

which has done so much to drive pleasure out of the theatre in recent years (so that even musicals have to have "significance"), and of the crassness which has done so much to drive out wit. It wasn't always like that.

Marguerite Duras's **Suzanna Andler**, at the Minerva Theatre, Chichester, is set in St Tropez in February. The Suzanna who gives the play its title has come there to look at a handsome house (with eight bedrooms) which she is considering renting for the summer. Money is no problem — her husband Jean is a millionaire — but she dithers and her hesitation is part of a larger indecisiveness about where her life is going.

She is six months or so into an affair with a journalist called Michel. It is her first extramarital excursion, and her thoughts still seem centred on her husband, even though he has made no secret of his own frequent infidelities. She is uncertain about what she feels, and so are we. The whole play is a mass of oblique reactions and minor deceptions, of meaningful silences (but what exactly do they mean?) and fretful pacing back and forth.

It might just have worked as a short story — an evocation of mood and atmosphere — or even as a short novel, in which fluctuating feelings were subjected to minute analysis. But in the theatre we crave for something stronger and bolder than Duras provides. Not for the first time she comes across as a fairly pretentious writer, laying claim to a good deal more depth than she delivers.

That needn't be the end of the story. An empty part, if it has a sufficiently interesting outline, can still create theatrical opportunities. It gives an actor a chance to fill it in — as Eileen Atkins reportedly did when she played Suzanna in 1971. (The play itself dates back to 1968.)

At Chichester, however, Julie Christie fails to convince us that the sphinx has much of a riddle. Her performance has clearly been carefully thought out, but it remains stubbornly prosaic. Watching her, I found myself recalling the old James Thurber cartoon: "But *why* must you be inscrutable, Marcia?"

The punitive slowness of Lindy Davies's production

doesn't help, either. But it could have been worse. Aden Gillett as Michel and Julie Christie as Suzanna's friend Monique inject some much-needed life; the sombre elegance of Johan Engels' set (shuttered gloom, a misty seascape beyond) is reinforced by Nick Beadle's lighting and Catherine Milliken's music. These are consolations — and in the circumstances one clings to them.

SAMON Block's **Chimps**, at the Hampstead Theatre, is much more interesting. Two years ago Block scored a success with his first play, *Not a Game for Boys* — the game in question being table-tennis. In his second play he turns to the world of high-pressure salesmanship.

Mark (Darron Fiebo) is a young illustrator who has thrown up his job in order to work on a children's ABC, so far he has only got as far as A for Aradillo and B for Bunny. Stevie, his girlfriend (Ashley Jensen), supports him — it's her earnings that are paying the mortgage for the house they have bought. She is pregnant, too, and he has promised to help prepare a space for the baby.

Instead, he takes pity on a pair of salesmen — one of them is coloured — and makes the fatal mistake of letting them get a foot in the door. In no time at all they have persuaded him that the walls of the house are disintegrating, and that his only hope lies in signing a contract for the treatment which they are peddling. Stevie urges him to resist, but they play ruthlessly on the tensions in his relationship with her, and in the end he succumbs.

There is a horrible pleasure in watching the reptilian reps at work. You laugh and shudder simultaneously at their patter, their dodges, their quick thinking. And to add to the interest, the relationship between the two of them is not what it seems. The apparently deferential younger man (Fraser James) is in fact in charge. His middle-aged partner (Nicholas Wooderson) is new to the racket; he is still on trial, and still subject to distracting twinges of conscience.

The play isn't strictly plausible, and isn't meant to

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