

Reza's hit formula: the light, pre-dinner drama

Picture: ALASTAIR MUIR

Theatre

Life x 3

NATIONAL THEATRE

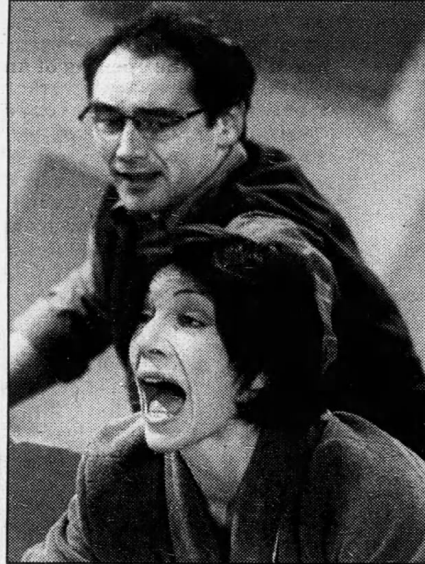
FIRST in *Art* and now in *Life x 3*, French dramatist Yasmina Reza has come up with the formula for the perfect commercial hit. She has realised that 90 minutes without an interval is the perfect length for those seeking to combine a trip to the theatre with a relaxed dinner.

She has also perfected the technique of combining light comedy with the play of ideas. *Art* flatters its audience into thinking it is getting a serious debate about modern art and an affecting study of friendship. In *Life x 3*, Reza serves up chunks of cosmology and chaos theory, and an exploration of personality and relationships.

In both pieces, though, the intellectual content is never allowed to make the evening too challenging. There is just enough to discuss over the starters afterwards, but nothing seriously to disturb either the heart or the head. The final key to Reza's success is that this former actress offers terrific parts to actors. Distinguished thespians queue up to appear in her work.

If all this sounds a touch patronising, it's meant to. You can enjoy a play by Reza, but it's impossible to feel passionately about it. *Life x 3* is typical of her work — it's clever, it's elegant, it's entertaining, but you never feel the writer is digging deep into her soul or expecting her audiences to do so either.

Matthew Warchus's slick production at the Lyttelton takes place on an elegantly minimalist set by Mark Thompson, with the action framed by a



Mark Rylance and Harriet Walter

cube of blue neon. Yet for all its self-conscious stylishness and big themes, the play owes more to Alan Ayckbourn than it does to Tate Modern or Stephen Hawking. We are in disastrous dinner party territory.

Henry (Mark Rylance), a low-grade cosmologist seeking promotion, and his elegant wife Sonia (Harriet Walter) are hoping for a quiet night at home. But their evening is first interrupted by the tantrums of their unseen six-year-old son, and then by the arrival for dinner of Hubert (Oliver Cotton), a top cosmologist who might just be able to secure Henry's promotion, and Hubert's wife Ines (Imelda Staunton), whom he bullies atrociously.

The problem is that Henry and Sonia were expecting them the following evening, and the only food available is Wotsits and chocolate fingers. There is however plenty of Sancerre to lubricate the rows, cruel truth-telling and squirming discomfort that follows.

The trick of the play is that we see three versions of the same dire evening, with dialogue and characterisation subtly changed in each. In the first, Henry is a self-abasing crawler, in the second a crawler who turns vicious, and in the third, a canny survivor. The other characters change too, and so does the outcome of events — in particular Henry's career prospects and the possibility of an affair between Sonia and the vile Hubert.

In Christopher Hampton's witty translation the dialogue fizzles, and the acting is outstanding. But what is Reza saying? That personality is constantly mutable? That small actions can lead to vastly different consequences? That the play is taking place in three parallel universes? I don't think it much matters. Reza's primary aim is to entertain, and this she does with style.

Rylance is in magnificent, ruffled form, moving hilariously from aggrieved humility to reckless insults as his research project bites the dust, while as his wife Walter is half sensual siren, half Lady Macbeth. Cotton plays the sadistic Hubert with lethal authority and Staunton touchingly captures all the pent-up misery of his wife.

There may be less here than meets the constantly deflated eye and ear, but Reza, and the National, have a big hit on their hands.

Tickets: 020 7452 3000

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