

Review

SWANWHITE

GATE, NOTTING HILL

LOVE clearly brought out the worst in Strindberg. *Swanwhite* was written in 1901 by the 52-year-old playwright for his new bride Harriet Bosse, 30 years his junior. He called it "an idealistic play of pure beauty, the apotheosis of love".

Strongly influenced by the plays of Maeterlink, it is a curious, fey fairy tale about virtuous love in which a princess, dominated by her evil stepmother, falls in love with a prince who reciprocates her affection.

The wicked stepmother tries to keep them apart with her magic spells, but reckons without love: when the prince is drowned, the strength and purity of *Swanwhite's*

feelings bring him back to life.

The loamy spring of dark earth under your feet as you enter the auditorium augurs well, and Gemma Fripps's design, full of gloomy crannies and boasting a fantastical bright-eyed junk bird, gets the fairy tale element just right in a story in which the lovers inhabit the intuitive and magical world of the child which is constantly being pressed by the demands of reality.

Like all fairy tales, there are obvious psychological and religious undertones in a story which pits good against evil, light against dark and dirt against cleanliness — wicked stepmama's major crime is to keep *Swanwhite* from having a wash. So too in the testing of love by trials of suffering and redemption of the sinful stepmother only escapes

the stake because *Swanwhite* forgives her.

Unfortunately the production rarely rises above the simple task of telling the narrative and it constantly mistakes melodrama for emotion. I kept on wondering who on earth the potential audience for this could be. It is too frightening for the very young and too naive and sentimental for most adult tastes.

Harriet Bosse, by the way, never got to play *Swanwhite*. By the time the play was eventually produced eight years later, she and Strindberg were divorced. It only goes to show that it is only in fairy tales that the prince and princess live happily ever after.

□ At the Gate, London W11 (0171-229 0706), until December 21.

Lyn Gardner

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