

► THEATRE

A hard act to follow

Sperm Wars
Orange Tree Theatre
Richmond

I USED to fear that modern theatre had slipped into a tedious, repetitive spiral, with every new play – especially comedies – following a rigid formula dictated by TV sitcoms. But this week I've ceased to be a negative, crusty old cynic. All thanks to a glass jar containing what looks like a slightly watered-down pub measure of Bailey's.

If David Lewis can follow up this, his first full-length play, with another of comparable quality, we could soon be hailing him as one of Britain's brightest writing talents.

Sperm Wars, which finishes at Richmond's Orange Tree tomorrow (Saturday) after a short but successful repertory run, is as fresh as a daisy, as original as sin. It's a wickedly funny comedy about the personal implications of artificial insemination, interwoven with telling debates about creation, the furtherance of the human race and, er, accountancy.

Lucy (Amanda Royle) and Matt (Jeremy Crutchley), late 30-somethings struggling against his low sperm count as they try to have a baby, enlist the help of Matt's old college chum Barry (Stuart Fox), a superbly boring accountant, to provide samples. At the appropriate time of the month, Barry sheepishly calls round, disappears into a side room and produces a donation for his old mate to administer. But Matt and Lucy's relationship, partly because of the strain of the childless, is shaky. The resultant sight of Matt stomping around the stage, mid-argument, brandishing the precious fluid, and spilling half of it on the furniture as he becomes more agitated, is one of the funniest things I've seen in years. The script is sharp and tight and – like all the best comedies – laced with bittersweet tragedy too. We laugh, yet we feel slightly uncomfortable about laughing.

Orange Tree director Sam Walters, who I've always thought is at his sharpest with good comedies, has turned Lewis' polished material into a memorable production. The funniest character is Barry, the accountant, agonising over his role in the saga, and finding the implications deeply affecting. Mention, too, for the fourth character in the drama, Zoe (Sarah Tansey), whose affair on the side with Matt further complicates the equation. Best of all is the lack of a pat ending. The second half sees the comedy rising to an altogether higher plane, with Lewis successfully resisting any thought of tritely tying up the loose ends. A masterful debut.

Sperm Wars runs at the Orange Tree Theatre, Richmond, until tomorrow. Performances at 7.45pm, Sat mat 4pm. Bookings: 0181 940 3633.

Tim Harrison

Lovers in arms: Matt (Jeremy Crutchley) and Lucy (Amanda Royle)



Sperm Harrison Gazettes



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