

# Straight confessions amid the gay frolics

**A**FTER three mediocre dramas, the Orange Tree's repertory season has finally produced a gem in Terrence McNally's bittersweet comedy about four fraughtly bickering heterosexuals cast in at the gay deep end. McNally imagines two straight Connecticut couples, variously suffering from illness, unhappiness and infidelity, celebrating the Fourth of July on a Fire Island beach house that one of their number has inherited from her dead, gay brother.

While homosexuals frolic around them, McNally gently uncovers the quartet's secrets and prejudices in confessional asides. The play could certainly do with some polishing and judicious cutting, but it's a gem nonetheless.

Sally (Amanda Royle), whose island it is, is variously haunted by memories of her brother (whose sexuality she never accepted) and

**Ratings:** ○ — adequate  
★ good, ★★ very good,  
★★★ outstanding, X poor

**Lips Together, Teeth Apart** ★  
*Orange Tree, Richmond*

**NICK CURTIS**

by the vision of a man drowning offshore. Things aren't helped by the fact that she is pregnant again after several miscarriages, and has slept with her brother-in-law John (Stuart Fox), who has been diagnosed with cancer.

John's wife Chloe (Lucy Tregear) keeps up a constant background buzz of inane chatter and old show tunes, and seems unhealthily close to her boorish brother Sam (Paul Kemp), Sally's husband. The particle-thin veneer of amicability between these four is regularly ruptured by tactless bitchiness, and once by outright violence. But the real depth of their lack of understanding, of themselves and each other, is revealed when McNally freezes the action and has them speak directly to us.

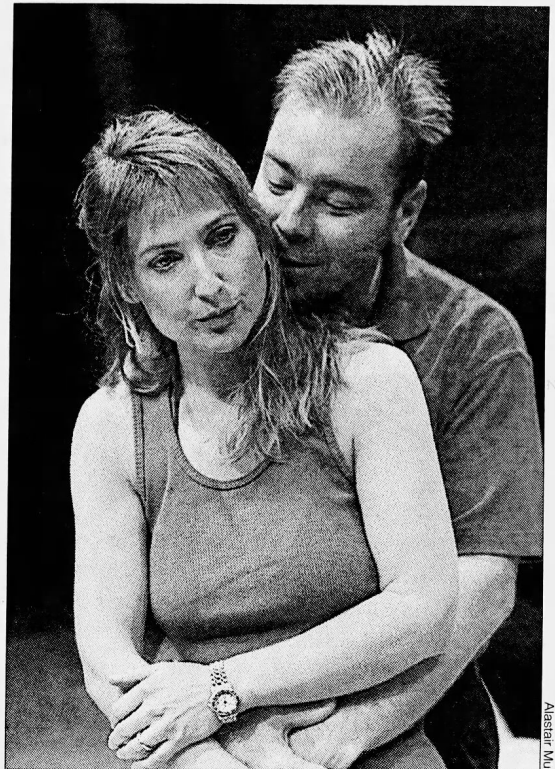
This is a clumsy device, and McNally's dialogue is prone in these moments to a mawkishness

which contrasts sharply with his savage wit elsewhere: it is a credit to Auriol Smith's pacy direction that one never winces too much. Even though her cast — especially Kemp — look rather too young to play McNally's fortysomething losers, Smith's production carries the stamp of conviction.

Fox is very good indeed as the supercilious John, and Tregear is splendid in the thankless role of the twittering Chloe. Royle is fittingly remote as Sally, and Kemp, though rather too camp to deliver John's homophobic comments about "those people" with full force, is blisteringly convincing in his rage.

Although his characters are by turns weak, stupid and vicious, McNally retains sympathy for them. The contrasting abandon of the offstage gay parties is a sad rather than sardonic counterpoint to their unhappiness. For all its faults, *Lips Together, Teeth Apart* is a great find, as humane as it is humorous.

● *In repertory until 12 December.*  
Box office: 0181 940 3633.



Haunted: Amanda Royle and Paul Kemp in *Lips Together, Teeth Apart*

Lips Curtis Standard



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