

Ideology no substitute for the post-coital fag

THERE are political plays and there are personal plays, and in this moving, witty story of an entrepreneur businessman confronting the schoolteacher who was once his mistress, David Hare succeeded in fusing the two.

Richard Eyre's well-made production of this well-made play — which takes place in a single room over a single night — won plaudits on its 1995 premiere at the National Theatre, in the West End, on Broadway and on tour. Back in London with a new cast, it still looks like a fine, if schematic, piece of theatre.

On one level, *Skylight* is a requiem for a passionate but doomed relationship. On another, it is a review of British political attitudes, in which Hare renounces his early role of polemicist in order to play *Devil's Advocate*. This dramatic blend of conflicting emotions and conflicting attitudes is fascinating, and grippingly acted, even if Hare's

Skylight ★
Vaudeville Theatre

NICK CURTIS

social musings impose a contrived structure. And, shockingly for those who regard Hare as a socialist standard-bearer, he gives the *Devil* the best speeches.

Thatcherite restaurant mogul Tom (Bill Nighy) tracks down his former factotum and lover Kyra (Stella Gonet), after three years apart. In the interim, Tom's wife, who was also Kyra's dear friend, has died, staring cancer-stricken out of the sickbed skylight of the title, and Kyra has become a teacher in one London hellhole and resident in another.

While the first half depicts the wary mating dance of two scarred souls, the second, post-coital act becomes a war of ideologies.

That might not be a problem, if the fight were more equal. Nighy's twitchily authoritative

Tom dominates the first half, possessively prowling Kyra's flat and getting the lion's share of laughs with his blunt, go-getter attitude to life. In the second, Gonet's brittle Kyra, brimming with unnecessary Scottish wistfulness, gets her say, and a very unconvincing say it is. Tom's libertarian capitalism seems infinitely preferable to her right-on piety, and his character is altogether more vivid.

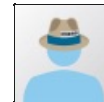
The scenes between Kyra and Tom's son Edward (Theo Fraser Steele), which top and tail the play, feel like fragile attempts by Hare to reassert his belief in human kindness. Despite its mechanised structure — and Hare even supplies Kyra and Tom with emotional trump cards which neatly negate their relationship — this remains an edifying piece of theatre. Why? Because there is a potent, affecting chemistry between Nighy and Gonet despite their rigged roles, and because Hare's script, though flawed, marries the personal to the political better than any recent play I've seen.

● Box office: 0171 836 9987.



Same old lovers, same old wounds: Bill Nighy and Stella Gonet

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