

Love and loss in the age of Aids make a beautifully modulated palindrome

"I'M HAVING quite a hard time. I'm always being accused of writing the same thing," declares Frank, the 40-something dramatist in *Mouth to Mouth*. This has the air of an in-joke, for the author Kevin Elyot has also found himself charged with writing the same play over and over again.

Premiered now in Ian Rickson's beautifully modulated production at the Royal Court, the new piece isn't going to involve a drastic rethink of that view. Its themes are those that have preoccupied Elyot's work since his 1994 hit play, *My Night With Reg*: the pain of unrequited love; passion and loss in the age of Aids; and the odd tricks of time and memory. But *Mouth to Mouth* offers a further demonstration of the sharp, observant humour and

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sensitivity with which Elyot plays tragicomic variations on these elements.

The play is a palindrome around a long central flashback which ends in a tragic accident that has left several people feeling racked with guilt. On either side of this, we see Michael Maloney's intense, watchful playwright, who has decided to give up taking his anti-Aids drugs, failing to communicate the cause of his own remorse. His attempts to unbosom himself to his gay doctor friend (a flamboyantly

bitter Adam Godly) are foiled by the latter's running monologue which manages to incorporate an angry despair at his partner's death and a bitchy alertness about the celebrity clientele and the sexual availability of the staff, one of whom, he airily declares, will "let you snort a line off his stiffy in the lav".

But internal inhibition stops Frank coming clean with Lindsay Duncan's Laura about his true relationship to her dead son. Duncan is superb - both as the stricken, stammering creature, armoured behind dark glasses in the present-day episodes, and as the smoulderingly frustrated housewife, jealous of her boy's budding sex life in an expertly orchestrated sticky family gathering.

Rickson's production warm-

ly accentuates the play's expressive musical structure. For example, Duncan's Oedipal tango with her son at the party is hauntingly reprised for a brief, heartbreaking moment with another man in the final scene. It's eavesdropping on this sudden revelatory intimacy that convinces Frank that it would be fairer to Laura if he kept his own dubious involvement quiet.

There's a lovely tremor right at the end when Frank says that he will write and it's left ambiguous whether he means a letter to Laura or a play that will exploit this material. If *Mouth to Mouth* is no major leap forward in Kevin Elyot's art, it resoundingly shows that his work has not begun to obey the law of diminishing returns.

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