

STRATFORD EAST

Michael Billington

Back mean Season 12/14 Alterations

THE TITLE of Michael Abbensetts' *Alterations* at the Theatre Royal, Stratford East, has a double-edge to it. It literally refers to alterations to hundreds of pairs of trousers being carried out in a rickety sweatshop by a West Indian tailor and his staff. But it also hints at drastic changes in lifestyle by the black community as they absorb the white, business work-ethic. A rich theme but you feel Mr Abbensetts can't entirely make up his mind where he stands on it.

He has devised a classically simple situation. The hero, Walker, has just over a day in which to shorten a wealth of trousers for a Jewish wholesaler: if he can bring the order in on time, he will fulfill his dream of buying the lease on the shop. But, in the interim, he has to deal with the desertion of his neglected wife and his white mistress, petty sabotage by a hipster-helper who fancies himself as a film-maker or RSC actor and the sundry discontents of an ambitious young gofer and an old trusty with an expectant wife. The question is: will he make it on time?

That gives the play its impetus. But far more interesting is Walker's wholesale adoption of Tory values: when his staff discuss the oppressive daily racism of



Stitches in time: Alister Bain in Alterations — picture by Douglas Jeffrey

British life, he cries "making money is the best revenge I know" and even mutters something about the need to get on our bikes. Mr Abbensetts (revising an earlier 1978 version of the same play) is the first black dramatist I know of to have pinned down this particular form of post-Caribbean Thatcherism.

But, while his observation is shrewd, his attitude is

deeply divided. He paints a vivid picture of the deprivations imposed by the work-ethic both in terms of communal sense and personal happiness (though to lose both wife and mistress in one day looks like carelessness). Yet he also wants to show his hero winning through and beating the resident locals (including the Asians and the Jews) at their own game. Mr Abbensetts has tapped into a good subject of changing West Indian values; but the question he leaves unresolved is whether this kind of workaholic assimilation represents victory or defeat.

The ambiguity is reinforced by the bizarre casting of Rudolph Walker as the hero. Mr Walker, one of the best actors around, is like a theatrical Viv Richards: he exudes such natural power and authority it is a bit hard to see him as a hard-pressed, back-to-the-wall grafter sweating his way to the top.

Although Steve Addison's production is too laid-back there is lively support from Jim Findley as the would-be thesp ("It seems every other black man in London thinks he can act" someone cruelly remarks) and from Gary Beadle as an ambitious young high-flier. Significantly, Stratford's predominantly black audience

rejoiced in the hero's reverses: the tension in a slightly unsure play springs from the fact that a part of Mr Abbensetts wants them to share in his success.

COVENT GARDEN

