

# Women the losers in the world of the lecher

**M**EN and true love, in the blistering, satirical accusation of Hanif Kureishi's sharp, black satire, often come together, but not for long. *Sleep With Me* is a devastating theatrical charge-card written as an enticing comedy of bad sexual manners. Kureishi accuses the 1990s English male from the media classes of compulsive lechery, treachery and vanity, to name just three of their deadly vices, and a ruthless determination to have their own way, particularly with any biddable, beddable young women who come to hand. Children are the pain they leave behind. Females emerge in this old-fashioned but persuasive indictment, as beautiful losers. They are faithful where men are errant, victims of the ordinary wish to have and to hold.

Kureishi revitalises a tired theatre concept, helped by the smooth flow and atmospheric of Anthony Page's finely acted production. The scene is set for a country-house weekend and reunion of old university friends. You imagine the author is hot for nostalgia and reminiscence, poised to reveal how ambition and early promise has gone the way of so many great expectations. No such thing occurs. The 1960s past is mentioned, but only in passing. There are obvious thematic nods to Chekhov and, far less happily, to Alan Ayckbourn. Otherwise Kureishi makes his own brand of dark comedy.

Tim Hatley, in the second example of superlative scenic design he has provided within a fortnight, creates a paved country garden upon a traverse stage. With its flower-laden walls, shrubs and water it could be the setting for an opulent 1950s West End drama. But here the difference begins. This is the terrain of 1990s snobbish achievers,

**Sleep With Me** ★★

*Cottesloe Theatre*

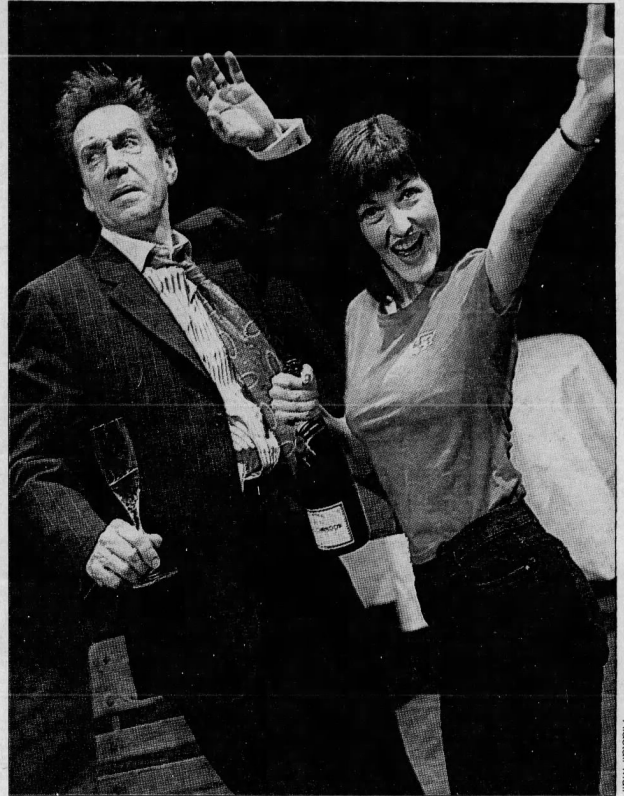
**NICHOLAS DE JONGH**

high on the aphrodisiac of success. Sean Chapman's Stephen, a fortyish famous script-writer and author, dependent upon Jonathan Hyde's melancholic producer Charles, encapsulates the play's central dilemma: How can he dispense with his long-standing wife, Julie, and defect with his latest true love, Anna, who inconveniently arrives on the arm of another old friend, Adrian Lukis's vacuous, cockney TV mogul.

Kureishi catches the comedy and the aphoristic banter of these lecherous, self-regarding men who behave with all the grace of bantam cocks in the farm-yard: they take to cocaine and copulation with Kacey Ainsworth's willing au pair like delayed adolescents. The scene in which Stephen's marriage collapses amidst violence and anguish has truth's baleful ring. It is played with rending forcefulness by Sian Thomas's remarkable Julie, all flashes of child-like fury and desperation, and Sean Chapman's Stephen, rivettingly as a quiet, intense sexual obsessive.

Peter Wight's randy old Labour schoolmaster, Barry, who could have stepped out of Ayckbourn, coarsens the play's fine fibre. But a gawkily handsome Penny Downie conveys the play's essence. Her performance of stinging truth and rich pathos speaks of and for women whose own high hopes of a career are lost in sacrifice to a man.

● In rep. 0171 452 3000.



Another bottle please: Jonathan Hyde and Kacey Ainsworth in *Sleep With Me*

Alastair Muir

## Sleep Standard de Jongh

Clipped By:

ianlharris

Sun, May 26, 2024