

REVIEWS

## Marber lays bare the passions of betrayal

### Theatre

#### Closer

National's Cottesloe Theatre

WELL, he's done it again. Two years ago Patrick Marber made one of the finest dramatic debuts in recent memory, with *Dealer's Choice*, his corrosively funny study of an all-male poker school.

Now comes *Closer*. Second works are notoriously troublesome but this raw, wounding drama strikes me as being even better than his first. Though Marber's style and vision are his own, there are moments in this new piece which reminded me of both Pinter's *Betrayal* and David Hare's *Skylight*. What's amazing is that *Closer* can stand comparison with such magnificent plays.

It is, however, necessary to enter a note of warning. *Closer* is a play about love, desire, sex, jealousy and guilt. There is no nudity, no simulated love-making, but the language is as violent and as graphic as you are likely to encounter outside the pages of a porn magazine.

The obscenity is entirely justified. This is how people, or at least many people, talk when they are in the grip of the most powerful or destructive emotions, or when they are engaging in sexual fantasies. In Marber's script, the F-words and the c-words acquire an intensity I don't think it's pretentious to describe as poetic.

The play, set in contemporary London, is a sexual quadrille. A journalist (in the obituaries department, ironically, as it turns out) meets a spunky young stripper and they fall in love. Then, after a hilarious and riotously pornographic scene of mistaken identity on the Internet, a male doctor and a female photographer meet and they too fall in love. And then love begins to curdle. The journalist and the photographer begin an affair and hurt their ex-partners grievously. Then the stripper and the doctor have an affair which has

much more to do with mutual despair and the desire for revenge than it has to do with love. Then... but I won't go on. Not the least of this play's accomplishments is that you become desperate to know what is going to happen to its anguished, vulnerable characters next.

What I love most about Marber's writing here is that he gets right down to what Yeats described as 'the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart'. Anyone who has loved and lost, anyone who has experienced infidelity or felt love die, will watch this play with stomach churning pangs of recognition. We might not have spoken as frankly as Marber's characters, but I suspect some of us will wish that we had. The writing seems to have been ripped straight from the gut.

In contrast, the construction has great formal beauty, consisting of a series of duologues which gradually move the action forward, and occasionally back, in time. The sense of artistic control is formidable, and my only real complaint is that the play's structure seems a touch too neat for its subject matter.

I have no complaints at all about Marber's bruisingly, deeply felt production, or the performances of Liza Walker, Clive Owen, Ciaran Hinds and Sally Dexter which all ring unerringly true. The scene when Walker desperately begs her unfaithful boyfriend to stay, the scene when Hinds, like a man picking at a scab, asks Dexter just what sex was like with her new lover, have a scorching intensity and emotional truth.

I'd be astonished if there's a better new play this year.

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