

First night

by Nicholas de Jongh



Marriage Play and  
Finding the Sun ★★  
Cottesloe/National Theatre

**Y**OU rarely see a middle-aged, middle-class couple engaged in vicious fisticuffs on stage, with one female foot lashing out at a man where it hurts most. After all such people usually have more subtle and satisfying ways of hurting each other at length. But Sheila Gish and Bill Paterson, as the couple concerned went at each other with all the relish of veteran brawlers last night. Marriage Play, the first half of this magnificently disturbing double-bill by Edward Albee, fixes a rare, discerning eye on the peculiar games and subterfuges played by people whose lives are wasted or ruined.

Marriage Play, written when Albee was out of fashion in the Eighties, is a chilling, comic variation on the marriage-game themes of Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf, in which George and Martha clung to illusion and fantasy to ward off painful home-truths about themselves. Here the isolated warring couple, Gillian and Jack, like George and Martha before them, play ritual games to express and contain their sense of life-disappointment.

The manner is faintly Pinteresque, the mood Beckettian gloomy. "You're home early," observes Miss Gish's elegant, blonde Gillian, seated on a leather chair in an opulent, arty living room.

"Yes, I'm leaving you," murmurs Paterson's ravaged Jack as he puts down his briefcase. "What do you mean," Miss Gish retorts, as if her husband spoke in a language she couldn't understand, though without a flicker of dismay or surprise.

Since Jack twice goes out and returns, repeating his tumultuous entrance line, it rather looks as if the couple are caught in another of those ritual games. So it proves. Gillian and Jack do not fight such a coruscating duel of words as the vicious squabblers in Virginia Woolf. But there's no mistaking the force of their reproaches and recriminations or a residual, mutual tenderness in Anthony Page's beautifully animated production.

Miss Gish is terrific as a mellow sex symbol, basking in the warmth of her own aura. Flicking nonchalantly through an aide memoir that details her hus-



Lashing out: Sheila Gish and Bill Paterson clash with the relish of veteran brawlers as the isolated couple Gillian and Jack in the Marriage Play

## Playing the marriage game with a kick where it hurts

band's bedroom erotic feats and failures, she counters Paterson's powerfully expressed despair with scathing, sulky hauteur. At last they agree to separation, but, like the tramps in Waiting for Godot sit motionless, as if ready to begin all over again.

Finding the Sun is even better. In this dream-like confessional, set upon Christopher Oram's pastel evocation of a New England Beach, and drifting from comedy to final desolation as the sun goes down, Albee views the strains of marriage and existential loneliness from the perspec-

tive of two bisexual men. Benjamin and Daniel sunning themselves with their respective, respectable wives, angry Abigail and Polly Walker's unflappable Cordelia, are former lovers who have vainly tried to staunch their gay desires by marriage.

Cordelia's mother, the cynical Gertrude and Daniel's death-fearing father, Henden, exquisitely acted by Sheila Burrell and Edward de Souza, watch over their fragile, adult children with helpless, hopeless concern, while Edward Hughes's precocious teenager questions these edgy

couples with all the inquisitiveness of the indifferent young.

The seaside location is insufficiently emphasised, the sound of waves is rarely heard, and both Demetri Goritsas's Daniel and Patrick Baladi's Benjamin are overemphatic and self-conscious. Yet the fragmented encounters and eloquent confessions drive inexorably towards the melancholic truth of the finale.

Ratings: - ○ adequate ★ good, ★★ very good,

★★★ outstanding, ✕ poor

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