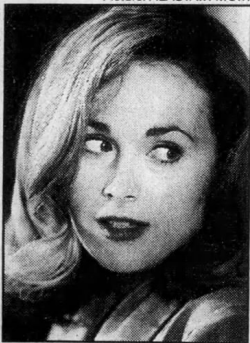


Political beliefs overpowered by pheromones



Canny: Natasha Little

RETURNING to the theatre after a two-year absence, the director Richard Eyre is on winningly vigorous form. *The Novice* is his own new adaptation of *Les Mains sales* by Jean-Paul Sartre, the French existentialist who became a Marxist in his later years. In his political drama, written in 1948 and supposedly inspired by the murder of Trotsky, Sartre's focus is a youthful radical called Hugo. Played by Jamie Glover (son of Julian), Hugo has fiercely rejected his privileged background and joined a

Theatre

The Novice

 ALMEIDA, N1

party of armed revolutionaries. Being devoted to its pure ideals, he has now been chosen by his comrades on the far Left to assassinate their long-standing leader, Hoederer (craggy Kenneth Cranham). The latter is turning pragmatic, agreeing to meet representatives of the centre and the Right, in order to get into

government via power-sharing. Hoederer's execution is delayed because Hugo, like Hamlet, is an intellectual who hesitates, failing to forge himself into a man of action. Hoederer also keeps almost persuading the younger man to accept his stance. This piece could have been full of arid political debate and ethical philosophising. I remember, as a student, being far from enthralled by Albert Camus's comparable 1949 play about militant revolutionaries, *Les Justes*. Generally, French plays that embrace abstract ideas don't translate well. However, Sartre always had a fundamental grasp of dramatic dynamics. *Les Mains sales* actively puts personal conflicts in the foreground, and our protagonists' political beliefs are, at points, overwhelmed by pheromones. There is a fatal sexual attraction drawing Hoederer towards Hugo's upper-class wife, Jessica (Natasha Little). And even Olga (Emer Gillespie), a hardened extremist who has no time for Hugo's procrastination, is torn by her private love for him. Beyond this, Eyre's cast make sure their dialogues are well oiled, with passionate commitment and considerable pace. There are surprising flashes of humour, and the play is a suspense thriller as well. Set designer Anthony Ward's shadowy,

dilapidated apartments are lit by Mark Henderson like a film noir, through shutters and suddenly opened doors. Meanwhile, Eyre's translation is shot through with modern punch (and four-letter words) and, more importantly, with contemporary resonances. All the heated talk of principles and compromise sounds terribly like current arguments surrounding the IRA, particularly since Gillespie's Olga is Irish. Simultaneously one sees parallels with Old Labour/New Labour battles, as Cranham's old, leather-jacketed hardliner (with perhaps a touch of Red Ken) battles over policies with Fred Pearson's Karsky, king of the centre-Left. This play does have some creaky elements. Sartre's narrative structuring seems wooden — the central scenes are an extended flashback. Ward's ambitious set-changes are a palaver. The cast have stiff moments, and Little's Jessica is so irritatingly silly and girly in the first act that I thought I was going to have to kill her. But she grows more interesting and canny. Glover's boyish Hugo is impressively fevered, and Cranham, looking like a grizzled pit bull, is a terrific foil for him, mixing gritty coarseness and dictatorial ferocity with sagacity, weariness and paternal warmth.

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