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On life, death, and incomprehension

THEATRE

By BERWYN LEWIS

The Hell Of It, and Baby, Baby . . . Two Monologues by Gordon Dryland, performed by Arna-Maria Winchester, directed by Emile Gomez, Stables Theatre

THESE two monologues expressly written for Arna-Maria Winchester have connecting themes of life, death, morality and compassion.

Squalid pity, indignant remonstrances for justice, beseeching an indifferent God, become window dressing in these two powerful and disturbing pieces.

On the one hand they are expressions of our need to remain detached and bustle on to the next episode of life. On the other, they are howls of rage and incomprehension.

In the first, *The Hell Of It*, a paediatrician placates invisible

parents, addressing them with the facts of their child's incurable disability. She avoids looking at eyes. Her compassion is overtaken by her cool professionalism yet privately she boils with the dread of her obligation, to inform the parents of their dying child.

The doctor's room, a bright warm nursery, scattered with toys, alive with childish drawings, belies the helplessness and heaviness of her work.

The rich writing and Miss Winchester's fine performance range from despair and paralysing depths of pity to dispassionate composure.

Baby, Baby . . ., the second piece, portrays a sherry-swigging single mother, snipping her hair, barefoot in a nightdress, retracing the events leading up to the birth of her 14-day-old baby.

She sways beneath a frame of Christ, crowned with thorns. His contrite eyes, turned upward to the sky, make a mockery of this woman's harsh and inescapable reality.

Her penury and isolation are ignored by her family for the sake of respectability. In her stark room, among the scattered magazines, cheap bedding and empty bottles, she dreams up a future for her baby, the anchor in her life. She recalls her first dance, belle of the ball. And she vows to make her relationship with her daughter better than the one she had with her mother.

Indignant neighbours bang on the cheap guesthouse paper-thin walls as she nurses her pain and attempts to keep it at bay. She waits for signs from God, from absent fathers and from her desperate heart.

Finally the answer comes. Miss Winchester's performance is beautifully restrained, conveying a sense of horror and aloneness. The writing offers no solutions and creates such a powerful wave of compassion that it threatens to swamp.

These two emotionally charged pieces stab at the audience and deliver confronting death-related issues.