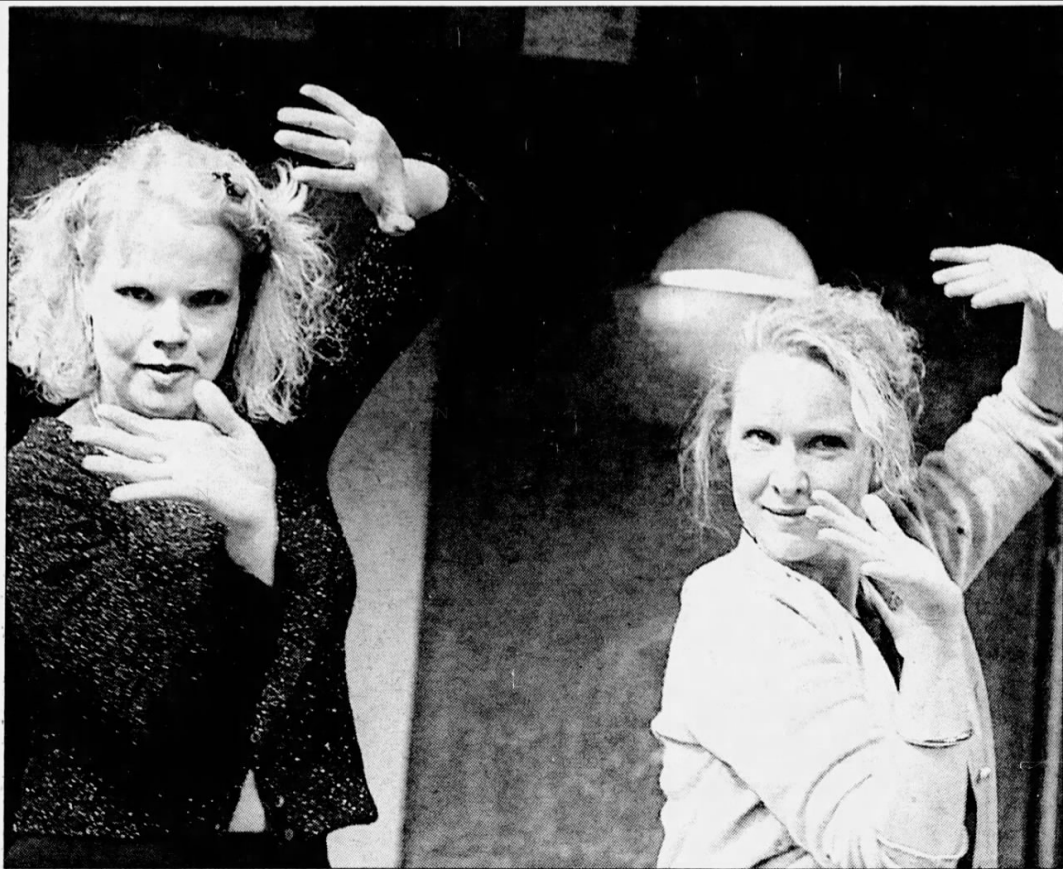




Valiant display of tensions and tantrums: Sara Crowe and Teresa Banham in *My Best Friend*

Look back in hanker

WHAT an indigestible feast of melodrama is served at the climax of Tamsin Oglesby's bland comedy. *My Best Friend* proves not so much hard to swallow as virtually inedible. Some plays are not fully fit for human consumption and this may be one of them. If it were performed as the nightmare fantasising of a thirtysomething, middle-class female, it might carry more than glimmers of interest.

Neither the text nor direction, however, suggests that this 80-minute play is located beyond realism's terrain — even though the concealed, barely suppressed feelings of pent-up aggression of one of the women are occasionally voiced and expressed: then the brief scene is re-run in its polite, real-life form, with all fury excised. But this rather anti-feminist comedy, which begins by astutely implying what tricks deceitful memory may play, abruptly turns track. It then loses form and focus altogether.

The scene is a doorless, French farm-

MY BEST FRIEND ○

Hampstead Theatre

Nicholas de Jongh

house. Patrick Connellan's un-atmospheric stage design, with a crude backcloth of clouds, resembles a child's unattractive, blown-up sketch and is not nearly dilapidated enough. Childhood, though, is the arena on which the three characters cast their reminiscent gaze. For the pert holiday banter of the married Em and her best friend from infancy, the love-lorn Bee is interrupted when Sara Crowe's man-hungry, garrulous Chris bursts in upon them, apparently by pure coincidence: but nothing about Chris, who was also their schoolfriend and remains close to Em, proves to have anything to do with purity.

Threesomes, except in the best organised bedroom rendezvous, tend to turn jealous and vengeful. And so it

proves here. The embittered Bee recognises Chris as her childhood persecutor and begins angrily raking up a very murky past indeed. Could she really have been buried by five-year-old Chris in a six-foot deep hole? Or is memory a trickster? Sadly such intriguing questions are left unexplored.

A scarcely believable sequence of sexual blackmail, accusation and revelation, lies and violence, sends the play plunging laughably down melodrama's gulch. Surely nice girls aren't like this? Until the denouement, Anthony Clark's production valiantly displays the trio's tensions and tantrums. Crowe's vicious, vampish Chris sounds oddly dated — like a Coward heroine, while Teresa Banham's Em remains too placid. But Eve Matheson's Bee, seething and sad on the side-lines until provoked, stirs odd flickers of excitement.

● Until 12 February. Box office: 020 7722 9301.