

David Hare's new play is a theatrical tribute to the theatre. And that's where it goes wrong, says **Michael Billington**

## Sick of self-love

**L**ike all good dramatists, David Hare is a bundle of contradictions: he conducts in public his own private debate between radicalism and style, realism and romance. But in *Amy's View* at the Lyttelton Hare has written an unashamed paean to the theatre in which his romantic side wins hands down over his sceptical one: it's wittily enjoyable but without the schismatic division that made *Skylight* unforgettable.

Theatre certainly lies at the heart of *Amy's View*. It starts in Berkshire in 1979 with famed West End actress Esme Allen confronting her daughter Amy and the latter's ambitious film-buff boyfriend, Dominic, in an ironically predictable scene full of echoes of *Hay Fever* and a legion of Thames Valley comedies. Over the next 16 years we see how Esme's theatrical star wanes while media-celebrity Dominic's symbolically rises. Caught between them is Amy, whose view that love conquers everything is cruelly exposed.

Hare sets the stage for a series of confrontations. Theatre versus the rival media. Mother versus daughter. Esme's feckless charm versus Dominic's Thatcherite greed. But while the mother-daughter scenes have a passionate intensity, the larger cultural debate never really takes off, largely because Hare's sympathies are all too evident. He may give Esme token flaws — including a financial naivety that allows her to become a *Lloyd's* Name — but he clearly adores her resilience and courage as much as he loathes Dominic's ambition and aura of trendy TV opinion-forming.

There is plenty in *Amy's View* to enjoy. There is a telling, Osborne-like vision of England as a crumbling form of theatre: a fantasy theme-park full of fake fetes and boardroom attempts at historical swagger. Hare is also very good on the minutiae of personal relationships: the frozen silence when Esme and Dominic are first left alone; Amy's later, obstinate refusal to accept her mother's embrace. But, while the play has many moments of emotional truth, it is dubious for drama to tell us how wonderful the theatre is: paradoxically its most lasting tributes, as shown by *Les Enfants Du Paradis*, often come from rival media.

But, even if Hare is writing from a position of romantic certainty, Richard Eyre's production wittily captures the play's self-referential quality: Bob Crowley's set is based on a series of



receding proscenium arches as if the Berkshire home were itself a stage. Hare has also written a gift of a part for Judi Dench as Esme. Dench is excellent at giving un sentimental portraits of actresses: here, even though the play is emotionally on her side, she makes Esme tough, caustic and durable, not least in the final bare-walled dressing-room scene when she confirms Hare's old observation that "acting is a judgment of character".

Samantha Bond matches her perfectly as Amy, endowing the character with a self-destructive attachment to the hustling Dominic: a figure who embodies the glib bucksterism Hare detests and with whom Eoin McCarthy wrestles valiantly. Ronald Pickup as Esme's permanently sozzled neighbour and Joyce Redman as her indestructible mother-in-law also offer flawless cameos. It's a high-grade production. But, if one has lingering doubts, it is because Hare seems more anxious to prove a point about the moral value of theatre than to use the stage as a dialectical forum: in short, what we get is not just Amy's but also David's View.

National Theatre, Lyttelton, London SE1 (0171-928 2252)

**Method**

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Directed by Mike Alfreds. Designed by Paul Dart

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