



China old and new – a symbolic snoop

Gangster gunfire vying with the bars of Andrew Lloyd Webber musicals on opening night; corpses in hi-tech trainers, a manic glint in their dead eyes. These were some of the symbols of the New China as depicted in the 'colour' pieces of Shanghai journalist Lin Jun in John Fletcher's absorbing play **Deadline** (R4, Thursday, October 16).

Ordered out to the Old China by his editor (John Rowe) a vista of rural making-do and ancient superstitions opened up. The deadline of the title was both the journalistic one and, the suicides of old people wishing to beat the new ban on cremation-only funerals. They believed that the body must be buried whole in order to make the journey to the afterlife.

Kim Wall's feature writer was a self-styled urban sophisticate who, under the subtle tutelage of the ancient villager Yu Feng, (Mary Wimbush) came to see how things old and venerable can supplement the new and shiny.

Directed by Gordon House and with performances which echoed the characters' quest for a way through the jumble of corruption, red tape and primitive creed, the play was also an allegory of changing societies.

Untimely death and shifting mores was also the theme of **Morning Dove** (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation for BBC World Service, Saturday, October 18). Emil Sher's moving play was

partly based on the court transcripts of a farmer who ended his sick daughter's life.

Here RH Thomson played the father of a cerebral palsy sufferer who decided that euthanasia was the kindest option. While the court asked for whom that was kindest, the living nightmare of the family was played out in nondescript conversation mixed with moral debate, rooting the family firmly in reality.

Poignantly, a Down's syndrome boy, bright enough to be aware of his condition, feared that he might be exterminated. This character boldly symbolised the fears of many about euthanasia.

Moral debate can, of course, take place wherever you fancy. In the case of Edward Thwaites, willing away the morning in the bath while exploring the avenues and cul-de-sacs of his memory, seemed a reasonable enough proposition. But, as he found in **Under the Loofah Tree** (R4, Saturday, October 18) this was to the agitation of those who beat upon the bathroom door.

Not so much kitchen sink as bathtub drama, this play written by Giles Cooper in 1958 had a real feel of the fifties about it, although this was a 1975 production, directed by Desmond Briscoe and repeated as part of the BBC's 75th anniversary celebrations.

It was intended as a vehicle to show off the talents of the



Comic concoctions – (left to right) Jean Heywood, Liz Smith and Barbara Dickson in Dinner Ladies on Radio 4

inventive Radiophonic Workshop. This it did with many a gurgie, splash and rumble of far-off memory or fresh infusion of hot water. Edward Thwaites (Cyril Shaps) had a vision of his father, then reflected on just how he had come to marry the shrill domestic

downstairs (Kathleen Helme).

So often an apparently random collision of circumstances can change the course of a life. In Timothy Daly's black comedy **A Lapse in Behaviour** (Australian Broadcasting Corporation for BBC World Service, Saturday, October

11), a tone deaf woman's murder of a Beethoven sonata led to her own death.

The intrusion of Lois Rowntree (Judy Farr) into the neatly-ordered life of piano teacher and music lover Harold Carpenter (Peter Carroll) was orchestrated to great comic effect. Her relentless chatter, her lack of legato, and preponderance of "choppy staccato" reached its pitch as she banged her way through one of Harold's favourite pieces.

Beethoven had suffered from 13 diseases, she shrieked, trying to think of a similar number herself. After "leprosy!", she paused and then exclaimed "brain tumour!". In the pause that followed, Harold hit her over the head with something hard. The farce of the gravedigging in the turnip patch and his entrapment by the police was less successful: the humour was in the giddy pairing of teacher and terrible student.

Two father and son pairs collaborated in the entertaining **Richard Barton – General Practitioner!** (R4, Saturday, October 18). Lol Mason, the son of Edward J Mason who wrote the first episode of Dick Barton – Special Agent! in 1946 penned this update.

The now retired private eye (played by Moray Watson as the older man and Julian Dutton as the younger) was recovering from

an illness at the home of his son, a country GP (Robert Bathurst). Dick came to the rescue, service revolver and corny quip at the ready when his daughter-in-law (Sally Phillips) was in trouble.

Dinner Ladies (Bona Lattie Productions for R4, from Wednesday, October 22) was a comic confection behind the scenes at a school canteen, with sparky interplay between Brigit Forsyth, Barbara Dickson, Liz Smith and Jean Heywood. With the kitchen viragos ready to bid for the contract to produce the dinners, the scene was set, at the end of episode one, for more dramas than merely lumpy custard.

Stage reviewer David Self's delightful monologue, **Blue Rabbit** (BBC Pebble Mill for R4, Tuesday, October 14) was, unfortunately, a one off. Performed with a lugubrious knowingship by Jo Brand, it told of a group of cuddly toys immortalised in children's books by a "mean-minded misogynist" as they term him.

A satire on reality and fantasy, on political correctness versus dyed-in-the-wool gruffness, and on the politics of gender, it married humour with insight.