

## Reviews

### Theatre

## Art or profit, the quality is there

### Peggy For You

Hampstead Theatre.

★★★★

Agents are not supposed to be more famous than their clients. But Peggy Ramsay, after being the subject of a biography and memoir and making cameo appearances in films and plays by Alan Bennett and Peter Nichols, is now the eccentric protagonist of Alan Plater's highly enjoyable new work. What might have been an in-joke becomes an eloquent testimony to a woman who believed infinitely more in art than she did in money.

Plater's first act, set in her precipitous, script-crammed office in St Martin's Lane, central London, is largely an affectionate portrait of the unpredictable Peggy.

Coping simultaneously with a gauche young tyro and a gilt-edged West End dramatist, she dispenses aphorisms, advice and acuity in equal proportions.

"Drama," she announces, "like sex, should never be rushed." Hollywood producers and agents are pimps turning her writers into whores: "If any of my clients are rich," she claims, "it's entirely by accident." And a play to her is an event that should tell us something we don't already know.

But just when you begin to wonder if Plater is adding anything new to the Peggy

myth, he presents us with a writer prepared to test the legend to destruction.

The second act consists largely of a combative encounter between Peggy and a blunt northern dramatist infuriated by her occasional negligence and calculated oddity.

It is good to find someone at last standing up to her. But Plater's play also at this point transcends gossip to achieve the dignity of metaphor: his agent-heroine suddenly stands for all those who believe that art is more important than fame or profit and that living requires more courage than a drunken suicidal death.

Admittedly Peggy dominates the play rather as she did her theatrical world. But she elicits from Maureen Lipman a performance that is embryonically fine but is still a bit blurry at the edges. All the details of Peggy's voice and appearance are there: the knee-high stockings, the swooping voice, the strange gait with knees raised high, suggesting a stroll over a quicksand.

Lipman also rises superbly to the best part of the play when Peggy peremptorily summarises a pile of unperformable works. Lipman captures excellently the spirit of Peggy Ramsay: only the words, at the moment, occasionally prove elusive.

But, even though her role is dominant, Robin Lefevre's production boasts a very good performance from Richard Platt as the aggrieved northern writer who arrives to challenge her authority and ends up laying her new carpet. Tom Espiner as the raw beginner



Maureen Lipman and Tom Espiner in *Peggy for You* Photograph: Tristram Kenton

and Crispin Redman as the dramatist already tainted by success lend rock-solid support.

The result is a highly unusual play: one that starts by exploring the politics of the theatrical village but ends with a movingly resonant statement about resilience and audacity in the face of rejection and solitude.

**Michael Billington**

### Classical

## Preparation for Paris

**Birmingham Contemporary Music Group/  
Simon Rattle**

**CBSO Centre, Birmingham**

★★★★

Next weekend the Cité de la

Musique in Paris opens its doors to the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra and its past and present music directors, Simon Rattle and Sakari Oramo. The orchestra's sibling, the Birmingham Contemporary Music Group, is going along too, and the programme they are taking was aired on Sunday in Birmingham — works by Oliver Knussen, Thomas

Peggy Billington Guardian

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