

Strindberg's Dance Of Death at the Almeida is an emotional, tragi-comic roller-coaster from the front line of the sex war

Death warmed up to fever pitch

Michael Billington

THEATRE, at its best, is a shared ritual: we feel we have gone through some life-changing experience with the characters. And Peter Stormare's fine revival of Strindberg's *The Dance Of Death* at the Almeida leaves us as wrung through as O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night*: it's as if we've been on an exhausting emotional roller-coaster ride that takes us from bilious comedy to the depths of tragedy.

Strindberg's play — of which we only get part one here — deals with an extreme situation: Edgar, a brutal army captain, and Alice, his vengeful wife, live in sullen isolation in a Swedish island fortress. After 25 years of married hell, they still search for new ways to draw blood. And when Kurt, Alice's cousin, strays into this battle-scarred arena,

they use him as ally, audience and victim of their vampiric tendencies before finally settling for an exhausted truce.

Life, we may argue, is not lived at this insane fever-pitch. But what Stormare's production brings out is the universality rather than the oddity of the situation. As superbly played by John Neville and Gemma Jones, Edgar and Alice are more than duellists in an unending sex-war. They are vulnerable mortals bound together both by a weary complicity and terror of the meaninglessness of existence.

Where Olivier lent Edgar a crazed bravura, Neville — in a welcome return to the London stage — makes him an absurd martinet on the verge of decay: his ramrod-backed military posture is held in place only by a corset and when he attempts to dance the *Entry of the Boys*, his knees instantly buckle under him. But what Neville captures unforgettably is

Edgar's terror of existential emptiness.

Gemma Jones suggests that cruelty and revenge are simply a way of keeping the darkness at bay. She also acutely seizes on Alice's past as an actress to suggest she is a serial role-player: one moment the wasp-waisted tyrant from a Sardou melodrama, at the end a lipstick-smearing harridan from a Tennessee Williams play. And Anthony O'Donnell as Kurt is not just living proof of Wilde's dictum that in married life three's company, two's none but also a parasite who feeds off others' whiplash cruelty. But the power of Stormare's production lies in the way it enlists us in the characters' own emotional journey and implies that in Edgar and Alice's welded isolation we find an image of ourselves.

At the Almeida (071-350-4404) until March 4.



Private dancers . . . Gemma Jones and John Neville

Billington On dance Of Death

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