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Sex, love and infidelity...

KATE CHAMBRÉ reviews Closer

PATRICK Marber's Closer playing at Belfast's Baby Grand Opera House this week is a sad, savvy, often funny play that explores the complexities of sex and love when founded on deception and lies.

This gritty production, featuring two couples, gives a riveting and frank insight into the often complicated and hazy boundaries of modern day relationships.

Sex, personal fiction and downright lies are the basis of this love quadrangle where honesty is frequently not considered the best policy.

The award-winning play opens in a hospital waiting room, where Alice, a sassy, young American stripper, played by Northern Ireland actress Tessa Nicholson, strikes up an unlikely liaison with an older Dan, an obituary journalist, stuck in a dead end job, who yearns to become a writer.

When asked by Dan, played by Ulsterman Michael Liebmann, what she wants out of life, she replies, "To be loved". "That simple?," asks Dan, to which she replies, "It's a big want".

Catapulted into the future and the pair have become a couple. She is his muse and Dan has finally realised his dream of writing his first novel...about her.

But all is not well in lover's paradise. While having his portrait taken for the cover of his new book, Dan makes a pass at the photographer Anna, played by New York actress Stephanie Weyman.

Initially rebuffed, Dan takes his revenge by snaring Anna into a meeting with dermatologist Larry (Paddy Jenkins) an "innocent abroad" whose obsession with internet sex leads to their unlikely encounter. But Dan's plan backfires, when the duped strangers fall for each other and eventually marry.

A few months later and marital bliss is revealed as a sham when Larry returns home from a business trip to learn that Dan and his wife are having an affair. What follows is a destructive tale of two couples in relationship meltdown, as unpleasant truths emerge, exposed by their own lies and fictions.

With superb performances by all four members of the cast, director Martin McSharry has created an edge of the seat production which should give all smug couples, second thoughts about their relationship security.

Nicholson gives a captivating, risqué performance as the beautiful Alice, whose eyes betray her true vulnerability and deep rooted neediness. Weyman as the strong, confident Anna plays a more subtle role rising to the occasion when confronted by her angry, cheated husband Larry played by Belfast man Jenkins. In turn he gives an explosive, spell-binding performance when he learns the truth of her infidelity highlighting the very reason why Closer is better suited to the stage than the big screen.

Meanwhile Liebmann brings an authenticity to his self-obsessed character Dan, which no doubt will resonate with male commitment phobes everywhere.

The set designed by Niall Rea (also in charge of costume design) is sparse and simple, which accentuates the raw emotions delivered by the cast.

The Rawlife Theatre Company's production of Closer produced by Lyn Harris has its last (sell-out) performance at the Baby Grand Opera House tomorrow (Saturday) night.

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