

FIFTY years ago, when first produced in Paris, Jean Genet's dream-struck fantasy of two maids romping in their employer's bedroom and dressing up to play servant and mistress for their own erotic enjoyment must have seemed thrillingly subversive.

To think that people below stairs would dream of getting a kick out of their betters. But time and familiarity, as John Crowley's scarcely erotic production goes to show, have dulled the shock-effects of Genet's sado-masochistic power-play — a "black mass ritual" as Sartre described it.

David Rudkin, who has done an over-ornate new translation, admits in a programme note that it's still difficult to decide just what's at issue. The play is oppressed by an air of persistent fogginess. Through the mists, though, you deduce the maids — Niamh Cusack's Clair and Kerry Fox's Solange are drifting in and out of reality. Their rituals serve as expressions of revolt against feelings of abasement. They express hatred of a dominant mistress and their sexual attraction to her.

So their black mass is a ceremony in which they play at murdering "Our Lady" — the significantly Catholic designation they give her. But at the play's climax, a fatal blast of reality threatens an end to games. Crowley's production achieves an intense glow of theatricality.

Designer Tim Hatley has beautifully dreamed up a tall, green panelled room of rancid grandeur, decorated with Louis XV gilded furniture, a chandelier and french

Ratings: No stars — adequate
★ good, ★★ very good,
★★★ outstanding, X poor

Below stairs sex stays in the closet

The Maids
Donmar Warehouse

NICHOLAS DE JONGH

windows, all of which Rick Fisher bathes in romantic light. A ticking clock, a shaft of light from a creaky, opening door lay stress upon the fact that we're about to witness fantasy games. But these maids are almost as cool as cucumbers when they should be as hot as peppers. They lack erotic dynamism, and their transitions from fantasy back to reality are

never emphasised. Josette Simon, swallowing the ends of her sentences but full of the right, swanky hauteur, cuts an attractive but never sufficiently provocative figure as Our Lady.

Miss Cusack's aura of cool, feline elegance envelops Miss Fox's more ponderous Solange — all decorum in her hairnet and maid's black outfit. Little lesbian passion here. Genet insisted in 1947 that he wanted the maids played by young men. That might inject an odd frisson or two into this musty, static old piece.

● Box office: 0171 369 1732.



Alastair Muir

Maid for murder: Niamh Cusack, Josette Simon and Kerry Fox

Crusty old Don wins the love on a Roman holiday

Don Pasquale ★
Coliseum

TOM SUTCLIFFE

THE guileless pleasures of Donizetti's perfect little comedy are well served by Patrick Mason's crafty, pleasant updating to (approximately) the present day. Don Pasquale is not just rich but successful: his booze lives in a cabinet shaped like a tower-block, and there's a modern "masterpiece" on his office wall alongside a combination safe equally grandly displayed within a gilt frame.

Norina runs a newspaper stall outside a local Rome coffee house with cheeky waiters, and rides a red Vespa. Windows in Joe Vanek's baroque-shaped backdrop

open to reveal the massed chorus, or a lone high-up wistful trumpet for Ernesto's aria of amorous despair. The final dubious assignation in the garden has enough atmosphere to support the continuing flow of melodies — the reason this trad story of an old bachelor getting in the way of young love has staying power.

Mason and Vanek's approach is

an ideal foundation for the truthfulness, games-playing and sheer thespian craft that Richard Angas brings to the title role. His voice-production had a veil drawn over it years ago. But as a vehicle for character, voice and being combine to paint a wonderful picture of wilful impending inadequacy: beautiful comic acting. Angas registers an infinite variety of excited anticipation and disappointment, secret illusions and vulnerability, in facial expressions that change like the weather. The audience love him most.

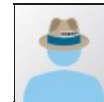
His delightful Norina, Mary Hegarty, is sweet in voice and

manner, naughty but not as egocentric as the text suggests. For the bitchy bits, her style is unpretentious, her singing clean-limbed and gracious. John Hudson's golden tenor is comfortably suited to the gentle lyricism of Ernesto. And Riccardo Simonetti makes a most promising, agreeable-sounding debut as sobersided Dr Malatesta.

Alex Ingram conducts with style, affection and plenty of bounce. Injecting gentle pressure as required, he thoroughly relishes the infallible melodiousness.

● Until 4 July. Box office: 0171 632 8300.

Maids de Jongh Standard



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