

Paul Taylor says Yasmina Reza's latest work is funny, sad, better than *Art*, but he seems to have watched a radio drama

Listen, a wireless play with strings

If the mark of a great dramatist was the ability to dream up natty, piquant ideas for plays that can then be consumed, with no lasting danger to the system, in the 90-minute gap between one's first gin and tonic and dinner, then the French playwright Yasmina Reza would unquestionably be the new Shakespeare. The runaway worldwide success of *Art* demonstrates the depressing commercial attractiveness of the work that titillates an audience's intelligence, while making few demands on it, that offers an actors' equivalent of the "Three Tenors" concert and that is cleverly agnostic enough to confirm you in whatever prejudice you arrived with.

Reza's *The Unexpected Man* receives its English premier now in an RSC production at The Pit that reunites the creative team behind the West End triumph of *Art*. Mark Thompson once again provides the chic-ly minimalist set, Matthew Warchus the drolly stylish and poetic direction and Christopher Hampton the adroit translation. It would be nice to be able to say that, unlike its predeces-

sor, *The Unexpected Man* won't be a licence to print money because it's a better play. But whatever edge this funny, sad 80-minute piece may have in psychological subtlety and shadings of sorrow can't compensate for the fact that we seem to have gathered here to watch a radio drama.

Reza would object that this calculated perversity is what makes *The Unexpected Man* an intriguing theatrical proposition, and certainly, in Michael Gambon and Eileen Atkins, she is lucky to have two actors whose faces are full of suffering and humour, and hints of a complex hinterland you could go on reading for ever. The chance to stare at them silently staring is, to be sure, abundantly on offer here.

Set in a train compartment between Paris and Frankfurt, the play arranges a chance encounter between a *soignée* middle-class lady, melancholy because of the death of a much-loved male friend, and her idol, a successful male novelist variously aggrieved by a chum's recent slighting of his latest work, his daughter's



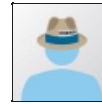
Faces of suffering and humour: Michael Gambon and Eileen Atkins

likely marriage to an oldster, and the manifold disappointments of the literary life. He doesn't know he's been recognised: she has his new novel in her bag and is in a turmoil of comic indecision over the protocol and possible consequences of getting it out and reading it in front of him.

The technical trick is that most of the piece is conducted as interior monologues: the drawback in a stage version is that the embarrassing constriction and the absurdly tense and still mutual watchfulness of the real-life situation are dissipated as the characters deliver their thoughts, not in voice-over but in direct-to-audience routines, and move around the stage to physicalise the relationship going on in their heads.

Interesting questions are raised about such topics as the connection between a writer and his *oeuvre* and the kind of insights (superior or mistaken) into his deeper, better self a devoted reader can have. But, despite the fastidious brooding of Gambon, who intones the name Scriabin with all the disgust of someone mentioning Scrofula, and despite Atkins' beautifully wry nostalgia for the life she might have lived, it creates an irritatingly over-abstract insubstantial world where, you feel, Godot would arrive sooner than a humble buffet trolley.

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