

THE INDEPENDENT TABLOID FRIDAY 25/04/97

Siblings in arms

THEATRE *Out Cry*
Lyric Hammersmith, London

"I've always suspected that theatres were prisons for players," remarks Claire towards the end of Tennessee Williams' *Out Cry*. "Finally, yes, and for writers of plays..." replies her brother, Felice. They neglect to add that theatres can also seem like prisons to audiences when, as here, you feel as if you've been trapped under the stifling bell-jar of a playwright's subjectivity and that the drama is itself incarcerated in a theatrical metaphor whose exits have all been sealed.

The play, which Williams kept revising through the Sixties and early Seventies, has never been performed in England in the version now presented by Timothy Walker for Cheek By Jowl. A two-hander, it is the author's most naked and revealing depiction of his intense emotional bond with his sister, Rose, who stayed suspended in time after her lobotomy while Williams proceeded on a turbulent ride through success, fame, failure and his own mental instabilities.

Quizzed once about the secret of happiness, Williams wittily replied: "Insensitivity, I guess." *Out Cry* brings home, in more ways than one, the price of too much sensitivity. The piece is set in a theatre where a touring company has been booked to perform. But the rest of the

actors have walked out on Felice (Jason Merrells) and Claire (Sara Stewart), temperamental siblings who would certainly test the loyalty of the most dedicated of troupers. The scenery has arrived incomplete; no hotel reservations have been made; they aren't even sure which city they are in.

But, although we may take leave to doubt the existence of the fictional audience we're assured is out there, the couple put on a play called *Out Cry*, in which they seem to be enacting a suffocating and volatile sibling relationship that overlaps dangerously with their own. (By the pre-arranged signal of her running over to the piano and striking C-sharp, a panicky Claire often insists on cuts.) When the performance grinds to a halt, and they find themselves locked in a freezing theatre, the pair have to retreat for warmth, back into the world of the play, where they climactically confront the incestuous nature of their affinity.

Williams had once been capable of creating a Stanley Kowalski as well as a Blanche Dubois and of allowing us to get glimpses of her from Stanley's perspective. In *Out Cry*, by contrast, the sensitivity, the teetering on the brink of madness, the seeking refuge from hostile reality in theatrical make-believe are accepted,



A family affair? Sara Stewart as Claire and Jason Merrells as her brother, Felice Geraint Lewis

overwhelmingly, at their own valuation. "Our home is a theatre anywhere that there is one," declares Felice. It would be enlightening to see this pair in non-theatrical surroundings.

As Walker's production demonstrates, this envelopment in artifice creates tricky problems of tone. From one angle, the play-within-the-play comes over like a camp spoof of some ripe piece of Southern Gothic, with Felice and Claire impersonating a brother and sister psychologically trapped in the home where their father may have killed their mother and himself. Despite compelling

performances from Jason Merrells, who makes a magnetic, sweatily intense Felice, and from Sara Stewart, whose Claire veers vividly from louche, hard-bitten pro to gasping, paralysed neurotic, the parts where the hokey portentousness is meant as a joke are sometimes hard to keep separate from the poetic, significant bits. Is it possible to view with an entirely straight face the sight of an adult blowing soap bubbles through a hole in his house to symbolise the fragility of beauty and the longing for escape?

To 17 May. Booking: 0181-741 2311
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