

Snaps from hell

BURIED ALIVE ○

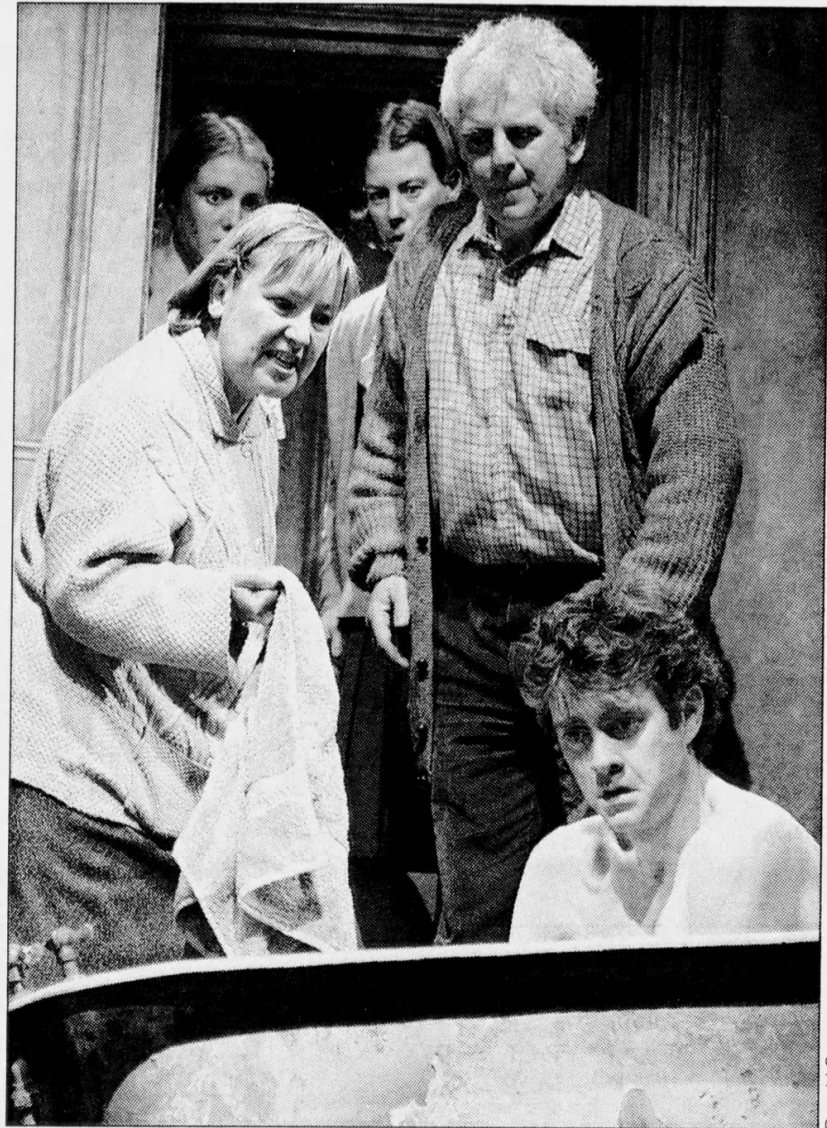
Hampstead Theatre

Nicholas de Jongh

PHILIP Osment's disappointing thriller occupies familiar theatrical terrain, with a photographer impelled to face up to skeletons in his family closet. There's a constant, film-like shuttling between time past and time present, between late 1970s and today, in some 34 scenes. But if Osment depends upon a clichéd device, he manipulates it with some imaginative cleverness. The scenes from the past are the stirred memories and recollections of Stewart, a famous, thirtysomething photographer, whose images of atrocity and suffering in the Third World have made him famous.

Ammy, an attractive female journalist, arrives at Stewart's Suffolk home, where he sits morosely drinking the day away with his half-Brazilian teenage son, Luis. Her quest is for the concealed truth about Stewart's Scottish, working-class upbringing. And true to the grubby spirit of today, Ammy lacks scruples. She cares little how she discovers what drives Stewart to travel the world and photograph its little waste-lands of hell. Unfortunately, though, Michelle Joseph's Ammy, is an obstinately wooden figure and when her character impugns the integrity of intrepid photojournalists the play succumbs to the shabby morality that it condemns.

Robert Jones's set design is confusingly arranged as an expressionistic jumble. The space resembles a junkyard terrace, festooned with bath, bed, table, chairs and dilapidated doorways. The reiterative scenes from Stewart's teenage life are certainly written and played with a grim restraint. But they reveal a world of



Donald Cooper

Reign of terror: Paul Higgins (Stewart) in the bath with (left) Veronica Roberts (Margaret) and Gary Lilburn (Andrew)

such unrelenting, melodramatic extremity and sexual exploitation that belief is utterly beggared. Veronica Roberts as Stewart's grim-visaged Oedipal mother, Margaret, looking like a transatlantic loan from the wardress's room in Cell Block H, appears to have driven her husband out of his mind. She locks her older, pregnant daughter, Kate in the cellar for weeks, preaches religion and practises cruelty.

Margaret's reign of terror precipitates catastrophes that smack more of contrivance than of inevitability. And though the revelation of these tragedies convincingly suggests why Stewart

makes such an inadequate father and human being, it does not explain his interest in photographing brutalities all over the world. Mike Alfreds's austere production would have been invigorated if lighting changes distinguished between the two time zones. As Margaret's psychologically tortured sisters Kate and Liz, Jane Arnfield and Louise Bush are suitably weird. Simon Trinder's Luis so powerfully transmits resentment, defiance and undercover pain that he steals limelight from Paul Higgins's sad, ice-capped Stewart.

● Box Office: 020 7722 9301. Until May 19.

Buried de Jongh Standard

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