



Picture: ALASTAIR MUIR

Grave matters: from left, Claire Bloom, Amanda Root, Clare Holman and David Calder

Blooming fun buried amid graveyard humour

THERE is nothing like a burial service to turn people's thoughts straight to sex. So it comes as no surprise in Yasmina Reza's lightly amusing comedy of post-funeral manners to find sex rearing an enthusiastic head — within hours of the service ending. Nathan, the dead man's middle-aged son, is approached by Elisa, ex-mistress to his brother, while standing at his father's grave in the grounds of the family estate. Elisa has hardly had time to make funeral small-talk before Nathan is undressing her. For she has enthusiastically agreed to help him drown his sorrows by taking part in an act of sympathy — sex atop his daddy's grave.

So much for shock-horror and black comedy, or rather so little. The lights go tactfully down well before Elisa does. Director Howard Davies, who never quite gets on Miss Reza's comic wavelength, squeezes few drops of comedy from this graveside seduction. Matthew Marsh's Nathan wanly woos Clare Holman's Elisa. But then *Conversations After A Burial*, premiered in Paris seven years before Miss Reza's *Art* became an international theatrical phenomenon of the Nineties, does not follow the lead of Joe Orton's *Loot* in making fun of funeral decorum.

Miss Reza's comedy is essentially bourgeois, consoling and conventional. Despite the rash of expletives in Christopher Hampton's fluent translation, the festivities, after Simon Weinberg has been laid to rest, are civilised and old-fashioned. But there are capitivating modern elements too. Miss Reza demands an unrealistic set and the impressive designer Rob Howell achieves the right look of strangeness, with a broken back-wall on which autumnal creepers grow, wooden flooring and an earthy grave in its midst, leather chairs and a vast cupboard. And the play ends oddly, with mystic, magical intimations.

Dramatic interest focuses upon the way in which Simon Weinberg's death, releases his adult unmarried, children from their patterns of behaviour and positively transforms them. Nathan, Simon's son, describes the family as civilised, discreet observers of the rules of good form. But in the tense, bereft post-burial mood, reticence and discretion are generally cast aside. In the past, Nathan's one-night stand with Elisa was condoned by his brother Alex. Now Nathan's



FIRST NIGHT

by Nicholas de Jongh

Conversations After A Burial *
The Almeida

attempt to take Elisa to bed is furiously brought into the open by the brother's sexually repressed sister, Edith. The neurotic childishness of the unmarried trio is exposed before compromises and change.

Miss Reza's subtle and supple comedy is clearly about a Jewish family. But Davies's production, which catches little of Miss Reza's mordant humour, ignores this fact. The acting is more miss than hit. Paul Higgins spoils the comedy's rueful atmosphere, by ridiculously setting the unhappy Alex in the top gear of cantankerous rant and leaving him there. There's scant trace of Alex's light sarcasm, self-mockery and sadness. Marsh's Nathan stints upon emotion, Holman's Elisa upon sexiness. And David Calder's generous old uncle is far too frosty. The rueful comedy lacks rue.

There is, though, one beautiful compensation for these disappointments. It comes in the fabulously well-preserved shape and youthful look of Claire Bloom, who makes a rare return to the London stage. Dressed in black from top to black-booted feet, she plays a peripheral, voluptuous old aunt whom she invests with a sense of fun, abundant sexiness, a touch of gallic elegance and Jewish warmth: sheer star quality.

Ratings: — ○ adequate, ★ good, ★★ very good, ★★★ outstanding, X poor

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