

Cast and crew let down by a heartless play

Theatre

Sleep With Me
National's Cottesloe Theatre

HANIF KUREISHI clearly doesn't believe in squandering the material of his own life. A few years ago he abandoned his long-term lover and their children and went to live with a much younger woman.

He had no hesitation at all about turning this personal unhappiness and betrayal into a short novel, *Intimacy*. Writers, of course, have always cannibalised their own lives, and the lives of those about them. But there was a sadistic viciousness about *Intimacy*, and a massive self-regard, that really chilled the blood.

Having generated plenty of controversy, and sold a lot of books, one might have hoped that Kureishi would move on. Not a bit of it. His new play at the National, *Sleep With Me*, has as its central character a writer who abandons his wife and young children and goes off with a much younger woman.

It's not only the plot that repeats like a breakfast kipper. Kureishi has a touching faith in the enduring value of his own *bons mots*. A host of lines in *Intimacy* are duly regurgitated in *Sleep With Me*, including what might well be the most repellent epigram in modern literature: "There are some f***s for which a man would happily watch his wife and



Lost weekenders: Sean Chapman and Sian Thomas

children drown in a freezing sea." After reading the novel and watching the play, one has the nasty suspicion that Kureishi might be absolutely in earnest about this.

I fear *Sleep With Me* will be a hit. It's superficially sharp and funny and I suspect the National's director Trevor Nunn thinks he's got another *Closer* on his hands.

Patrick Marber's play, however, was written with scorching intensity, real wit, deep-felt pain. Kureishi's is little more than a bog-standard middle-class adultery comedy with a few f-words and the obligatory cocaine-snorting scene to make it seem hip.

The action is set in the garden of a big house in the country, the rural retreat of Stephen (Sean Chapman), the Kureishi-like writer, and

Julie (excellent Sian Thomas), the pushy, snobbish wife he is on the point of ditching.

A group of friends has been invited for the weekend, and it's been grandly claimed that the piece is like a modern version of Ingmar Bergman's *Smiles of a Summer Night*. In fact it is much more reminiscent of *The Big Chill*, a film about the reunion of a group of college friends, and there's a great deal of grindingly predictable stuff about the betrayal of Left-wing ideals.

What's spooky about this play is Kureishi's almost complete inability to get inside the heads and hearts of his characters. Despite an excellent cast and nimble direction by Anthony Page on a beautiful set by Tim Hatley, the characters almost all seem like types rather

than living individuals; and though Kureishi may fancy he's Ingmar Bergman, he's more like Andrea Newman.

There is a torrid, soapish quality to this drama, as characters agonise about sex and get down to a serious spot of cunnilingus; with their heads between other people's legs, they have no care at all for a world beyond their own self-regarding circle of media folk.

Kureishi is also a crashing snob. The patronising portrayal of the young working-class nanny Lorraine (Kacey Ainsworth) is as contemptible as Noël Coward's treatment of comic servant girls, while the decent teacher Barry (Peter Wight), still trying to cling to recognisably humane values, is cruelly mocked and subjected to the most embarrassing nude scene on the London stage.

Kureishi's mouthpiece, Stephen, may bang on about the "extended and stretched human mind" and the "erotic anarchy of the imagination", but what Kureishi actually provides is predictable plotting, duff dialogue and dire little jokes about the *cappuccino brûlée* at the Ivy.

He strikes me as being an almost entirely heartless dramatist who, like many people who deal in cruelty, comes over all sentimental about the kiddies. What a smug, priapic, misogynistic writer he is.

Tickets: 0171 452 3000

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Sun, May 26, 2024