

Genes of the fathers

Lyn Gardner sees outstanding performances lift a play above the ordinary



Colin Firth and Elizabeth McGovern in *Three Days Of Rain*

PHOTOGRAPH NEIL LIBBERT

It is the acting — brilliant, hard and absolutely true — rather than the writing, that lifts Richard Greenburg's *Three Days Of Rain* above the ordinary. Of course, Elizabeth McGovern, Colin Firth, and David Morrissey get two opportunities to show their mettle: first as the children, then, in the play's second half, as their parents, in a drama that begins in 1995 then

time-warps backwards to 1960. You see quite clearly how the sins — or at least the genes — of the fathers and mothers are visited on their offspring.

When Walker's rich and successful architect father died a year ago, Walker did a disappearing act. He didn't even show up for the funeral. But now he's back in New York, holed up in the studio where his

father and his former partner Theo worked on the commission that made them famous shortly before Theo's early death. Here he finds a cryptic journal, kept by his father over 30 years previously, which proves that other people's diaries are very seldom interesting let alone sensational.

Famously a man of very few words, Dad's most eloquent entry

reads: "Three days of rain." Only after Walker has met up with his exasperated married sister Nan (McGovern) and Theo's son Pip (Morrissey), an easygoing actor in daytime soaps, for a reading of the will, are secrets exposed and surprises sprung. Then the play flips back 35 years and the meaning of the journal's entries begins to make sense.

Its a neat device, which plays heavily and to good effect on the fact that the audience always knows much more than the characters ever can about themselves, but, like a lot of the dialogue, it is almost too pat and too clever.

Any play in which somebody — Walker and Nan's mad, alcoholic mother, Lina, actually — can be described as "Zelda Fitzgerald's less stable sister" gets top marks in the wit department, and Greenburg has plenty more where that came from. But the emotional lives of these people is much less successfully defined by the writer — the second generation seem merely to be richer, thinner, less talented, more neurotic versions of their parents.

It is left up to Robin Lefevre's beautiful nuanced production and the actors to paint in the detail and the emotional texture of parents who will always be skeletons in their own children's wardrobe. The three-some deliver world-class performances. What you remember are not the smart sassy lines but Firth's Walker, shivering like a traumatised child in his hunky grown-up frame, McGovern like a gaudily painted butterfly staving off his grim alcoholic future with a desperate gaiety, and Morrissey's Pip finding contentment and happiness in an acceptance of his second-rateness.

At the Donmar Warehouse until March 13. Box office: 01 71-369 1732.

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ianlharris

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