

# Troubled family on the couch

**A** CONSULTANT psychotherapist at Broadmoor has written a programme note for Adrian Noble's spare and eloquent production of *Little Eyolf*, perhaps the least known and performed of Ibsen's last plays. And quite right too.

For the world of very late Ibsen is just the place for a literary-minded therapist to go prospecting. It's stiff with the sort of obvious symbolism, family secrets and guilts in which Freud took such a healthy, productive interest.

The danger is that Ibsen often makes his self-conscious characters unnaturally eager to analyse each others behaviour or to draw attention to the paths of their lives. Noble minimises these tendencies by keeping tone and context cool and unheroic.

He sensibly loosens the play's realistic grip. Instead of Ibsen's cluttered "garden-room" the Swan's stage is bare apart from table, chairs and chaise longue. Instead of the specified, spectacular rural scenes designer Rob Howell achieves a pre-impressionistic glow, blue-green and gold back-cloths evoking fjords and woods.

The play's two crucial secrets, sealed in the past and precipitating disaster in the present, depend upon the sexuality of Alfred Allmers whom an intense, bearded Robert Glenister plays with the air of a man reluctant to look a mirror straight in the eye. The death by

**Little Eyolf** ★  
*Swan, Stratford*

**NICHOLAS DE JONGH**

drowning of Allmers's crippled son, Eyolf, impells his wife Rita, whose disconsolate and emotionally volatile condition is imposingly conveyed by Joanne Pearce, to break the codes of reticence.

Ibsen's psychology is astute. When revealing jealousy of her own son, Rita is really disclosing anxieties about the fragility of her marriage and Allmers's passionate attachment to his half-sister, Asta (Derbhle Crotty). Both Glenister and Miss Crotty, despite one revealing clinch, never quite discover a



Alistair Muir

**Psychological breaking point: Joanne Pearce and Robert Glenister in *Little Eyolf***

way of suggesting what apparently incestuous ties exist between brother and sister.

Damian Lewis, as the young engineer who draws Asta away from her brother's sway, exudes

winsome ardour rather than the passion of a man coaxing a girl into his arms and further.

Noble sensibly queries Ibsen's happy ending, with Allmers and Rita reconciled: Miss Pearce stands,

not looking at her husband, while she repetitively flexes her fingers, but never goes as far as holding out a hand.

● *In repertory. Box office: 01789 295623.*

# Bagpipers call the tune for this baroque 'n' roll

**I** DIDN'T expect the Barbican Hall to be quite so packed last night for *Les fêtes d'Hébé* (1739) by Jean-Philippe Rameau. Admittedly, William Christie and his fine Arts Florissants orchestra have made a lot of CDs. But it's surprising the baroque craze extends to Rameau since his beautiful, rhythmically nuanced art has its longueurs — even when judiciously cut, as this long unstaged performance was.

Rameau's elegantly conversational, vocal writing is short-winded and earthbound beside

**Les Arts Florissants** ★  
*Barbican*

**TOM SUTCLIFFE**

only got down to opera when he was a famous musical theorist aged 50, sounds quite like a 40-years-late Purcell with less melodic skill.

Opera-ballet is scarcely dramatic, just the sort of thing to divert a fashionably bored Versailles court. Hébé, the Olympian

of poetry, music and dance — the lyric talents which are the work's alternative title.

The three acts of the opera are self-contained stories about, respectively, Sappho's love for Alcaeus, Iphise's love for the vocally gifted Spartan warrior Tyrtæus, and Mercury's yen for a ballet-dancing shepherdess called Eglé. The last act is the cream, stuffed with superbly memorable dance material including a delicious Musette en rondeau, with a pair of French indoors barmyines making the rus-

The skill and expressiveness of the star singer, Sarah Connolly, spot-lit defects elsewhere. Connolly, with her colourful lower register and dramatic sense, projected the characters of Sappho and Iphise brilliantly. Jean-Paul Fouchécourt's Mercury combined suppleness and wit with a slightly awkward insistence. Thierry Felix's Tyrtæus provided welcome energy and attack, but with rough technical edges. The purity of Maryseult Wiczorek's shepherdess was useful. Sophie Daneman as

De Jongh Standard Eyolf



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