

playing more for each other than for us, intricate cross-rhythms, slap bass, duelling lead guitars and all. This ain't communication, it's masturbation.

Paul Lester

Theatre

Gallic to a turn

Conversations After a Burial

Almeida, London

★★★★

John Osborne once described a play as "impossibly French". I'd call Yasmina Reza's piece, first seen in Paris in 1987, as exquisitely Gallic. It is exactly like one of those delicate Eric Rohmer movies in which little happens on the surface but where by the end a whole set of relationships has been exposed and subtly changed.

The title is exactly right: six people gather in the Loire countryside for a family funeral. Three of them are siblings and it becomes clear that there is a dark rivalry between Alex, an agitated literary critic, and the older Nathan who is a Nanterre lawyer. In part it stems from the enigmatic Elisa who was Alex's mistress and now loves Nathan: much of the tension stems from whether Elisa, whose car has broken down, will stay the night and in which bed. Watching helplessly are Edith, sister to the fractious brothers, their ageing uncle and his nervously new wife.

Death, said Hazlitt, cancels everything but truth; and part of Reza's point is that it forces antique grudges, failures and longings into the open. Above

all, you sense the heavy hand of the dead father on his three unmarried, middle-aged children. The neurasthenic Alex was expected to be a writer but settled for the quieter pastures of criticism. Nathan was the precociously brilliant older brother who lapsed into the law. Even Edith, who has a transient lover, sees herself as "a dried-up old apple." While parents are alive, suggests Reza, we nurse our disappointments: once they are dead our alibis are gone.

It may not display Reza's cutting edge. But it is poignant, graceful, wise: one notices the quiet skill with which Reza implies the marriage of the uncle, Pierre, is built on shifting sands. And Christopher Hampton's translation highlights the play's self-consciously literary quality: at one point the marooned Elisa remarks that her enforced return is like something out of a novel and when Pierre refers to Alex's "rattlesnake compliments" one is clearly meant to relish the choice phrase.

Howard Davies's production, with an autumnal set by Rob Howell, is acted with finesse. The delicious Amanda Root is not my idea of a fading spinster, but Paul Higgins as the Hamletesque Alex and Matthew Marsh as the assured Nathan spar convincingly, Clare Holman is suitably mysterious as Elisa, and it is luxury casting to have David Calder as the Baudelaire-quoting uncle and Claire Bloom radiating stylish insecurity as his wife. All lend Reza's elegant text an elegiac Chekhovian sadness.

Michael Billington

★★★★★ Unmissable

★★★★ Recommended

★★★ Enjoyable

★★ Mediocre ★ Terrible