

## MICHAEL BILLINGTON on a cannily camp reading of *Les Parents Terribles*, Cocteau's tale of erotic mayhem

# It's a family affair

**G**OOD to find our lately Europhobic the National Theatre reviving Cocteau's *Les Parents Terribles* at the Lyttelton in time for the opening of the Channel Tunnel. Even better to find that neither translator Jeremy Sams nor director Sean Mathias treats this 1938 story of erotic mayhem among the Parisian bourgeois-decadents with total seriousness: it comes across like a camp version of *Oedipus Rex*.

I suspect Cocteau himself was writing slightly with tongue in cheek. His heroine, Yvonne, is a slovenly, bedridden, incestuous diabetic. Her husband George — once passionately loved by her spinster sister Leo — devotes his days to developing an underwater sub-machine gun. And the trouble starts when their son Michael announces he has fallen for a young book-binder,

Madeleine. The news drives his mother into a state of possessive frenzy and his father to despair, since Madeleine is also his own mistress.

You could treat the play as high tragedy but, as Jacques Guicharnaud brilliantly pointed out, the cosmos surrounding Cocteau's characters is not that of a great moral order but a mere Coney Island contraption. You could see the play as a political study in class-decline, but these bourgeois bohemians are too hermetic to be representative of anything beyond themselves. In Sams's witty translation, the play comes across as a piece of self-sustaining irony that owes as much to Feydeau as to classical tragedy.

That note of theatrical introversion is nicely captured by Mathias's production and Stephen Brimson Lewis's design: the sound of a wailing,

druggy sax ushers us into a ramshackle maternal boudoir and for the second act we are confronted by the world's biggest spiral staircase. I don't think it's a good idea — so soon after *The Birthday Party* — to have the set grindingly trucked back at the end, but the production style neatly matches Cocteau's own floridly self-conscious theatricality.

So too does the acting, which ignores polite restraint. You feel that Sheila Gish's blowsy Yvonne only just manages to hold herself back from chewing the scenery. Alan Howard's goggled inventor greets the news that his son has coincidentally fallen for his own mistress with a cry of "How could it happen in a city this size?" And Frances de la Tour is regally imperious as the kindly Leo. I don't think it's a great play. But it's a fascinating exhibit from the world of pre-war camp put across by Mathias and his team with the right mad panache.

Box-office details: 071-928 2252.

## Billington On Les Parents

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