

# Casualties of desire

David Benedict finds 'Closer' close to the bone

**THEATRE**

*Closer*  
National Theatre, Cottesloe, London

Alice is denigrating Dan's bad novel. "Why won't he write about something that will hurt him? He won't go near himself." The same cannot be said for Patrick Marber, whose latest play has the dangerous feel of autobiography. Unlike most of the vogue-ish "boy's own" playwrights, Marber isn't tossing off a dialogue-driven slice of life with little moral responsibility. After a brilliant debut with *Dealer's Choice*, the tough-minded *Closer* strips men's behaviour bare and you sense that Marber is refreshingly ready to implicate himself in the process.

This is a Nineties sex comedy but it's far from being an updated *Move Over Mrs Markham*. British naughtiness and innuendo have been banished. Instead, there are echoes of Pinter's *Betrayal* or a London take on Mamet's *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* as we follow the interlocked loves and lies of a quartet of characters caught in an almost ritualistic dance of desire. In the opening scene, Dan has taken a young woman he has accidentally saved from being run over to Barts' casualty department. Tersely questioned by the unnervingly confrontational Alice (excellent Liza Walker), he reveals himself to be in the dying business. He writes obituaries in which he enjoys slipping in euphemisms like "valued his privacy" - "Means he was gay; 'enjoyed his privacy'; he was a raging queen." From here on, the language is strikingly direct. By the end of the short scene, these two strangers are alive with sexual tension as she tells him what men want: "Girls who look like boys so that men can protect them ... she must come like a train. But with elegance."

We next meet them when Dan is having his book-jacket photo taken by Anna, to whom he is instantly attracted. She resists, but he impersonates her when doing cyber-sex on the Web by talking extremely dirty and setting her up with Larry, a bullish dermatologist. This virtually silent scene is shockingly funny and a brilliant illustration of all that Marber does best. The men's fingers rattle out



Someone to look after me: Clive Owen as Dan and Sally Dexter as Anna PHOTO: GERAINT LEWIS

sex on to the keyboards (and on to a screen on the back wall of Vicki Mortimer's set) but he is actually forcing us to read the subtext. The explosive drama of the scene is all in the gap between what the characters are saying and what they actually mean.

Marber writes (and directs) with a scalpel, peeling back layers and cutting effortlessly to the quick. Scenes start immediately with no preamble and you feel the audience hanging upon the words as Marber brutally exposes male manipulation and the desire for honesty in intimate relationships that charges through the play. Appalled by Anna's betrayal, Larry drowns himself in truth, demanding ever more humiliating details of her sexual behaviour with which to flagellate himself and humiliate her. The scene is very tense and extremely violent but only in terms of language. Throughout the play the characters hardly touch each other.

The writing is so accomplished, it seems almost unfair to point to its faults. The atmosphere is heavy with symbols. The characters' professions alone feel contrived: a stripper, a photographer (exposure), a doctor and an obituarist (mortality). More worryingly, the couples switch so many times we begin to lose faith in the characters. "You see love like a diagram," says Dan and the thought steals over you, does Marber? For all that, this pungently funny, powerfully acted play is essential viewing. *In rep.* National Theatre, Cottesloe, London SE1 (0171-928 2252)

Closer Bennett Independent



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