

wringing his hands; one man juggles. A girl dances to music from *Tannhäuser*, wrapping herself in a band of cloth like a winding sheet; three men shuffle together to demonstrate a Jewish joke. And accompanying themselves raggedly but tunefully on clarinet and recorders, looking frightened, stunned and wild, the company sing the Schubert song that gives the piece its name, a song which speaks of the consoling power of art. The title is a black irony: the play suggests that art – such as this drama itself – has no power to console. It is desolating.

It's a relief to know that *Conversations After a Burial* is Yasmina Reza's first play, not her latest. It shows how quickly a dramatist can progress to crispness from a maundering start. Reza's *Art*, the first of her works to be produced in England, is about to move on to its six-

teenth cast, and its fifth year in the West End. Like the plain white canvas on which the argument between a trio of male friends hinges, the play has turned out to be a space waiting to be given significance by whoever plays in it. It opened with Albert Finney, Tom Courtenay and Ken Stott; it has given work to Jack Dee, Sean Hughes and Stephen Tompkinson. Next month, it will be performed by John Fortune, Ken Campbell and Warren Mitchell.

This earlier play at the Almeida is not subject, as *Art* has been – I think wrongly – to accusations of philistinism and self-conscious smartness. It is more obviously sensitive – and the worse for that. It teases the audience with its elusiveness, and bursts into a bewildering supernatural sequence towards the end. At the same time, its lan-

guage is clumpingly emphatic: 'Let me be your pain,' declares one lover as an enticement to making love on a grave. Its dialogue is unconvincingly stylised, too often composed simply of one banal phrase lingeringly repeated.

Rob Howell's beautiful set – creepers sprawling over crumbling stone – is dappled with an autumnal light which proclaims the play's Chekhovian aspirations. But after each significant moment, Dominic Muldowney's music – a compote of allusions – crashes in as if it were supplying the soundtrack to a Forties melodrama. Reza's characters provide no surprises: there is one uncle (jovial); one unmarried sister (sour); one literary critic (full of self-important bile). Claire Bloom's performance – peculiar, modest and compelling – is the only solace.

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ianlharris
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