

OVER the years, the Royal Court has constantly tested what was permissible on the stage, often to howls of indignation. There was the drag ball in John Osborne's *A Patriot for Me*, the stoning-the-baby sequence in Edward Bond's *Saved*, and recently the relentless (and risible) catalogue of human degradation in Sarah Kane's *Blasted*.

This must be the first time, however, the theatre has had to censor its own posters for a production. The f-word in the title of Mark Ravenhill's harrowing, at times unwatchable, first play is obscured by a fork. Those who venture inside the theatre will discover that this is an in-joke in the worst possible taste.

I suspect there could be a rumpus about this production. The piece depicts sexual practices I can't even begin to describe here, and culminates in acts of graphically simulated buggery involving a 14-year-old rent-

boy. When the talk turned to the kind of vileness that gave Edward II his quietus in Berkeley Castle, a man in the same row as me made a speedy exit, and I fervently wished I could join him.

It would be comforting to dismiss *Shopping and \*\*\*\*ing* as mere pornography, or the cynical excess of a tyro playwright determined to create a stir. Comforting but dishonest. There is no doubt whatever that Ravenhill can write. His dialogue is spare, atmospheric and often wickedly funny (the anecdote about the Princess of Wales and the Duchess of York is as hilarious as it is scabrous).

## REVIEWS

### The all-too-naked truth

**THEATRE**  
**Shopping and \*\*\*\*ing**  
Royal Court at  
the Ambassadors

There's little question that Ravenhill holds the mirror up to nature, or a part of human nature. This is a play about the lost boys and girls of Britain, the long-term unemployed whose lives consist of microwaved junk-food, casual sexual encounters, abuse and the temporary escape of drugs. You'll find kids like these any night on the London streets.

What makes the piece so desolate, and at times so moving, is that there are glimpses of another world, ghosts of decency, kindness and beauty. There's an extraordinary moment when one of the characters, auditioning topless, recites Irina's speech from *The Three Sisters*, in which Chekhov's character looks forward to the day when humanity will be able to make sense of all its suffering. And even the play's grotesque drug-dealing heavy (the mesmerising Robin Soans, at once sinister and odiously sentimental) is moved by a video of his son

playing the violin, a haunting image of lost innocence.

Ravenhill's old-fashioned moral theme is that money — and the lack of it — is at the root of all evil, and that relationships have become heartless transactions, mere exercises in acquisition and control. People shop for sex just as they shop for clothes, drugs and food. Is human feeling possible in so corrupt a society?

With the help of an exceptionally talented young cast — Kate Ashfield, Andrew Clover, James Kennedy and Antony Ryding — the director Max Stafford-Clark does full dramatic justice to this revolting but persuasive portrait of our times. The play's harsh, neon-lit poetry, the savage humour and scenes of disgusting degradation throb in the memory like an unlanced boil.

Tickets: 0171 750 1745

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