

Theatre

Shopping and Fucking Royal Court, London

Take a gay "recovering substance abuser" who wants to know if feelings still exist that aren't chemically induced, while also fearfully fighting shy of the emotional dependencies that are, with him, just as addictive. Bring this character, Mark (James Kennedy), into the company of a teenage prostitute who has been abused by his stepdad and, as a consequence, wants something altogether more violent than the gentle Mark can provide.

Then suppose that the two people Mark used to live with – his jealous ex-lover Robbie (Andrew Clover) and their girlfriend Lulu (Kate Ashfield) – find themselves facing lethal reprisals from a drug dealer if they can't raise the £3,000 they owe him. To get their hands on it, will they give the teenager (Antony Ryding) the kind of deadly loving he's after or will they only go so far and leave the rest to someone who could have loved him in orthodox ways?

Shopping and Fucking – Mark Ravenhill's jolting first play now premiered in an oddly fastidious staging by Max Stafford-Clark – plunges you into a world of disposability, disconnection and dysfunction, where relationships, to be tustable, have to be reduced to transactions. People drift through this moral vacuum, watching themselves with a kind of impotent, existential perplexity. "Why did I do that? What am I?" asks Lulu after using the opportunity provided by a wino's knife attack on the assistant at the 7-11 to shoplift some chocolate.

Ravenhill has a sharp eye for the blackly comic bizarreries of this tragic, emotionally shrink-wrapped world. When he reported his sexual abuse to a social worker, the teenager reveals, her first reaction was to fish out a leaflet for him to give to his illiterate stepdad on condom use. With the hard-faced pout of the prematurely knowing, Antony Ryding gives an excellently unsentimentalised performance of a youth who is looking for a "dad" to replace his stepdad but who, trapped in

the abuse cycle, cannot conceive of a relationship that is not based on sexual violence. "Yeah, it'll hurt," he says in one of the most desolating moments of the play. "But a good hurt."

There are a number of speeches, however, where you feel that Ravenhill is aiming with counter-productive strenuousness to make *Shopping and Fucking* the definitive play about Nineties malaise and drift. Mark, for example, seems to have swallowed a psychological text book. And what of Robbie's lengthy discourse on stories? "A long time ago there were... stories so big you could live your whole life in them... The journey to enlightenment. The march of Socialism. But they all died or the world grew up or grew senile or forgot them, so now we're all making up our own stories. Little stories. But we've each got one." This sounds more like Ravenhill laying out his themes than a plausible method for egging on an under-educated teenager to reveal and play out with you his sado-masochistic fantasies.

You'd expect a play called *Shopping and Fucking* to be explicit. But it was the occasional explicitness of intent (the drug dealer's thoughts on money as the definition of civilisation are particularly trying in their over-emphasis) rather than explicitness of act or vocabulary that bothered me. For the strong of stomach, though, there's the chance to see a real talent at work here.

■ To 19 Oct (0171-565 5000)

PAUL TAYLOR



Kate Ashfield as Lulu

Shopping Taylor Independent



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ianlharris

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