

Theatre

John Gross

The Seagull Guiding Star Much Ado About Everything

thoughtless cruelty that helps to destroy her son Konstantin, however much she loves him in her better moments. Claudié Blakley makes an affecting Nina; Will Keen's unhappy Konstantin starts off well in the early scenes, but doesn't quite sound the subsequent depths of despair; Timothy Walker's unusually youthful Trigorin is credible as Arkadina's lover and Nina's seducer, but rather less so as an old-style *homme de lettres*.

Elsewhere the acting is variable, though there is an exceptionally good performance from Clare Swinburne as angry, snuff-taking Masha, still young and already "in mourning for her life". Jude Kelly directs; the production does credit to Leeds, and it would be nice if it could be seen further afield.

JONATHAN Harvey is a young writer who has made his name with a series of gay comedies, beginning with *Beautiful Thing*. His new play, *Guiding Star*, at the Cottesloe Theatre, is his most ambitious work to date. Unfortunately it is too ambitious: it tries to do more than he can cope with. But his talent is still unmistakably in evidence.

First seen a few weeks ago in Liverpool, the city in which it is set, the play is a co-production between the National Theatre and the Liverpool Everyman. The Hillsborough disaster, in which 96 Liverpool football supporters were killed, looms large in the background.

Terry Fitzgibbon was at the match with his two young sons; the three of them escaped, and now Terry is weighed down by a survivor's guilt. He gives up his job, broods, sits reading books about Auschwitz and visits his depression on everyone around him. It is left to his devoted wife Carol to hold the family together.

Meanwhile Terry's younger son, Liam, is slowly coming to terms with his homosexuality, a process that culminates in his running away. And the family's problems pale beside those of poor Mari next door. Her son dies of cystic fibrosis; for good measure she has lost her looks and her figure and the love of her husband.

Tragic material indeed. The trouble is that we hurtle through it at a rate that precludes tragic depth. Much of the time we might as well be watching *Brookside*. There is a lack of dramatic focus, too (sometimes it is hard to make out what is going on), and though Harvey, a naturally humane writer, provides Terry and Carol with a semi-upbeat ending, it is pulled out of the hat with not much more than a "hey presto".

The play makes its sharpest impact in detached scenes — Terry's sad encounter with a London prostitute, Liam's rather scary encounter with a nocturnal cruiser, a seaside mishap in which three young people nearly get drowned. Beyond that, it is redeemed by a good deal of vigorous, spiky dialogue and fine performances from everyone involved.

Colin Tierney's Terry and Tina Malone's Mari are particularly effective, and there's some excellent comic relief from Samantha Lavelle as a bimbo in a startling series of outfits. Gina Bodinetz directs.

There is a case to be made against Jackie Mason, who is currently appearing at the Playhouse Theatre in his one-man show *Much Ado About Everything*. He can be repeti-

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