

Six of the best

Michael Billington
at the Phoenix

SIMON Gray doesn't give up on *The Common Pursuit*. Since its initial production in Hammersmith four years ago, he has substantially revised it, written two diaries about it and now directs it at the Phoenix with a cast dominated by young alternative comedians. Paradoxically, it emerges as a more serious work by being played with a lighter touch.

Initially I took the play to be a lament for failed ideals and lost literary dreams; and my objection was that since the group of Sixties Cambridge literati on display never looked like major talents their descent into Grub Street hackery was of no great consequence.

But now the play seems to vindicate its Leavisite title by being both about the nature of friendship and about a more general cultural descent from intellectual rigour and high seriousness. The mess the six characters make of their lives becomes a reflection of a more widespread ethical vacuum.

The play starts in Cambridge rooms 20 years ago with Stuart setting up a meeting to found a literary magazine and, at the same time, breaking off from sex with his girl-friend to accost a major poet: high seriousness indeed. Over the years we follow the interwoven lives of Stuart and his chums. He edits 31 issues of a struggling literary magazine before joining the coffee-table publishing-house of his friend Martin.

Of the others Nick, who has the high ideal of being a drama critic, turns into a chain-smoking media hustler. Peter becomes a lecherous academic gadfly churning out instant books to support his growing family and Humphry, a severely judgemental philosopher, ends up being battered to death

in his rooms by a piece of rough trade.

The world on display is small and Mr Gray is never one to resist a cheap shot at, say, Belfast poets (currently writing some of the best verse around) or intellectually impoverished students. But lurking behind the play is an almost Arnoldian belief that the barbarians and the philistines are taking over.

It is a point wittily reinforced by the transformations in David Jenkins's publishing-office set, in which the photos of Eliot and Auden are gradually displaced by covers of books on antiques and master photographers. And Mr Gray establishes an umbilical connection between the failure to be "serious" and the emotional havoc the characters make of their lives.

The one character who retains his moral rigour is the gay Humphry and he gets a superb performance from Stephen Fry. Immensely tall and aquiline-profiled, Mr Fry has the capacity to dominate a room even from the depths of an armchair.

But Mr Fry makes it clear the character is not a prig: simply a man for whom verbal precision and intellectual clarity themselves serve a moral purpose.

John Sessions as Stuart, however, carries much of the play and he suppresses his mimic virtuosity to suggest a man of conscience. Mr Sessions conveys the wounded betrayal of a man who prizes personal loyalty as much as fine writing.

Rik Mayall is rather more manic as Nick but catches well the over-lunched affluence of the book-chat telly presenter. And there is good work from John Gordon Sinclair as the eternally boyish lecher, from Paul Mooney as the publisher whose personal refinement does not prevent him stealing his best friend's wife.

This review appeared in later editions yesterday

Michael Billington On Common Pursuit

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ianharris

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