

Talking over those good old times

YOU remember the formulaic pattern for plays about old-time friends, meeting for a reunion after years apart? Shelagh Stephenson's *Ancient Lights* belongs to this exhausted genre. The friends tend to be middle-class, successful, famous and artistic, though there's usually room for a good old failure too. They cannot stop reminiscing, with tongues and morals loosened by alcohol, cannabis and coke. Then well-kept secrets spill out. The friends, when stripped to their raw essentials, are unhappy and unfulfilled, preferring to give home truths the cold shoulder.

Shelagh Stephenson, who made distinctive impressions with *Five Kinds of Silence*, *A Memory of Water* and *An Experiment with an Airpump*, has succumbed to the leaden embrace of thematic cliché and stereotype. It feels as if I've virtually seen her new comedy of reunion manners several times before. It rings nothing but old bells. Tanya McCallin's oddly unsuitable stage design is supposed to be a room with many cushions in rural Northumberland. But the screen of white cloth that runs horizontally across the stage scotches that impression.

Fortyish Bea, someone big in PR who cherishes Thaddeus, an Irish novelist boyfriend, is set for a swish Christmas and a reunion with two college friends. Miss Stephenson then lays on the satire with a plastic spade rather than a genuine stiletto.

ANCIENT LIGHTS ○

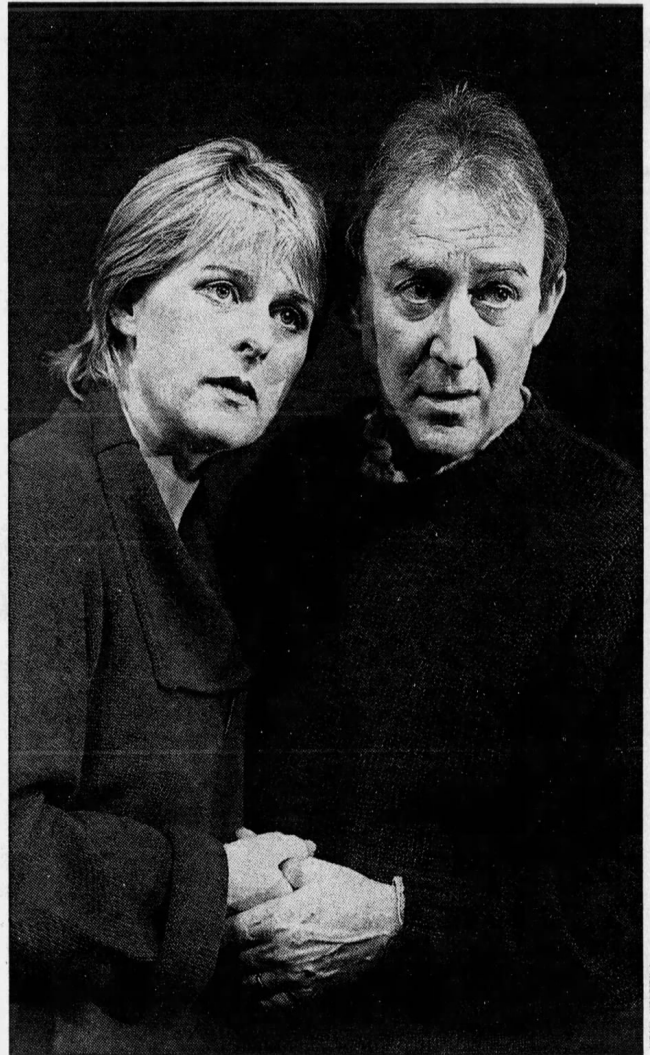
Hampstead Theatre

Nicholas de Jongh

The humour at the expense of Bea and Thaddeus, who are into life-lies, sounds woefully forced. The tone is relentlessly flip, with flashes of ostentatious cool. Tom, a Hollywood movie star, arrives with his girlfriend, Iona, who's filming him for a documentary. Tom says slightly witty things like, "I play a cripple in an Armani suit who gets to have sex with lots of women." Kitty, a BBC TV reporter, is not given a personality at all. But Thaddeus, forever harping on about putrefying bodies, is at least more than cardboard.

Of plot and action there is little. No one shows signs of change as a result of anyone's revelations. The secrets break with predictability's familiar thud. Ian Brown's production strikes up enough festive jollity, and the regular trickle of humour helps to pass the time. Joanne Pearce's dramatic gifts are wasted on bland Bea. Don McManus's Tom looks nothing like a Hollywood heart-throb. At least Dermot Crowley's Thaddeus brings touches of rueful comic relief to the dreary evening.

● Ends 6 January. Box office: 020 7722 9301.



Secrets: Joanne Pearce and Dermot Crowley in *Ancient Lights*

Ancient de Jongh Standard

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ianharris
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