

Boston tee-hee party

BOSTON MARRIAGE ★

Donmar Warehouse

Nicholas de Jongh

DAVID MAMET, who specialises in the nuances of man-to-man transactions and the way men talk when females are out of sight if not of mind, has turned his attention to women in this lightweight comedy. This is one of those theatrical occasions where the games the playwright exuberantly plays with language, and the mocking, witty use to which it's put, prove far more interesting than the small twists of a thin plot. The Boston Marriage of the play's title, according to Lillian Faderman's book, *Surpassing the Love of Men*, alludes to a late 19th century New England term, used to describe "a long-term monogamous relationship between two otherwise unmarried women".

Mamet's first, veiled joke is that his two lesbians, Anna and Claire, appear to have lapsed from the Boston form. Zoe Wanamaker, substantially the elder, has taken a lover for financial reasons and boasts a vital emerald necklace as a sign of her pulling-powers, while Claire is enthralled by a young woman. In Anna's drawing room, a place which designer Peter McKintosh has bizarrely constituted as the epitome of kitsch with its all-matching floral patterns, the cultivated women sit on a chaise longue or move around, fencing and feuding in a dazzling duel of formally wrought sentences. Lyndsey Marshal's funny Scottish maid, whose apparent simplicity conceals shrewd awareness of the women's edgy relations, serves to emphasise Mamet's characteristic theme.

In Mamet, what people say often conceals more than it reveals. So too here. Are the women seriously jealous of each other? Is their relationship under threat or are they playing a fantasy game, a ritual of power and abasement

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



Needle-sharp: Zoe Wanamaker and Anna Chancellor in *Boston Marriage*

as in Genet's *The Maids*? Since the women speak rather as Henry James wrote, in a style of abstruse, stately circumlocution, you're uncertain until a final revelation. But since talk is peppered with modern vulgarities their inflated language probably screens elemental emotion.

Director Phyllida Lloyd keeps the production at a sprinter's pace, so it's often hard to keep abreast of Mamet's scathing, elaborate cadences. The sen-

tences pour out with the whoosh of an urgent waterfall. More varied pacing would have helped. But Zoe Wanamaker, whose needle-sharp verbal thrusts are delivered with malicious relish and camp innuendo to match Anna Chancellor's clever flirtatiousness, projects the comic energy of this extended theatrical sketch.

● Until 14 April. Box Office: 020 7369 1732.