

Room with a gloomy view of marriage on the rocks

SHE walks on wearing bags of sex appeal — dressed in a mournful black coat and matching gloves — still looking like a femme for whom fatale is the natural adjective. Youthfulness has obstinately clung to Miss Julie Christie, who made her first famous ascent to film stardom in 1965, as if it would not dream of leaving her.

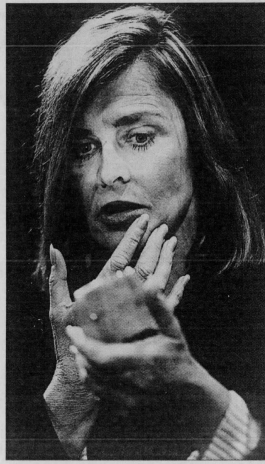
The role of Suzanna Andler, who describes herself as "a sort of elderly girl" and around whom men have fluttered like dazed moths, ought, therefore, to be suitably hers. But no. Miss Christie cannot rescue this play from its glum wallowing in non-specific gloom.

The fiercely Left-wing French novelist and playwright Marguerite Duras, who wrote Suzanna Andler, is not the kind of playwright whose work you would expect to find thrust in front of the elderly, conservative Chichester audiences.

Her cryptic plays avoid the smack of firm action and their air of desolation is quite at odds with Chichester's love of happy endings. Duras instead records the emotional states of fraught women in the grip of passions or emotions they scarcely understand.

Here, the middle-aged Suzanna is viewed through the course of one wintry day in a St Tropez sea-view mansion, which she may rent for her children's summer holiday. Johan Engels's design for this expensive retreat looks rather cut-price, with just a painted back-cloth to suggest the sea and rocks.

In the winter light the atmosphere is grey, though Suzanna manfully tries to lighten it. "I'm one of the most deceived wives in St Tropez", she nonchalantly tells the estate agent — alluding to the fact that she's trapped in a marriage which her rich husband has left open wide to a variety of mistresses. You might think her smitten



Picture: ALASTAIR MUIR

Grip of passion: Christie as "one of the most deceived wives"



FIRST NIGHT

by Nicholas de Jongh

Suzanna Andler
Minerva Studio

young journalist amour (Michel) — "I love you Suzanna, it's killing me" — serves as a useful revenge for her husband's defections. But for Suzanna this is just an adultery of convenience, whose motions and emotions she suffers with very small pleasure.

THERE are, though, just occasional signs of distress piercing the calm facade.

Suzanna's talks with Michel, whom Aden Gillet plays as a lurching, ill-at-ease lover, the telephone call from her spouse, and a conversation with Julie LeGrand's impressive Monique who was once her husband's lover, lead towards a tentative conclusion: that Suzanna simply longs to be with the man she married

and still adores. Duras never makes this unexceptional, though frustrated, with the stuff of drama. Lindy Davies's languorous production trails a mood of chronic wistfulness. She fashions statuesque stage pictures with people who sit soulfully around, airing intimate feelings as if they were damp clothes.

Miss Christie, who charmingly has something of the gawky adolescent still about her, does not strike a false or histrionic note; only the restless hands and eyes suggest profound unease.

She preserves the impassive calm of a sinking ship on which all hands have agreed to go quietly down. That's just how some suicidal people do behave. But her role is emotionally monotonous and she finds no way of giving it interesting depth or range.

If only she had played Chekhov's Madame Arkadina or Ibsen's Lady From the Sea instead.

Rating: No stars — adequate
* good, ** very good
*** outstanding, X poor

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Andler de Jongh Standard



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