



Patrick Marber's done it again. The former comic has another great play in Closer, says **Michael Billington**
Stand-up guy

The triumph

Sex and passion. They are natural subjects for drama. But they are also tricky to write about. As the dramatist hero laments in Stoppard's *The Real Thing*: "Loving and being loved is unlitigious. It's happiness expressed in banality and lust." But Patrick Marber gets round the problem in *Closer* at the Cottesloe by dwelling as much on agony and deceit as on the lineaments of gratified desire. The result is that relatively rare thing, a good second play.

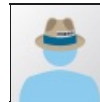
In his highly accomplished first work, *Dealer's Choice*, Marber showed us a group of male addicts who use poker as an escape from real life. After seeing *Closer*, you begin to understand why Marber seems to be saying that, while we pride ourselves on being cool and sophisticated about human relationships, and while we have commodified sex, we are as screwed up as ever. In particular, men and women, however honest they try to be, remain out of synch. Marber makes his point through four characters whose lives accidentally converge. Dan, who writes for a newspaper's obit page (unkindly described as "the Siberia of journalism") rescues a tough wail called Alice from a street crash on a bench in a London square called Postman's Park, filled with memorials to acts of private heroism, they fall in love. But a year or so on, Dan, who has written a clunking first novel, goes to be photographed by a sexy

snapper named Anna and is smitten. Initially spurned, he gets his revenge by setting up a blind date, via the Internet, between Anna and the surgeon Larry, who briefly examined Alice after her accident. Having cruelly played the role of a website Cupid, Dan finds he has unwittingly forged a real alliance. What follows is a crazy sexual square dance in which partners are constantly swapped. Dan has an affair with the newly married Anna, while the bereft Larry seeks his revenge via Alice, now working in a posh, hands-off West End sex club. But what Marber conveys, through all the jumps in time and social bed-hopping, is the extraordinary physical and emotional gulf between men and women. "You don't make me come," Anna sharply tells Dan, at one point sug-

gesting she fakes two times out of three. Later she describes how women disclose all their past emotional freight at the start of a relationship. With men, she claims, it's a more painful process: "A great big jigger nut arrives with their luggage - it got held up." Marber takes no sides or prisoners in this candid, scathing, very modern view of the sex war. At different times, he suggests, we are all predators and victims. But, although he shows men and women behaving equally badly, he almost inevitably writes better about male torment. The most romantic character is Alice, the tough cookie who, we discover, has invented herself. The most complex is Larry, the working-class surgeon who gets to earn a fortune in private practice and whose pain is tangible. We see him grovelling before the armour-plated Alice in the sex club and, in an even better scene set in his office, torn between revenge and charity as he confronts the no less desperate Dan. Marber writes well, no question. But, since it traces sex similar territory, it's difficult not to compare his play with David Hare's *Skylight*, seen in the same venue. What Marber lacks as yet is Hare's ability to see sex in a broader context: there's no equivalent here to KYA's great speech in *Skylight* about the "right-wing fuckers". There are just occasional hints of

Unhappy couple... Liza Walker (Alice) and Clive Owen (Dan)
PHOTOGRAPH: HUGO GLENONING
wider issues, as when Larry reveals that his new nurse lover refuses to go to bed with him unless he abandons private practice; if the play seems a bit hermetic, it is because Marber only fleetingly relates sex to society. He is, however, a first rate director of his own work. As in *Dealer's Choice*, he casts excellently. Liza Walker as Alice, has exactly the right mix of orphaned solitude and street wise smartness: "Men," she sardonically says, "want a girl who looks like a boy." Not wholly true, as shown by Sally Dexter's voluptuous, classy Anna. The men are equally sharply contrasted. Clive Owen's Dan has a boyish helplessness that is fatally attractive to women, while Ciaran Hinds's Larry is an outwardly tough, upwardly mobile bruiser whose much balliness is secretly scorned by his lovers. It's a well acted, highly satisfying play that touches on identity, sex and death, truth and illusion. But what tingers is Marber's sense that, however much they couple or fraternise, men and women remain forever trapped inside their own skins.
In rep at the Cottesloe, London SE1
0171-926 2252; booking 18 August 23.

Closer Billington Guardian



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