



Rising star excels as O'Neill's teen rebel

REVIEW

AH, WILDERNESS!

Young Vic, SE1

★★★★☆

HENRY HITCHINGS

AH, WILDERNESS! is regarded as the one truly comic play written by Eugene O'Neill, America's great master of tragedy. It's a story of coming-of-age, atmospheric and romantic. But an O'Neill comedy is no less of an oxymoron than soft rock or affordable housing.

The most compelling reason to see this revival is rising star George MacKay, as rebellious 16-year-old Richard Miller. MacKay's eloquent performance captures Richard's mix of idealism and restlessness.

O'Neill presents a portrait of the adolescence he apparently wished he'd had (though he described it as "an exact evocation of the mood of a dead past"). Set in 1906 in small-town Connecticut, the play pictures a largely benign family stirred up by a pretty quaint version of teenage angst. Richard's

parents are sensible Essie (Janie Dee) and genial newspaper owner Nat (Martin Marquez). Although his anarchic urges cause tempers to fray, we sense tolerance will prevail, especially with his self-important brother Arthur (Ashley Zhangazha) tinkling away on the piano to soften Essie's anxiety.

Meanwhile addiction, a favourite theme for O'Neill, is embodied by Dominic Rowan's Sid, an incurable drunk. But his blunders are mainly a source of amusement, and only in his relationship with Susannah Wise's sad Lily is there real poignancy.

Natalie Abrahami's production trims the text to an hour and three quarters and locates the action in the middle of a giant sand dune. The magic dust that pervades Dick Bird's design calls to mind the shifting sands of time, but the dreaminess of this staging can't mask the play's inherent slightness.

■ *Until May 23 (020 7922 2922, youngvic.org)*

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