



Alastair Muir

A splendid Stella: Clare Higgins is the focal point of amusement

Family in freefall

COLIN Teevan's ambitious comedy, a spirited satire at the expense of the middle-class Irish family, harks back to the dear, dead days of the Theatre of the Absurd. There's more than a touch of Ionesco, faint echoes of early Pinter and even a whisper of Edward Albee. For when the play begins, in a middle-class, Dublin home on Christmas Eve, middle-aged Stella faces severe social embarrassment. An entire front-room wall has disappeared, leaving her exposed to "people out there", as she vaguely puts it.

The fact that Stella and husband Theo (Michael Kulkin) cannot bring themselves to speak directly about their vanished wall is very Theatre of the Absurd too. A cryptic allegory lurks meaningfully around, begging to be decoded. Teevan does not resist meaningful, dramatic nudges in the

THE WALLS ○

Cottesloe, National Theatre

Nicholas de Jongh

audience's direction. More walls gradually vanish, leaving yards of sheer darkness, while the gathered family try to fill the void with the force of their own vacuous presences.

Clare Higgins's splendid Stella is the focal point of amusement as she wards off any attempt at serious talk. She dispenses prawn won tons, determined banalities and mince pies to her older son, Joseph, and his new wife, Mary, valiantly trying to ensure the family show will go on. And thanks to the symbolically named, pregnant Mary, it will. Those vanishing walls serve as Teevan's obvious symbols for a family in decline and free-

fall. There's no real communication between anyone. Each family member is walled away in a little world of his or her own.

Yet after Tony Rohr's Sweeney, Mary's father arrives, and the scene is set for eloquent, poetic reminiscence, for dreams and wistful recollection of the parents' better yesterdays before the crucial economic collapse of 1973 when Theo's underpants business lost its stuffing. The late reappearance of the walls marks the point when the family draws together, apart from Gary Lydon's defecting John, a rare truth-teller. Mick Gordon's admirably cool, laconic production realises the mild comic potential, but cannot disguise the play's repetitive, point-making framework.

● Ends 11 April. Box-office: 020 7452 3000