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Lingua Franca, Finborough Theatre, London

[Michael Coveney](#) | Monday 19 July 2010 | [0](#) comments



Even before his hilarious "soldiers in skirts" vaudeville *Privates on Parade* over 30 years ago, Peter Nichols (who's now a spry 82) had written enough good plays to make his name. Sightings are rare these days, but he's never stopped writing, and like his near contemporary and "unfashionable" fellow cynic, the late Peter Barnes, he's well overdue some major revivals.

Lingua Franca had slipped through the net until director Michael Gieleta revived it at a drama school last year: now, he's been encouraged to mount a fuller version in the tiny, suffocating Finborough, and while the piece is not a patch on *Privates*, it's well worth the detour to follow the fortunes of Private Steven

Flowers in a Florence language school in 1955.

Nichols includes a few tart, funny pages on his stint in the Florentine sun in his matchless autobiography, *Feeling You're Behind*, pointing out that he had something in common with James Joyce and Wilfred Owen in teaching English in a Berlitz school. But he didn't really fit in: "The students began to play me up, giggling when I asked them if a glass was a fork or, as time went on and boredom set in, if a pencil was an elephant."

Steven, played with a brittle sense of his own worth by Chris New, says the war was "kids' stuff compared to what's coming" while toying with the affections of a German teacher, Heidi Schumann (Natalie Walter), whom he seduces, viciously, and the fawn-like Peggy Carmichael (Charlotte Randle) whom he leads on, unforgivably.

The voice of bitter, better experience is heard from both Rula Lenska's displaced Russian Jewess and Ian Gelder's head-shaking neutralised old wiseacre, while the head of the school, a two-timing Don Juan (Enzo Cilenti), who rents out rooms to the teachers he fancies, finds his premises threatened by protests in the classroom and fall-out in the staff room. It's not classic Nichols, but deeply felt and continuously engaging.

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