

Ghosts, gags and bags of promise

THE horrors of panto and the terrible burden of exuding goodwill to all relatives will soon be upon us, but at least Hampstead has come up with a cracking, grown-up play for the allegedly festive season.

Shelagh Stephenson, best known for her touching, funny, family drama *The Memory of Water*, is one of the most engaging dramatists to have emerged in the Nineties, and *Ancient Lights* finds her growing in both confidence and ambition.

Part ghost story, part satire on the cult of celebrity and part mid-life crisis drama, it is a show with a light touch that cuts surprisingly deep. You laugh a lot, but the laughter is tinged with rueful self-recognition.

The action is set in the handsome Northumbrian holiday home of Bea, a control-freak PR woman in her early forties who lives with her truculent teenage daughter, Joni, and a delightfully garrulous, permanently hangdog Irish novelist called Thaddeus.

Bea is fretting (she always frets) about the goose and the Christmas tree decorations, because she has planned a reunion for Christmas. Her old university friends are coming to stay. Kitty was once a Kate Adie-style TV journalist, but has now been reduced to making a terrible programme that reconstructs car crashes, called *Whoops! I Nearly Got Killed*.

But it's their American

Theatre

Ancient Lights
HAMPSTEAD THEATRE

friend Tom who is the big cheese, a former student chum who is now a major Hollywood star. He arrives with his girlfriend in tow, who is making a *cinéma-vérité* documentary about him.

Stephenson superbly depicts social embarrassment and festering resentments, and, in the character of Tom, she hilariously nails the mixture of terminal vanity and desperate anxiety that seems to underlie so many celebs.

The first half ends with Thaddeus telling a spooky story during a power cut. It concerns a fetch, the disembodied ghost of a living person, and describes the terror of man who comes face to face with himself on the wild moors.

In the second half — and at times the scenario seems a touch too schematic — the main characters are confronted by their own true selves. Secrets are spilled, terrors are confronted, and the shadow of death, disillusion and dissatisfaction hangs heavily over the yuletide celebrations.

It may sound gloomy, but Stephenson's writing is always warm, witty and wry, and the secret of the Irish novelist — which it would be a crime to reveal — is one of

the funniest theatrical scenes of the year.

Ian Brown directs an outstanding cast who do justice to both the sharp humour and the emotional depth of a play which observes its characters with both a beady eye and a compassion that never cloy into sentimentality.

The American actor Don McManus is on terrific comic form as the floppy-haired film star who tries so hard to be charming while totally failing to conceal his massive conceit. Yet it is typical of the play that Stephenson finds the humanity of this coke-snorting monster as well as his absurdity.

Joanne Pearce is outstanding too as Bea, constantly busy, constantly bossy, while at the same time suggesting a raw emotional vulnerability, and the great Dermot Crowley is better still as the droopy, apologetic novelist with an astonishing secret.

There's strong support from Gwyneth Strong as the wretched chronicler of car crashes, and from Sheridan Smith, who captures all the bolshiness, and all the gaucheness, of adolescence.

Ancient Lights is a play of rare intelligence, humour and wisdom, and one that marks Stephenson out as one of the most promising dramatic prospects of the new millennium.

Until Jan 6. Tickets: 020 7722 9301

Charles Spencer