

## A brother, a sister and a terrible play

ARTISTS are often lousy judges of their own work. Tennessee Williams was convinced that *Out Cry*, which he worked on obsessively between 1967 and 1975, was "the big one . . . close to the marrow of my being". It was, he said, his "most beautiful play since *Streetcar*".

In fact it's terrible, though one feels a heel for saying so, since it is clearly a great howl of anguish. Unfortunately, and in marked contrast to his greatest plays, the pain seems strident, stagy and second-hand. There are lines and motifs here that tantalisingly recall *The Glass Menagerie*, *Streetcar* and *The Rose Tattoo*; but both the poetry and the passion have died a cruel death.

The action is set in a theatre, where a brother and sister have come to perform a play called *Out Cry*. Like Williams at the time he was writing — it was his "stoned age" — they have

### Theatre

#### Out Cry

Lyric, Hammersmith

reached rock bottom. The company has deserted them, and at the end we learn that the audience has walked out too. The pair are left trapped in the freezing theatre, with nothing but death ahead of them.

Felice and Clare represent aspects of Williams's own personality. Felice is a writer, poignantly convinced, like Williams, that he has written a masterpiece. Clare is drunk, drugged, almost out of her mind, yet still capable of a kind of bleary magnificence.

The play-within-a-play that they perform is set in the Deep South, and seems like a parody of Williams's earlier works. It's about a brother and

sister, living as recluses after the father has killed their mother, then himself.

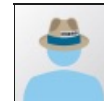
The crucial failure of Williams's writing, and of Timothy Walker's production for Cheek by Jowl, is that it is never clear whether we are meant to take the play-within-a-play seriously, or dismiss it as the tosh it is. And the Pirandellian games with theatrical illusion are deadly.

Sara Stewart, slurred, smashed but with a raddled glamour, brings intensity to the role of Clare, but Jason Merrells Felice never persuades you that he is anything other than a self-dramatising jerk. In this play Tennessee Williams is not waving but drowning, and Cheek by Jowl's revival has done him no favours at all.

Tickets: 0181 741 2311

CHARLES SPENCER

## Spencer Telegraph Out Cry



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