

## Glittering ponces

**Sleep With Me**  
Cottesloe Theatre  
★★

Hanif Kureishi says he stopped writing plays in the 80s because he couldn't find a style to accommodate his themes. Judging by this enervating nonsense, he still hasn't found it; for what we have is a country-weekend play about a group of old university friends who have mostly succumbed to the bitch-goddess success. They're such a dislikeable bunch, however, I dubbed them *The Glittering Ponces*.

The hosts at this rural thrash are Stephen and Julie; he is a promiscuous, highly-paid screenwriter and she is his arantly snobbish spouse. Their guests include Russell, a hot young TV mogul, his girlfriend, and a middle-aged movie producer, Charles, who has virtually become Stephen's poodle. To lend contrast and a touch of moral integrity we also have a couple who live outside the media goldfish-bowl: an earnest teacher called Barry and his wife, Sophie, a once radical feminist who is now a social worker.

But what exactly is Kureishi's purpose? I assume, since Stephen's marriage is cracking up and the characters all exist in a state of sexual confusion, he is suggesting there is some connection between media success and emotional chaos; that the free market is as big a recipe for unhappiness in matters of the heart as it is economically. The embittered Stephen, in fact,

talks of "the utter emptiness of effortless success", and laments that "marriage has become more of an exhibition than an institution".

Kureishi's point may be valid, but it is hard to care about his characters' tarnished values as they never appear to have had that many ideals in the first place. Their sell-out to success or domesticity arouses no twinge of compassion.

Even worse, when they talk of their messed-up lives, you feel their twin gods are really Mills and Boon. At one point, Stephen's secret mistress tells him "You like being loved ...but you're afraid to love back." Later the angry teacher tells his faithless wife "he touched the parts of you I thought were mine", which makes the lover sound like a peculiarly potent lager. I also lost count of the number of scenes that ended with a character quietly sobbing. Scratch Hanif Kureishi and you discover Barbara Cartland.

There is not much that a good director, Anthony Page, and a strong cast can do with this mush. The person who comes best out of the evening is, in fact, Jonathan Hyde, who makes the ageing movie producer a spiky-haired sad sack desperate to get his hands on Stephen's latest movie script. At least, he has an intention that carries him through the play.

Sian Thomas also lends Stephen's wife, who claims that "the family is a point you can live from", a genuine sense of maternal anxiety. But Sean Chapman as Stephen is left moodily wrestling with an artistic conscience of which we see precious little sign.

And splendid actors like



Wrestling against the agonised and successful ... Penny Downie in *Sleep With Me* Photograph: Neil Libbert

Penny Downie and Peter Wight spend their time trying to breathe life into the stereotype outsiders who supposedly represent the real world.

But I am suspicious of plays that dwell on the agonies of success.

Michael Billington

## Sound and light show

**Aleksandar Madzar**  
Queen Elizabeth Hall  
★★★★

The Belgrade-born Aleksandar Madzar took third prize in the

Leeds Piano Competition in 1996, and won the Umberto Micheli Competition in Milan the following year, but he is not the kind of pianist who usually succeeds in that kind of talent contest — he's imaginative, he takes risks, and is always on the lookout for fresh insights into what he is interpreting. The imagination that goes into his playing is reflected in his programming too — pairing Berg with Schumann in the first half of his QEH recital and sandwiching Berio between Scarlatti and Ravel in the second suggested an artist whose horizons are far wider than those of many of his peers.

As well as an effortlessly

commanding technique, Madzar has a light, flexible touch and a wide command of keyboard colour. That was most obviously brought into focus in Ravel's *Gaspard de la Nuit* with which he finished his programme — a performance full of dark, glinting sonorities lit by sudden flashes of brilliant iridescence—but it was equally present in Berg's *Sonata*, in which the intense thematic working was given buoyancy and clarity, with never a hint of the dourness that sometimes passes for intensity in this work. The Schumann, *Dauidsbündertänze*, was compelling; not every idea came off, but there was serious thought even behind the mis-

firings, and the best numbers were quite remarkable, by turns either full of dash and vigour, or a quiet poetry with every strand of the texture carefully shaped; Madzar has a real feeling for the quietest playing.

The two Scarlatti sonatas, both in C major, were effervescent, never strait-laced, it was equally present in Berg's *Sonata*, in which the intense thematic working was given buoyancy and clarity, with never a hint of the dourness that sometimes passes for intensity in this work. The Schumann, *Dauidsbündertänze*, was compelling; not every idea came off, but there was serious thought even behind the mis-

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