

# Couples dish up the dirt

**DINNER WITH FRIENDS ★**

Hampstead Theatre

**Patrick Marmion**

IT MAY be just another comedy about the chattering classes whining and dining, but Donald Margulies's American Aga saga is as fresh and tasty as a crisp rocket salad. With writers like Woody Allen in *Husbands And Wives* already having picked the tastiest olives from the Tuscan bowl of middle-class kvetching in the kitchen, Margulies sensibly keeps his menu simple. This is why he takes nothing more than two comfortable Connecticut couples as his ingredients. One pair, Gabe and Karen, happily bond over their love of fancy food, while their friends, Tom and Beth, are neatly sliced in half to create contrasting flavours.

With this simple approach, Margulies creates a trolley-load of delicious surrogate ironies and agonies. But, underpinning these, like a good meaty stock, is a subtle sense of the characters' "co-dependency" — excessive emotional reliance on others. So, when Tom and Beth break up, Margulies dishes up conflicting feelings of betrayal, liberation, self-doubt and neediness — preparing a light comic "baseline of wretchedness". However, Margulies's sharpest observations come with the unsavoury business of listening to others



Kitchen-sink drama: (from left) Rolf Saxon, Samantha Bond and Kevin Anderson

describing new-found love. As Gabe says, it makes intelligent human beings "sound like f\*\*\*ing Moonies".

Never mind the elements of Margulies's theme, which he sautés with wit and warmth, the real test of the authenticity of this bourgeois cuisine is in the presentation. Instead of the characters having lots and lots of sex, Christopher Oram's design offers lots and lots of sets. Thankfully, all the right chrome-finished accessories are co-ordinated with all the right mushyroomy colour schemes — so crediting the characters as fully-fledged, decaffeinated hedonists. Likewise, talk of lemon and almond polenta cake and the discriminating fondling of zucchini plants assure that the author really knows his culinary arse from his elbow.

With these garnishing issues resolved,

Simon Curtis's direction strikes a tasty balance. Elizabeth McGovern as Beth is a fragile, intense, artistic chick mystified that Kevin Anderson as her scruffy, selfish, lawyer husband can have upped and left the marriage table. This sets up the play's main course of Gabe and Karen's apparently inviolable union. Samantha Bond's Karen is a challenging, judgmental woman, determined to stick to her diet of marital discipline, while Rolf Saxon as her devoted husband Gabe is a conjugal trooper who charmingly believes that sex is all about "trust, love and mutual respect". It's certainly a rather conventional play with a sugary message for dessert, but it's no less enjoyable a dinner with friends for all that.

● Until 28 July. Box office: 020 7722 9301.

Dinner Standard Marmion

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