

THEATRE REVIEW

Debate takes over from drama in bitter view of life

Amy's View National Theatre

IN THE past few years David Hare has given us his epic state-of-the-nation *Trilogy* and *Skylight*, a magnificent play that combined a raw and wounding love story with a passionate analysis of the divisions in British society.

After these Herculean endeavours, it is perhaps not surprising that *Amy's View*, at the Lyttelton, should turn out to be an anti-climax.

The play is never less than absorbing, sometimes bitterly funny and there are some affecting moments. Yet you never feel that Hare has achieved the insight that allows characters to take on a vivid inner life of their own.

There's a revealing moment in the third act, during a row between Esme, a distinguished actress, and her daughter, Amy, whose ghastly television personality of a husband has just deserted her. Amy is trying to explain why she loved the man of whom her mother has always disapproved.

"I went with Dominic because he was the future. I'm frightened of you because you're the past," she says.

In my experience people never talk about those they love in such neat, abstract terms. This isn't an individual describing her own tan-

gled emotions, it's a playwright summing up the theme of his play.

Hare's major weakness as a dramatist is his tendency to impose ideas on his characters from without. He rarely does it in his best work — *Skylight* and *Racing Demon* spring to mind — but though he's never as grindingly mechanical as Shaw, he does sometimes use his characters as mouthpieces for debate.

This is particularly noticeable in *Amy's View*, for it concerns one of Hare's major preoccupations. He has long complained of the "fashionable whine of contempt" against the theatre, and the glibness of modish cultural commentary that dismisses the stage as hopelessly old-fashioned.

I agree entirely, but here arguments that might make an excellent newspaper article have been turned into less-than-satisfactory drama.

Amy's View spans 16 years, from 1979 to 1995. There is an undeniable fascination in seeing the effects of passing time and the ravages of age on the characters. But there is also something worryingly predictable about the piece.

When Esme entrusts her business affairs to a neigh-



Picture: ALASTAIR MUIR

Relative love: Judi Dench and Samantha Bond portray the raw emotions and passionate analysis of David Hare's latest production

bour, it's only too clear that it is all going to go horribly wrong. And the joke about Esme appearing as a nurse in a hospital soap is so heavily signalled that it loses most of its humour.

What's not in doubt is the excellence of the performances in Richard Eyre's

production, which successfully disguises, if not entirely conceals, the drama's weaknesses.

Judi Dench is superb as the ageing actress watching her career and her life fall into sad decline. Apparently scatty, she gradually reveals enormous courage. Her

demolition of her slick and selfish media star son-in-law is devastating.

Samantha Bond is equally good as Amy, whose "view" is bleakly disproved by the play, is that unconditional love can conquer all.

Eoin McCarthy has a harder time as the theatre-

loathing cultural guru, who is all too evidently the villain of the piece. But there is a fine sense of dawning humanity at the end, and he delivers his voguish claptrap with trenchant assurance.

As well as being a refreshingly old-fashioned saga of family life, *Amy's View* is a

fierce defence of the theatre, which becomes Esme's last refuge. I have an uneasy suspicion, however, that those who despise the theatre will find little here to change their mind.

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