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# 4000 Miles, Minerva Theatre, Chichester review - brilliant Atkins in a tender play

A classy evening with authentic characters and Dame Eileen in a transparent blouse

by [Ismene Brown](#) | Saturday, 13 May 2023

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Smoke gets in their eyes: Sebastian Croft and Eileen Atkins as grandson and grandmother share a reefer in Amy Herzog's 4000 Miles

All images Manuel Harlan

Of all the theatrical dames, Eileen Atkins is the one with the least predictable face. She doesn't bring promises in advance of warm or cuddly, or acerbic or flirtatious. She plays her part like a superb poker player, indeed like someone who is also herself a scriptwriter - she never gives the game away. There's a wrenching moment late on in Amy Herzog's *4000 Miles* when Atkins allows the full weight of her character's very long life hit her, and her face simply empties of expression, becomes a mask of dispassionate tragedy. The effect is of time freezing for a couple of beats. It could be a moment of senile brain failure, or it might be almost its opposite, a moment of total awareness of the way the sands of time pan out.

At any rate, it is utterly unsentimental and quite brilliant, Atkins at 88 deploying the full power of her skills, the more magnetic because she uses such a light touch. And I fancy that's not age restraining her touch, it's her application to this play,

“Though  
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be 89, the delay  
has done  
nothing to blunt  
her fine edge  
and timing”

rating



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which is about what happens when Vera Joseph, 91-year-old Communist and Greenwich Village recluse, is surprised without her teeth and hearing aids by her grandson turning up with his bicycle in the middle of the night.

Leo, 21, has biked (just possibly 4,000 miles) all the way across America from Seattle to New York, smelly, bug-ridden, and with a disarming Plan B to pitch his tent in Manhattan for a couple of days before cycling back. But fortunately the grandma (or rather step-grandma) he hasn't seen since childhood orders him into the shower and puts his filthy biking gear in the washing machine. (Atkins' face as she folds his tight jersey kit is a picture of both horror at the frivolous things young people do for fun now and a sneaky bit of desire.) Peter McKintosh's set, expertly evoking an old leftie's flat, overflowing with political books and awful Cuban souvenirs, is a cocoon for mutual discoveries about growing up and growing old, and no prizes for guessing which is the more painful rite of passage.

In 2020 Herzog's sweet play was on the Old Vic schedule with Atkins and the beautiful filmstar Timothée Chalamet, but Covid saw to that. Though Atkins will soon be 89, the delay has done nothing to blunt her fine edge and timing, and it's also now directed by Sir Richard Eyre – the former National Theatre boss whose increasing interest in the experiences of getting old showed up in his films *Iris* and currently *Allelujah*. The result is a classy evening in the Minerva Theatre, an absorbing staging of a play of hints and questions that are not necessarily fully unfolded – authentic character work, then.

With Chalamet gone, another young screen heart-throb, Sebastian Croft (*Game of Thrones* and *Heartstopper*,



**pictured above right**), plays Leo with a warm balance of laddish self-absorption and sometimes genuine connection with Vera – they confer hilariously over a reefer (**see main image**), and agree they don't want to talk about his mother, her step-daughter, but we gradually find that their evasiveness does them no favours.

In fact one telling sub-theme of Herzog's is that people very rarely talk about what is uppermost in their mind or life. With her activist husband and friends all dead, old Vera has lost her political train of thought, and her only conversations now involve the macabre amusement of shouting down the phone at the woman in the flat nextdoor, who appears to be even more forgetful and immobile than she is.

Meanwhile Leo doesn't discuss for a long time what went wrong on his bike trip – a dreadful event – and lets out some questionable things about his behaviour with his adopted sister that have had a terrible effect on his mother. As with Vera, the more one sees of him the less straightforward he seems – a cunning unfolding of character by Herzog – but he and Vera largely spare each other judgment.



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Happily two girls who turn up to see Leo do judge, and provide the grit and challenge that grandson and grandmother are dodging. Amanda, a larger-than-life first-generation Chinese-American girl played sparkily (in costume as in manner) by Elizabeth Chu, is appalled that Vera was a Communist activist, given the traumatic experiences undergone under Chinese Communism by her own parents.

And Nell Barlow (**pictured above**) very touchingly plays Bec, Leo's shy former girlfriend who dropped out of the bike ride and is now at university in New York, uncomfortable with her feelings about Leo, and who gets furious that Vera never complained about her late husband's serial adultery. The girls are vital in sharpening our focus on the central pair's moral softnesses.

They also demonstrate another of the production's great delights, McKintosh's costume design. Bec's garishly patterned leggings and Amanda's shrieking sockette-and-stacked-sandals look with micro skirt are countered by the phantom ghostliness of Vera's aged white nightie as she flits past her walls of books scaring the pants off the youngsters, all brilliant situational expressions of character.

Even better is the funeral drab worn by Vera to her unseen neighbour's funeral, a black suit and beret over a blatantly transparent pink chiffon blouse (**pictured right**). When Leo protests, his step-grandmother raps back that the bra is meant to be seen, "it goes". With Atkins, the sartorial choice isn't a signal of senility but a running up of the flag for bloody-minded personality. We should all hope to be as undimmed as she is when we're nearly 90.



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