

OPERA

Baby Doll

Cottesloe

Tom Sutcliffe

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THE Springboards season of new work at the National Theatre is straying riskily into someone else's garden venture with the premiere of Andrew Poppy's opera *Baby Doll*, based on Tennessee Williams. This is, after all, where professionals at ENO and elsewhere fear to tread. But the skill and imagination that Poppy brings to his small-scale instrumental accompaniment are initially very encouraging. Using amplified piano, violin, banjo or electric guitar, clarinet or bass clarinet and trombone (sometimes muted) he sets the atmosphere and shapes the scenes pleasingly.

The frustration is the anonymity of the melodic lines with which the three singers have to create their characters and dialogues, and the sense that all too often precise pitch and harmonic conviction are the last things Poppy has on his mind.

Poppy's *Baby Doll* is not far short

of 100 minutes without an interval. The situation and staging (a whimsical affair by Julia Bardsley) are not completely static, but what happens in this distillation of the familiar Southern material is arty and rather unconvincingly self-conscious. In the title role, Fiona O'Neill works impressively well, and almost manages to sound the right accent in her singing. John Upperton is frank and forward, robustly piercing as Silva.

THEATRE

Oktoberfest

Lyric Studio

Michael Billington

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STOCKS in Odon von Horvath have been rising as those in his contemporary Brecht plummet: *Oktoberfest* (Kasimir and Karoline in German) is the sixth Horvath play London has seen in recent years. And, even in Kevin Knight's rather heavy-footed British premiere production at the Lyric Studio, it emerges as a weirdly fascinating piece that taps memories of Otto

Baby Doll May 1993

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