

# Sisters' tale is funny and chilling

**The Memory of Water, by Shelagh Stephenson, at Cambridge Arts Theatre until Saturday. Review by ANGELA SINGER.**

WATER apparently has a "memory" in that it carries the mark of substances put into it — even long after they have been moved.

Such, says author Shelagh Stephenson, is the influence of a mother upon her daughters.

*The Memory of Water* has three sisters returning home for their mother's funeral, arguing, bickering and reminiscing in her 1950s bedroom. This is how Arthur Miller would have written his family skeleton plays — if he had been a woman and if he had been a comic.

It is very funny, and every so often, chilling.

The play allows Julia Sawalha to move on from her many famous roles as the giddy girl or the prissy girl and show us her powers for humour and for a grown woman in anguish.

She had two pieces all her own, one comic, one of despair, which each deserved its own applause — if only Arts Theatre audiences did not behave as if they were at a classical music concert where it was not polite to clap until the end.

This play has all the passion, flow and contrast of a piece by Rachmaninov. Alison Steadman (as



The Memory of Water . . . Alison Steadman and Julia Sawalha.

Teresa the older sister) is such a consummate actress down to her bones, she had the audience responding to every muscle movement on her face.

Samantha Bond plays Mary the second daughter — the one who has the dialogue with their mother (Julie Legrand) — and about whom there are the most secrets.

Like real sisters, the three are so different, they are almost like three generations of women in attitude.

Those of us brought up in the Fifties and Sixties were schooled in contorted values which were ditched completely within 10 years.

In 1963, people gave away their grandchildren like unwanted puppies if their daughters were what were then called "unmarried mothers" for

the sake of what the neighbours would say.

By 1973, in a lot of circles, getting married seemed a bit of an affectation — what was wrong with just living together?

In the Fifties and Sixties, female secrets were "not told to your father". But was this because he was powerful or vulnerable?

In *Memory of Water*, the men are as shadows, which is part of the humour. Patrick Drury, as Mary's married boyfriend Mike, is a perfect example of a passive adulterer, a bit like a dog on a lead — he returns to his owner at the end of the day.

Says Alison Steadman's Teresa to her husband Frank (Mark Lambert): "You have a whole range of silences."

Memory Singer Cambridge



Clipped By:

ianlharris

Sun, Oct 15, 2023