

Tragedy sharpens Jimmy's act

JIMMY ELLIS

The Bedsit by Paul Sellar at The Assembly Rooms until August 30

VETERAN Irish actor Jimmy Ellis knows all about the darker side of life – both on and off the stage.

The former Z-Cars star is currently wowing audiences with a superb performance as a gunman vainly trying to escape the sins and faults of his brutal youth in the Fringe production *The Bedsit*.

For Ellis – the son of a Belfast shipyard worker – the play is a constant reminder of the religious tensions and bigotry which have torn his homeland apart for so long.

But the violence is also a chilling throw-back to his darkest day – when he learnt that his eldest son had been stabbed to death in London.

Adam Ellis was fishing on a canal in Notting Hill when a mugger attacked him and got away with just £1.20.

"Adam was only 28 when he was murdered – it was just so mindless," says the actor. "It happened 11 years ago but I still think about him every day. I look at his photograph a lot.

"He was knifed – it was all very nasty. Someone picked a quarrel with him and left him in a pool of blood."

Now, long after the tragedy, Ellis, who is also an accomplished published poet, is coming to terms with his loss.

"At last I've managed to get off my chest how I feel about it by writing an elegy. That kind of tragedy deepens your awareness of what is important in life."

Like almost anyone from the Province, Ellis has also been touched by the atrocities of the Troubles.

"I remember being in Belfast when there were car bombs going off all over the place – it was pretty heavy going for a while.



FATHER FIGURE: Jimmy Ellis has taken everything life can throw at him in a long and distinguished acting career

"But I always got a greater sense of terror when I was in Derry because I didn't know my way around.

"But sure, I know people who went the opposite way from me and got involved in the violence."

Ellis was brought up in what he calls the

Protestant tradition, but has no time for the sectarianism which has caused so much anguish.

"It just saddens me, as it saddened my father before me, to see working men divided by religion when they should have been united."

The *Bedsit* marks Ellis's return to the

Edinburgh Festival – he first appeared here 41 years ago. Despite staying away for so long, he holds a special affection for the Capital.

"It's just the luck of the draw that I haven't been back. I've always been fascinated by the Festival – it's got all the excitement of a major world event now.

It's also such a wonderful historic city in a very beautiful setting."

Ellis, 68, has an obvious affection for *The Bedsit*, which was written by previously unknown London playwright Paul Sellar, and has devoted a good deal of time and energy to making it an undoubted success.

He plays Brady, an ageing drunken gunman, ashamed of his past and living out a crisis of conscience in the miserable squalor of a London bedsit.

Into his life come two hostile young men with mysterious but certainly menacing intentions.

Production

Sharp, witty dialogue and strong performances by the two co-stars Gerard Rooney and James Hartman all play a pivotal role in the production. But in the end it's Jimmy Ellis who makes the play. He is back on top after a rollercoaster career which included a 16-year stint as Bert Lynch on *Z-Cars* and acclaimed roles in award-winning movies like Alan Bleasdale's *No Surrender* and Jimmy McGovern's *Priest*.

Along the way, he's had to endure personal tragedy and financial worries. But now, he's back doing what he's best at – giving a stunning stage performance and showing us just what a fine and underrated actor he is.

"I don't think of this play as specifically being about the Irish troubles, this scenario could be staged anywhere – I just see it as being about three men who are caught up in a game where the stakes are life and death. I think the theatre business and the company of the young and talented people I work with is very important to me.

"Sure I pass on advice to them, but I also learn so much from being with the young generation. We work very well together."

John Munro