

A play to stand the test of time

KEVIN Elyot's marvellous new play is exceptionally hard to review. Though it's certainly not a thriller, any detailed description of the plot would ruin your enjoyment of this subtle and haunting work. And enjoyment isn't quite the right word either. Though it is often wonderfully funny, there is a depth of gradually exposed pain in *Mouth to Mouth* that is almost unbearable in its bleak intensity.

Elyot, an actor turned dramatist, is best known as a gay writer, most notably for *My Night with Reg*, the best-ever play about Aids and one of the finest plays of the Nineties *tout court*. He works slowly — only four dramas in a career spanning almost 20 years — and with great economy. Every word counts, and there is also an elegance of construction that marks Elyot out as a classicist in an age of let-it-all-hang-out romanticism. As so often in the finest art, the tension between rigorous control of form and powerful, barely contained emotion leads to remarkable rewards.

Theatre

Mouth to Mouth
ROYAL COURT THEATRE

All three of Elyot's major plays concern time. He not only examines the ravages it inflicts on individual lives but also uses it as an integral part of both meaning and structure. Here we begin in the dramatic present, move backwards a year, and then come forward again, so that the last scene is a continuation of the first. By now, however, we have come to know and care deeply for the characters, several of them locked into terrible grief and secret guilt.

The only clue that I'm prepared to give about the plot is that it echoes the Oedipus story — in reverse. What distinguishes this play is Elyot's recognition that, in our unheroic, unmythical age, one has to go on living, however great the suffering. He is a dramatic poet of the unfashionable virtue of stoicism.

Yet this review is in

danger of emptying the theatre, when it ought to be packed every night. There is an unsentimental compassion about Elyot's writing that is deeply affecting, and a sharp observation of contemporary life that is often richly comic. Even as his characters suffer, Elyot is keenly aware their absurdities.

The heart of the play is provided by an appalling party that crackles with tension, betrayal, guilty desire and testy irritation. Elyot proves here that he is just as adept at portraying fraught family life as gay relationships, and the mixture of jokes and profound unease is beautifully achieved.

He is equally good on the solipsism of suffering, with a devastating portrait of a bereaved, cocaine-snorting doctor, far too wrapped up in his own misery to care for anyone else. More comically, but just as mercilessly, he nails the absurd rituals of modish restaurants.

Ian Rickson delivers a flawless, selfless production

of this masterly play, which is sparsely designed by Mark Thompson, and has a beautiful musical score by Stephen Warbeck. Michael Maloney is outstanding as a lovelorn, Aids-infected playwright, a hesitant man who constantly seems to be banished to the margins of life, watching, listening, but never really being listened to. Lindsay Duncan, as his best friend, a wife and mother, offers a performance of choked, inarticulate grief that is almost too painful to watch.

Adam Godley offers a *tour de force* of black comedy as the doctor who calls himself Crippen, Lucy Whybrow brilliantly plays the most hilariously dim and affected Gawd'-elp-us since Wodehouse's Madeline Bassett, and there is terrific support from Barnaby Kay, Peter Wight and Andrew McKay. This astonishingly fine play, which crams so much into 90 minutes without any sense of strain, has received the staging that it so richly deserves.

Tickets: 020 7565 5000

Charles Spencer

Mouth Telegraph Spencer

Clipped By:

ianlharris

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