



with the audience in ways that border on the exploitative. In one scene Lulu, an unemployed actress, is forced to strip to the waist to satisfy the voyeuristic dealer; since Lulu at the time is quoting Chekhov, the scene has its funny side but is it our own voyeurism that is also being appealed to?

Even more crucially, Ravenhill leads us to expect, in the penultimate scene, that we shall witness Gary's horrific need for anal penetration with a knife — mercifully we don't but Ravenhill plays on our fears in ways I find suspect.

Ravenhill certainly knows how to write dialogue; and, to be fair, he shows in Mark's sudden uncontrolled access of love for Gary how our residual humanity cannot be totally denied. But the section of society he depicts is too extreme to prove his general thesis that the cash-nexus has brutalised feeling. It also seems too easy to suggest that a corrosive money worship has simply been passed on from the older generation, symbolised by the hypocritical dealer who goes drowsy-eyed over his son's violin playing, to the deprived young. And, while all protest art treads a fine line between depiction and condemnation,

**The chief sensory impression left behind, for all the sex and violence, is of the vile smell of microwave-cooked food** PHOTOGRAPH: RICHARD MILDENHALL

Ravenhill sometimes goes over the edge.

It's a deeply uneven, in-your-face play that suggests Ravenhill has a genuine fire in the belly but an, as yet, uncontrolled talent. You feel there will be better plays to come.

The piece is, however, directed with visceral power by Max Stafford-Clark, against a flashing, moonlit design by Julian McGowan, and it's unflinchingly acted especially by James Kennedy as the mixed-up Mark, Kate Ashfield as the exploited Lulu and Robin Soans as the creepy dealer.

But, strangely, the chief sensory impression left behind, for all the sex and violence, is of the vile smell of the cheap microwave-cooked food which the characters hurl at each other in a symbol of society's conspicuous waste.

At the Theatre Upstairs at the Ambassadors in London (0171 730 1750) until October 18 and then on tour.

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