

Narrow vision of this thorny issue

MIKE CULLEN'S short, sharp, shocking play about child abuse and false memory makes me uneasy. Not because Cullen shirks the issues or the emotions involved, but because he focuses so fiercely yet impartially on one case.

Anna Weiss asks whether a young girl was systematically raped by her father, or whether memories of these events were implanted by a manipulative therapist. Cullen shifts our sympathies around for 90 intense minutes but ultimately leaves us guessing. Michael Attenborough's edgy production can't disguise the fact that this is a single-issue, studio-sized work, a rehearsal of extreme arguments rather than a rounded drama. Catherine McCormack, who adorned Mel Gibson's sword-arm in *Braveheart*, makes a creditable stage debut as the therapist, Anna.

Her performance is pretty good: it's the character that is problematic. It seems unlikely that Shirley Henderson's damaged Lynn would trust such an obviously needy, man-hating control freak, who dominates or guilt-trips her at every turn.

The fact that Anna and Lynn are preparing to move in together also seems like an improbable breach of therapist's etiquette. Later, Cullen exchanges dark hints about Anna's sexuality for the suggestion she has transferred her own buried nightmares to Lynn. But by then, Lynn's dad has arrived and things have become complicated.

David, played by Larry Lamb, first appears as a quivering wreck of a man, mystified by the allegations that have wrecked his world. He and Anna joust like rivals for Lynn's affection, until Lynn confronts him. The catalogue of violent sexual atrocities she recites sounds too vivid, too recent and regular, to be false. David attacks Anna, and his rage convinces Lynn of the substance of her feelings just



Intense: Catherine McCormack and Shirley Henderson play therapist and client
Picture: ALASTAIR MUIR

FIRST NIGHT
by NICK CURTIS
Anna Weiss ○
Whitehall Theatre

as she begins to doubt the "facts" she has remembered.

It's difficult to know how to take this. Cullen is clearly trying to see every angle of a thorny problem, but the way he rigs characters and situations feels uncomfortably close to the mental manipulations of which Anna stands accused. Odd moments of bleak humour — in the women's wrangling arguments, and in David's desperate bid to prove the superiority of his memory — strike a jarring note. Would David reveal stories of his juvenile bed-wetting to the woman he believes has perverted his daughter's mind?

Michael Attenborough's direction fosters the jittery mood demanded by a script in which the three characters constantly nag, snipe or scream at each other. The cavernous expanse of Francis O'Connor's set, though — a bare living room from which even the wallpaper has been removed in preparation for relocation — exposes the contrived nature of their wran-

gles. McCormack conceals her beauty behind grey clothes and academic specs. She plays Anna straight: contradictions, absurdities and all. Her performance is subtle and convincing, although she is inaudible in moments of high emotion.

Shirley Henderson's Lynn seems far more feisty and secure than Anna, but her torment in the confrontation scene has a raw, discomfiting power. Lamb looks suddenly old, prone to shakes that verge on the palsied until David explodes with desolate fury. I can't find major fault with these performances, but the characters are puppets, positioned to illustrate different facets of a horrendous, insoluble conundrum.

Mike Cullen has attempted to write an intelligent, fair-minded play about child abuse, the issue that has succeeded *Aids* as the 10-penny spectre stalking contemporary drama. I don't doubt his good intentions, but I find his methods, like Anna's, very questionable.

● Nicholas de Jongh is unwell

Ratings: ○ adequate ★ good, ★★ very good, ★★★ outstanding, X poor
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