



Alastair Muir

Focus of moral concern: Emma Fielding and Robert Bowman in *Spinning into Butter*

Spinning into mediocrity

HAVING shot to theatrical fame with *The Glory of Living*, that won her the Evening Standard's Most Promising playwright award in 1999, American-born Rebecca Gilman now hurtles towards mediocrity. Her new play has been hailed as a devastating exposé of the racist feelings that lurk beneath some liberal facades in the groves of American academe, with the cult of political correctness masking such attitudes. But in Dominic Cooke's rather sluggish production, *Spinning into Butter* emerges as a ponderous demonstration of the fairly obvious. Miss Gilman fails to appreciate that her liberal academic who conceals a fear and dislike of African-Americans is not inherently interesting. It is the reasons for prejudice or the nature of its impact that rate theatrical attention. And *Spinning into Butter* steers clear of such considerations.

The play is set in the office of Emma Fielding's Sarah Matthews, young dean of students at a Vermont Arts College. It springs to life when an African-American student

SPINNING INTO BUTTER ○

Royal Court Upstairs

Nicholas de Jongh

receives racist hate-mail. As a result of some unsubtle point-making the audience already appreciates that the college's liberalism serves as a lightly-worn, cosmetic decoration: Mido Hamada's hunky student is persuaded to categorise himself as Puerto Rican to win a scholarship even though he protests that the designation associates him falsely with European imperialists.

The racist hate-mail precipitates an outbreak of political correctness that Miss Gilman describes with heavy-handed, comic relish, while the academics succumb to barbed in-fighting. An opportunist student launches a Students for Tolerance group that's hampered by the interventions of David Horovitch's intem-

perate humanities department head and boycotted by blacks. In 12, uncomfortably constructed scenes, with characters forever slipping in and out of Sarah's office, liberal aspirations wither while Susan Engel scene-steals effortlessly as a sly, shrewd old academic who leaps to action when the identity of Simon's hate-mailer is revealed.

It is Emma Fielding's dean who remains Gilman's focus of moral concern. In a revelatory scene with her lost lover (ponderous Robert Bowman) the academic confesses her sympathy for blacks is skin-deep, masking dislike of their tendency to be "rude and loud and stupid". But the indictment rings hollow and trivial. The roots of her racism are never convincingly uncovered. And Miss Fielding, whom I rate the best of our young actresses, showily demonstrates rather than personifies the troubled, guilt-laden Sarah.

● Until January 27. Box office: 020 7565 5000.

Spinning Standard de Jongh

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