

THEATRE Michael Coveney



Shelley Simms (Susie) (Sheila Gail) (Mandy) has drugged legs being emotionally rescued by her family in the chaotic bedroom of her Parisian apartment in 'Les Parents Terribles'. Photograph by Mel Libbert

Suffocating games that families can play

JEAN COCTEAU was blaise! according to the *Gay* advert. He also wrote films and plays, including *Les Parents Terribles* (1935) which the Royal National Theatre has occasionally revived in the Lyttelton. Its great Parisian apartment, very young Michael – Jude Law looking almost unconvincingly like Jean Marais, Cocoon's lover and lead actor – tries to escape the suffocating affections of his drugged mother, her peculiar sister and his failed inventor father, who is serving his girlfriend.

Gay plays, very gay. After a post-pone of opening and a delayed Thursday matinee, when the RNT's lighting board failed, Cocoon had a hard time fulfilling Cocteau's odd instruction to astonish us. Jeremy Sista's lurchy translation and Sean Marshall's vague direction have responded generously to the technicians and gone with the jazy flow. But the play seems neither urgent nor important.

The tone and temperance of Cocteau's *Indochine* is mirrored by Jason Cunniff's excellent, hedonistic music and fully conveyed by Sheila Gibb as Michael's mother, Yvonne, a housewife, raddled and hollow-eyed, ruined beauty of the boulevard. Michael's girlfriend, Madeleine (Izzy Bonner), represents an alternative world of anarchic order. Her convincing environment, brilliantly designed by Stephen Rossman, Lewis places a coquette's entrance between the rooftops and her leavely attic.

This curious space is hilariously occupied in the second act by Alan Howard as Michael's dad, George, all but social and ecological. Ephraim abandons the farm to follow his elder son on the gold trail to California, and you must be the parent of a prosperously dear family, spiritual values and man's exquisite coozer with his own hand. Try telling that to the Conservative Party.

A similar atmosphere of poetic, pre-industrial innocence surrounds John Millington Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907) at the Bristol Old Vic, though Ian Hastings' production takes time to recover from the disastrous mistake of inventing a protuberance of a slovenly celtic, with bud dancing, snippets of small talk, across wandering about.

Synge's mythos in what Yeats dubbed 'the supreme work of our direct theatre' gradually imposes themselves, and the comic, criminal glamour of the runaway partridge who claims to have laid his 'Gai' low with a 'boy' lights up the remote, County Mayo community with an idea of its own self-interest. The Cherry Maids of Frank Grimes and Stephen Rea were both fine poetic dreamers with an ounce of cheek, but successor Michael Glenn Murphy bears them both in portraying a sad, insecure young beggar who swells to achieve an identity bulking in the fascination of others and his sporting triumph in the donkey ride on the sands below.

Synge, like O'Neill, created an artificial language with its own idiosyncratic music and cadences. The Bristol cast plays it with a power, truth and gusto. Christy may be reclaimed by his resurrected 'Gai', but he'll go home through a rumpus lifetime from this hour. The emotional devastation is most keenly felt by Theresa Boden's exceptionally fine Pigeon Mike and

handicapped child by his father (Martin Shaw), an investigative journalist of a liberal persuasion who is given a tough time by a pro-Life Catholic prosecuting counsel (Diana Quick). Good material, poor treatment.

Choices

Lady Windermere's Fan (Birmingham Rep, 021-236 6455), British, beautifully-staged Wilde revival with Francesca Annis. Last week before touring.

Old Times (Old Theatre, Dublin, 010 353 874 6045), Pastoral comedies with the Frobenius Inletter (Mac-Soc) and political curtain-raiser *One for the Road* (Thames-Soc).

The Death (Tramway, Glasgow, 041 227 5511), Moby Theatre's Dostoevsky remission starting at noon next Sat and Sun.



Coveney On Les Parents

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