

Wet and windy night

Michael Billington

Bad Weather
The Other Place, Stratford

ROBERT Holman is a poetic, allusive dramatist who rarely raises his voice. Indeed, one of his best works was called *Making Noise Quietly*. But after three hours of delicately exposed nerve-ends in *Bad Weather*, getting its premiere in Stratford-upon-Avon, I found myself pining for more social detail and political anger.

The play starts with a palpable injustice. After a fight outside a Chinese restaurant in Middlesborough in which a guy's head is kicked in, 19-year-old Jamie is arrested, tried and sent down for four years. The only problem is that the real culprit is his best friend, Luke — a lad who has grown up with him on the same estate, who has been nurtured by Jamie's mother and whose sister is carrying Jamie's child.

Such is the bald scenario, which could go several ways. One might have a moral drama about Jamie's crisis of conscience: to grass or not to grass? Or a scalding attack on social deprivation and judicial incompetence on Teesside. In fact, Holman chooses



First-rate... Susan Brown

to write a strange, discursive Freudian drama about older women and younger men. The focus is very much on Jamie's mother, Kay, brought up in France, and on her old Gallic nanny, Agnès, both of whom are inexplicably drawn to the errant Luke, a self-styled "self-centred slob".

Such things, you may argue, happen in life. But on stage, the growing love between the schoolmistress, 69-year-old Agnès and the 21-year-old spoilt brat Luke seems frankly incredible. Holman also seems like an eccentric photographer who, present during a volcanic eruption, turns out marginal still-life portraits. We want to learn the cause of social discontent in the North-East. Instead we get a story about a

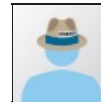
wayward family in which the mother struggles to overcome the loss of a childhood inheritance of a French vineyard — hardly, I suspect, a typical Teesside problem.

I am not asking for sociology, just drama. Holman's play, switching from Middlesborough tower-block flats to a French chateau, has the meandering quality of an adapted novel. It has some good individual scenes — particularly those involving Kay and a scruffy ex-con whom she disconsolately takes to her bed — but in the end it is too oblique for its own good.

The director, Steven Pimlott, should have been far tougher with the text. But there are two first-rate performances: one from Susan Brown as the guilt-ridden Kay, who has displaced her maternal love onto Luke, and another from Susan Engel, who, as the French nanny, speaks English with the meticulous precision of a foreigner. Barry Stanton also offers staunch support as Kay's grey-ponytailed lover, and I would hardly blame Paul Poplewell for failing to explain why everyone is so magnetised by the manipulative Luke, as if he were Middlesborough's answer to Leonardo DiCaprio.

At The Other Place, Stratford-upon-Avon (01789 295623), till September.

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