

Please, get a life

HURTING ○

Orange Tree Theatre,
Richmond

Nick Curtis

PATRICK Marber has a lot to answer for. Ever since his play *Closer* revitalised the relationship-drama, we've been plagued by inferior variations on a similar theme. Here is another aerated, emotional splurge in which four incompatible thirtysomethings yammer at each other for two hours in the name of intimacy. It is nicely put together by writer David Lewis, and decently acted by Sam Walters's cast, but leaves you with a consuming urge to give each character a good slapping.

At the start, bossy Suzie (Amanda Royle) is mates with prissy Paul (David Antrobus), and having an affair with boorish Mark (Jason Baughan). One year and one suicide attempt later, Suzie is bosom buddies with Mark's neurotic, agoraphobically housebound girlfriend Julia (Paula Stockbridge), she's dating Paul and



Wildly improbable roles: Jason Baughan and Paula Stockbridge

she hates Mark. This seems wildly improbable: the four of them make unlikely friends — let alone lovers.

Lewis's bid to say anything novel about relationships is hamstrung by the characters' inability to stray beyond their defining traits. Julia is appallingly manipulative, Mark shifty and unsupportive, Paul insufferably pompous and Suzie confused by her *Cosmo*-style hopes of having it all. That's how they start and that's how they stay.

Lewis elides settings and separate narratives neatly, but his attempts to put some fun into all this dysfunction seem either lazy or callous. Paul's smug

semantic pickiness would be funnier if it were accurate, and it's hard to take Julia as a martyr to her phobia, an emotional blackmailer and a figure of fun, all at the same time.

Walters's production is typically neat and breezy, though only Amanda Royle introduces any tonal variation into her character.

As with Lewis's debut play *Sperm Wars*, staged here last year, you feel little sympathy for these people and their unhappy lives. You just wish to God they'd go out and get new ones.

● *Until 15 April. Box office: 0208 940 3633.*

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