

Theatre

A WOMAN IN WAITING: OXFORD PLAYHOUSE

The nationwide tour of *A Woman in Waiting*, which stopped off last weekend at the Oxford Playhouse, begins with an array of impressive credentials. Its UK producers are Fifth Amendment (co-producers of Lorca's *Yerma*, currently at The Theatre, Chipping Norton) and its director-creator is Yael Farber who first presented it at the acclaimed Joseph Papp Theatre in Manhattan. Its awards include a Fringe First at Edinburgh last year.

And that's without even mentioning the star solo performer Thembi Mtshali, who contributes not only her versatile skills as singer, actress and dancer but the very core of the performance. For it is her own life story of growing up a Zulu child under South Africa's cruel apartheid regime.

Because events are shown through the female experience, stress is laid on patience, endurance, the acceptance of lowliness, and — a word much repeated — waiting.

Mtshali transforms her voice and movements into those of a little girl as she waits — for Christmas, for her parents' annual visit, for the day she can join them in Durban borne on a rattling, shaking bus which she mimes brilliantly.

The city crowds, noise and jostle appal her. Worst of all, she sees her beloved mother humbled and cowed before her shouting, fat, white employer. And she, in turn, accepts a menial role, leaving her baby for long hours while she toils as a nursemaid and skivvy; she too learns to lower her eyes and voice before the dominant white bosses.

She shudders with fear and cold during a night raid arrest — more excellent miming by Mtshali. Even worse, although she loves and cherishes the white children in her care, she realises how many career choices they have in comparison with their black brethren, even — horrors! — being a soldier or policeman. "God



Resilience . . . Thembi Mtshali in A Woman in Waiting

protect my children from you" becomes her lullaby.

Mtshali's personal story ends happily, with her escape to international fame, and she shares the hopes of the new South Africa proud to vote for the first time. But she leaves us remembering silent sufferings and lasting scars. We can all learn from this tale of oppression and resilience.

Jeannine Alton