

# on death



Marie de Hennezel is a psychologist in a Parisian hospice, who has spent several years 'accompanying' people towards death, believing firmly that 'an act of witness... has value' at such a 'crowning moment'. I reproduce such direct quotations not to claim that they are used euphemistically or to give false dignity to de Hennezel's work, but because, on the contrary, they best describe her extraordinary sensitivity and delicacy in her approach to this subject. Her book *Intimate Death*, like Sacks's *The Man Who Mistook His Wife For A Hat*, has now inspired a remarkable stage piece.

Mick Gordon's approach in adapting and directing *On Death* is, like Peter Brook's version of Sacks, *L'Homme qui...*, concerned at every moment that these real experiences and conditions should not be cheapened or exploited by turning them into "theatre". Gillian Barge, who plays Marie, first enters in propria persona and makes a few brief remarks to us before assuming her role, which she performs with a similar honest, underplayed naturalism. Every one of the five other performers takes similar pains to be truthful rather than dramatic; any other approach would somehow be an insult to the subject matter. Characters matter-of-factly explain to us the nature and progress of their cancers, AIDS-related or other degenerative disease before lying flat on the hospital bed which dominates the sparse, neutral set. No moment of death is played as more than a few seconds of silence and stillness, after which the actor simply and without affectation leaves the bed and the stage.

This is a kind of theatre so scrupulous to avoid apparent artifice that when, on the night I attended, a member of the audience was overcome by emotion, one of the actors on the stage (playing, as it happened, a doctor) unobtrusively tended to her and led her out; a few minutes later, Mick Gordon made a brief appearance to let the rest of us know that the woman was all right, and this broke neither the mood nor the flow of the 90-minute evening.

Approaches to death vary, but the common thread is that we, the living, should be grateful to the dying for their lessons, and above all that a kind of permission to die is required that we pay them the respect of not holding on. Gordon's simple, affecting production does due honour to both de Hennezel's work and its subject, and will resonate profoundly with anyone who has ever felt the bereavement, less of a death than of a dying.