

# Guardian angel

MARTIN DOYLE hears why distinguished Irish screen actor Jimmy Ellis is acting in a pub theatre in west London.

Jimmy Ellis, the Irish actor known to millions as Bert Lynch in *Z Cars*, will be stepping across the road from his London flat to his local pub for the next few weeks to star in a new play in the theatre upstairs, a rare opportunity to see a great actor in so intimate a space.

In *The Bedsit* by Paul Sellar, Ellis plays Brady, a middle-aged Northern Irishman, lying low in a dingy bedsit, clutching his Bible and reflecting on his shadowy past which is just about to catch up with him. The play is "a short, sharp, surreal drama which explores the terror of being the hunter and the hunted." The playwright is highly regarded — "very promising and extremely funny" (*The Times*) — and Ellis too is full of praise. "I was interested in the play for the quality of the writing," he says over a pint.

"I believe in new writing. You're not going to get any returns from it other than the satisfaction of making new work stand up. I was lazy. I said, if it's on in my local pub so I only have to walk across the road, I'll do it for a limited period of time. I was going to Romania to do a film, which will pay the rent to Christmas so I can indulge myself. At my age I'm not looking to prove anything but I do like to play a decent part rather than just earn my corn. Hack work always has to be done, but I've been very lucky to have worked with quality writers like Anne Devlin and Graham Reid." Indeed, Jimmy Ellis has a string of great roles to his name, from the blind boxer in Alan Bleasdale's blackly comic *No Surrender* to the alcoholic priest in Jimmy McGovern's *Priest*. After Bert Lynch, though, he is probably

best remembered for his role as Kenneth Branagh's boozing, brawling father in Graham Reid's *Billy* plays in the early eighties. What was it like working with Branagh? "Well," he says, "we didn't know he was Kenneth Branagh back then."

Originally from Belfast, the son of a sheet-metal worker in the shipyards, Ellis won a scholarship to Queens but left to be an actor, though he still has academic leanings. He is working on a translation of a Romanian folk-tale, about a good shepherd figure, which he hopes might serve as an elegy to his eldest son, a care worker who was stabbed to death in a street robbery. Jimmy Ellis is a gregarious figure but he has known more than his fair share of grief.

The actor is from the Protestant tradition but his political ethos is one of work-



Jimmy Ellis.

ing-class solidarity. "I was brought up with the belief that Ireland's troubles were not based on religion. I've always seen them in terms of political exploitation, the playing of the Orange card."

Does this play have anything to say on the Troubles? "It has something to say about idealism, ruthlessness, disillusion. But plays are not the way to solve problems. I think they can show the human predicament but I think a partisan play is a mistake. But I'm not against anything if it's good, if it works."

Lynch was a positive Irish role model. "It was running for an awful long time. I always felt I was representing a kind of Irishness with a name like Lynch. It was very funny. When Jack Lynch became Taoiseach, for a time people used to call me Jack."

Once, however, "this writer came in with the attitude that he was going to be the first writer to write a good episode of *Z Cars*. It was bang in the middle of the Troubles. I can't remember if I was meant to be a Catholic or Protestant but this guy decided he was going

to carve up my whole background, put either an Orange or green flag in my hand. I agonised about this. Lynch had reached the proportions of a national figure, having gone 12 years as Mr. Irishman. I went to the producer and said I think this is a mistake. This is going to make it partisan. I felt I was representing Irish dacency all round and not any particular aspect."

■ Jimmy Ellis stars in *The Bedsit* at The Tabard Theatre, 2 Bath Road, Chiswick, London W4, until November 23. Box-office: 0181-995 6035.