

**FIRST NIGHT**

by  
**Nicholas de Jongh**


**The Old Neighbourhood**  
★  
*Royal Court Downstairs*

**T**HE Old Neighbourhood has the eerie compulsion of a smudged, faded photograph which stealthily sharpens into the clarity of revelation. What an interesting wealth of sadness David Mamet unfolds in this enthralling jostle of memories and close encounters, when Bobby, a middle-aged Jew with his marriage on the rocks returns to the Chicago of his youth. The fact of Bobby's Jewishness is crucial, for *The Old Neighbourhood*, in Patrick Marber's ravishingly acted production, conveys the insecurity of second-generation immigrant Jews in America, haunted by the significance of Hitler's extermination camps.

How grim, how earnestly loaded with seriousness this may make *The Old Neighbourhood* sound. But it's no such thing. The play's appeal has to do with its bright nonchalance while masking desolate significance. There's a joshing lightness, an amused, amusing take upon the grief and rue of friends and family who treat Bobby's homecoming as a chance to raid the vaults of nostalgia and badmouth the past. Mamet's dark, ironic humour still holds. How engagingly his characters talk: vaulting from female tirades, and male fusillades where batallions of expletives come out fighting dirty and macho, to a ruminative eloquence.

Mamet, ranked with Miller, Albee and Shepard as America's finest living playwrights, distills the raw, rank flavour of people wading down streams of consciousness. But Colin Stinton's compelling Bobby, whose style is all rueful melancholia, is the exception to the loquaciousness. With his swaggering friend Joey (Linal Haft) his married sister Jolly and Deeny who loved him, he is the passive, sympathising listener who would never do anything so vulgar as wear a bleeding heart on his sleeve.

The passive stance of Bobby, who admits he ignored his wife's one devastating, anti-semitic slur, is important. Mamet names the first of the 75-minute play's three scenes, *The Disappearance of the Jews*. The title surely refers not just to the concentration camp and Joey's belief that Jews were persecuted because of their passivity — a high-minded lack of aggression. There's also a pervasive anxiety the Jewish race is in danger of losing its purity from intermarriage. Bobby regrets his union with a Christian



**Iron and velvet: Compelling performances from Zoe Wanamaker and Colin Stinton** Picture: ALASTAIR MUIR

## Ghosts of the past haunt a Chicago of stark sadness

girl. Jolly, to judge from the blaze of old resentments and fresh grievances, stoked up in Zoe Wanamaker's terrific, funny performance, sees only family disaster resulting from her now dead mother's marriage to a non-Jew. Mamet beautifully catches a Jewish quality of familial closeness and melodramatic extroversion in the meeting of brother and sister. Miss Wanamaker, iron and velvet by turns is particularly appealing. But for all the reminiscent badinage, a kind of darkness subtly grows as Bobby faces up to the family ghosts.

**M**ARBER'S finely tuned production on William Dudley's revolving stage, with its sparse props, has a ghostly air about it too. And when in the play's last, desolate encounter Bobby meets Deeny — all flaky glamour and shimmering pain in Diana Quick's emotionally overwhelming performance — you realise he's become a sort of ghost too — a passive, husk of a man, for whom love and hope are done. A play of riveting disquiet.

Ratings: - ○ adequate, ★ good, ★★ very good, ★★★ outstanding, X poor  
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de Jongh, Standard, Mamet



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