior, Hare has plenty of time to take a more forensic look at the sunlit uplands.

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I'm Not Running is at the National Theatre, London, until 31 January. On that date the final performance, which starts at 7 pm, will be screened nationally via the excellent NT Live.

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