

Stomach-churning manipulation

ACCORDING to popular mythology, when Lee Hall's monologue for an autistic child was first broadcast on Radio 4, tough lorry drivers had to pull into lay-bys because they couldn't see for tears.

The piece received huge acclaim from both listeners and critics, was speedily repeated and did bumper business as a cassette. Now it has been turned into a stage play, starring the diminutive and astonishingly versatile actress Kathryn Hunter as Spoonface.

I fear I'm about to cause huge offence to many, but I have to say that I found *Spoonface Steinberg* completely repellent.

It is hideously sentimental and stomach-churningly manipulative. As Oscar Wilde remarked of the death of Little Nell, you would need a heart of stone not to laugh, but all around me people were snuffling happily into their handkerchiefs.

To say that Hall, a writer whom I have previously greatly admired, over-eggs the pudding is to put it mildly.

Not only is his young heroine autistic, but she is also a victim of terminal cancer. Just in case that isn't enough to upset us, there is also a lengthy passage devoted to children in Nazi concentration camps drawing butterflies before going to the gas chambers, which has been slung in to thicken the emotional stew on the slenderest

Theatre

Spoonface Steinberg

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of dramatic pretexts. And just in case words alone aren't enough to break our hearts, little Spoonface is a Maria Callas fan who keeps playing a tape of the diva's dying arias.

"If I could ever grow up, I'd be one of them sad singers and do the dying," she observes in one of the many lachrymose lines that left me wondering why the theatre hadn't followed the practice of airlines and stuck a sickbag on the seat in front.

I'm sure the piece worked more effectively on the radio, when the listener was confronted only with a voice. On the stage, there is the embarrassment of watching an adult pretending to be a child, and the awkward fact that Hunter doesn't have the round, distorted face that gives Spoonface her name.

The directors, Marcello Magni and Annie Castledine, have largely failed to supply the piece with visual impact — Liz Cooke's set is a faintly surreal bedroom — and the plodding literalism with which Spoonface keeps staring into spoons is ludicrously overplayed.

The piece doesn't strike me as being true to the nature of autism. Spoonface seems an unusually

sensitive and observant child, rather than one who struggles to make sense of the world and other people. And it beggars belief that the doctors would have told her so brutally that she was going to die.

I admire Hall for asking the big question — how can a loving God allow such senseless, undeserved suffering? Spoonface's mother concludes that "God is a bastard", something we must all have felt from time to time. But Hall is determined to salvage something from the wreckage of the child's terrible life.

There is a lot of embarrassing stuff about finding the sparks buried deep inside us and setting them free, and the contemplation of what it means to die at the end suggests transcendence rather than mere annihilation.

It is admirable to find a play tackling such challenging spiritual concerns, but the whole script seems so loaded, and so emotionally dishonest, that I found myself deliberately resisting sentiments I would normally applaud.

Hunter, at once down-to-earth and otherworldly, gives a compelling performance, and I'm sure many will find *Spoonface Steinberg* genuinely moving. The whole piece, however, struck me as a maudlin fake.

Tickets: 020 7836 6111

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