

The Guardian



The Contingency Plan

Bush, London

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Fri 8 May 2009 00.01 BST

We have waited a long time for a play that dealt comprehensively with climate change. Steve Waters has generously provided two, *On The Beach* and *Resilience*; they can be viewed independently, but only make total sense seen as a pair. Their virtue is that they not only act as an urgent wake-up call, but they present the issues in compelling human terms.

On The Beach is, at heart, a father-son drama. Will Paxton, a glaciologist, returns to his Norfolk family home from Antarctica convinced the polar melt will cause catastrophically swollen sea-levels. He confronts his father who 34 years previously reached similar conclusions, was ignored by government, and has retreated into hermetic obduracy. Will, however, is determined to be heard; in *Resilience* we see him, aided by his civil servant lover, putting his case to Whitehall ministers in a future Cameron government. He finds himself the victim of departmental rivalries and cautious advisers; and, when action is finally taken, it is too late to avert a national crisis.

Avoiding preachiness, Waters presents his arguments through action. And he is at his best in the first act of *Resilience* which, for sheer emotional intensity, has no rival on the London

stage. Following a Shavian pattern, Waters presents us with a passionate dialectic between two men, who each believes he is right. The setting is the office of the new climate change minister. On one hand we have the resident adviser, played with superbly emphatic vigour by Robin Soans, who argues for methodical mitigation of the effects of rising sea-levels. Against him stands Will, played with fine escalating desperation by Geoffrey Streatfeild, who puts the case for immediate action including more sea defences and readiness for evacuation of all coastal settlements. It is a ding-dong battle invested with mounting ferocity.

Waters' other great asset is that he makes you interested in the people involved. In the first play there is real pathos in the portrait of Will's father, given a masterly performance by Soans, who rejects the loving concern of Susan Brown as his wife and waits for the sea to engulf them in confirmation of his theories. And in the second play the new minister, played with Old Etonian chumminess by David Bark-Jones, is horribly credible in his wilful blindness to reality and his belief there is something almost festive about a national crisis. Despite a good performance from Stephanie Street as an ambitious civil servant, the love interest is rather patchily explored. And, although the plays are well directed by Michael Longhurst and Tamara Harvey respectively, the second has too many false climaxes for its own good. But the flaws pale beside Waters' massive achievement which is to have made the most important issue of our times into engrossing theatre.

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