

Nottingham

Pat Ashworth

Island Life

TAKE three women confined in an old people's home, cherishing their own fantasies and, in the case of two of them, respecting each other's. Jamaican-born Emmy clings on to the hope that her daughter will come to visit; prostitute Vera clings to faded youth and sex, and to the memory of the infants she gave away; wheelchair-bound Sofia desperately seeks a close relationship. And straying into the triangle to become the cataclyst is Kate, young, married, and already spiritually estranged.

Jenny McLeod's *Island Life*, commissioned by Monstrous Regiment, directed by Jane Collins, and due for a major tour next year, doesn't sound like the stuff of comedy. But these misfits have both humour and pathos, and their situation is one to which women will, I fancy, relate better than men.

Girls at school long for a "best friend": boys don't seem to have such dependence. Take three men confined in an old people's home and they wouldn't interact in the same way at all.

The isolation and inter-dependence of the women is reinforced in Iona McLeish's set with its mirrored floor surround suggesting water and its raised walkways reminiscent of jetties. **Such concentration of**

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the action makes it a bit static and a bit tedious sometimes.

This is only Jenny McLeod's second play, and inexperience shows in situations that climax too quickly and then become repetitive.

But the writing is promising, and the four vulnerable women are brought to life with frightening intensity by Monstrous Regiment: Joanna Field as the embittered, autocratic Sofia; Stella Tanner as the painted, child-like Vera; Corinne Skinner-Carter as the warm-hearted Emmy and Marcia Tucker as Kate.

● *Island Life, Nottingham Playhouse Studio (0602 419419) until October 29.*

Beware of illusions— and truth



● Corinne Skinner Carter and Stella Tanner in *Island Life*

By EMRYS BRYSON

Island Life / Playhouse Studio

DESPITE what John Donne said, every man is an island.

Nottingham writer Jenny McLeod has cottoned on to this early in life, thereby showing a maturity beyond her 23 years. Enough, anyway, to have two stage premieres within a week.

Last Thursday it was her *Cricket at Camp David* at the Bolton Octagon. Now Nottingham Playhouse lays on *Island Life* at its new Studio premises at the refurbished Albert Hall.

We meet three women in an old people's home, touched with that selfish dottiness with which the old and / or lonely protect themselves. Without staff to marshal them, they bump about like a trio of pinballs, sometimes clicking and clashing furiously, then retreating into or banged down a hole before re-emerging to trickle down the table again.

But unlike the impersonal steel of pinballs, these are vulnerable humans with their full complement of pride, pettiness, venom, jealousies, compassion, possessiveness and paranoia.

In a closed-circuit world, they subsist on illusions. Emmy, who came from the West Indies 35 years ago, nurses the illusion that her daughter Daphne is coming to take her shopping. The letter was written in 1971.

Sophia, dominant and bitchy from her wheelchair, badly needs someone to love — to the extent of 'stealing' the absent Daphne and getting her to write to her instead.

Vera — a wonderful character — is perhaps the most fragile. Generous with her favours down at the gentleman's retirement home, she is much married and goes on about her six 'infants'.

The three are interrupted by young Kate who has mistaken the place for a hotel. And in her well-meaning wish to lift the veil of their self-deceptions she doesn't realise the damage the 'truth' can cause.

Distinct

The work of Jenny McLeod shows thought, humour and characterisation far deeper than most first-time authors. Her people are distinct and individual in their pride and defiance, their sudden eruptions of jealousy and insecurity only too real.

After some marking time in the first half, the second gets you sweating with anguish for these souls laid bare. Yet a strong element of laughter points up the pathos of the human condition.

Miss McLeod will clearly continue to write and become a credit to the theatres who have spotted her potential. And be thankful she has players under Jane Collins' close-focus direction (designs by Iona McLeish) to give her play careful life — Joanna Field as Sophia, Corinne Skinner Carter as Emmy, Marcia Tucker as Kate and, notably, Stella Tanner as the wonderful Vera.

NOTTINGHAM
TRADER.

WED 26/10/88.



● Marcia Tucker (Kate) and Joanna Field (Sophia) in *Island Life*.

ISLAND LIFE

Playhouse until Oct 29

Pathos combines with wit to create a play which portrays some of the sad facts of life for the elderly and the sparks of humour which give the characters strength. The contrast between a weak body and a strong mind or vice versa are apparent in the dominant Sophia confined to a wheelchair and the younger-looking Vera who is reaching the edges of senility.

The production in the new Studio — bigger and more suitable for plays than the old Siddons Room — has a simple set on split levels, requiring the audience's imagination. The lighting from stage level and overhead rigs on three sides is gloomy, imparting the atmosphere of the depressing old people's home, while make-up is efficient and, of necessity, quickly changed.

Dora Bryan stars in *Hello Dolly*, which opens in the main house on Saturday and runs until November 26.

C.M.

UNIQUE and yet familiar characters are the main strength of *Island Life* by Carlton's Jenny McLeod, showing for the first time, as another of her plays receives its premiere in Bolton.

The young writer has created three striking elderly women — one bitter, cantankerous and bossy, another ingenuous, living in a dream world and yet perceptive, and the third losing her memory, desperate for attention and love, but outwardly cheerful.

The three companions are visited during an illicit weekend of independence from the restraints of their old people's home by an outsider. The young Kate escaping from an unhappy marriage questions their attitudes to life and brings events to their dramatic climax.

The characters produced with great insight are brought to life by Stella Tanner (Vera), Corinne Skinner Carter (Emmy), Joanna Field (Sophia) and Marcia Tucker (Kate). The elderly residents are so convincing I felt I had met the people they were based on.

TRANSCRIPT OF REVIEW OF "ISLAND LIFE"
BBC RADIO NOTTINGHAM 23 OCT 88

The Playhouse has inaugurated its new studio area next door in the refurbished Albert Hall with a 'prentice play by a 23 year old local writer, filled with excellent moments of dialogue and insight. Jenny McLeod won the recent Playhouse Writing '87 award with another play also having its premiere elsewhere in the same week. The one we were offered is ISLAND LIFE, directed by Jane Collins for Monstrous Regiment Theatre Company, who commissioned it.

The "island" of the title is the old people's home inhabited by Sophia, Emmy and Vera, and also the private life each leads in her own mind. For as well as their lonely real world, they also live a fantasy, in which caring relatives write or plan visits, or if all else fails, a seance may offer contact with a dead loved one. They all know one another's secrets, but normally they're tolerated and not exposed: Sophia who wants to get in touch with her dead mother, Emmy whose daughter is expected each holiday, Vera of the many husbands and undiminished sex urge, with a brood of infants who one day will pose with her at the centre of a family group. They bicker but vie for each other's friendship; quarrel, but are drawn back to each other with the inevitability of a tongue to a sore tooth.

To them enters Kate, who seems as surprised to find herself there as we are at her arrival, which is never really satisfactorily explained. She serves as contrast, vibrantly played by a young, vital and very attractive Marcia Tucker, and also as catalyst, creating effects which for a time seem likely to disturb the set pattern of these elderly ordered lives. By the end it's likely that nothing much is going to change.

The idea of trapping your characters and then dissecting them isn't new, nor the Pinteresque device of having an unexplained visitor interrupt the action, though Kate lacks the menace of a Pinter intruder. Especially in the first act, and the indeterminate tailing-off of the ending, there are some unnecessarily slow and repetitious passages, and awkwardness of construction, which reduce what is otherwise a claustrophobic tension. Some or all of these faults may lie as much in the direction as in the writing.

OVER.....



Keep smiling - CORRINE SKINNER CARTER and STELLA TANNER in *Island Life*.

Desert island dementia

TERENCE STEVENSON on an island inhabited by a group of mad old women

NOTTINGHAM *Island Life*

A NEW writer, a new play - and, at long last, a new acting space at Nottingham Playhouse. Radical old sentimentalist that I am, it's almost like old times. If that's bewildering, so was Jenny McLeod's play about three ageing women in a home. It smelt of Pinter, though the writer claimed no antecedents and hardly any knowledge of them.

The home was a wall-less enclosure, more island than institution, and each an island on the island. A watery set, with the embellishment of an off-shore yacht, designed by Iona McLeish, suggested that the women were all at sea, tossing on waves of envy, spite, delusions of youth and illusions of contentment. The latter was flawlessly propounded by the ever-hopeful Emmy (Corinne Skinner Carter), confident of the eventual re-appearance of her daughter who would bring rescue from her island of loneliness. Little does she realise that daughter Daphne's messages in bottles have been intercepted by wily wheel-chair witch Sophia (Joanna Field) and that the daughter has been effectively stolen. Vera, an astonishing performance by Stella Tanner, is a kupid-doll of a woman, still serving the geriatric gentlemen in the neighbouring men's home with her fading features

and false hair, and insisting on the existence, somewhere, of her 'infants'.

Into the floating lives of these three weird sisters, who toss human nerves into a cauldron represented by an unseen fridge, comes Kate (Marcia Tucker), who implausibly believes she has stumbled upon a hotel for the night. This witness from the mainland, with problems of her own, releases the four winds and old truths are scattered hither and thither. If it sounds a mite metaphysical, it is, but in an odd, unselfconscious way that defies prognosis. You want biographical backup for any interpretation. This, the young, black writer cannot - or will not - give. And, rightly, she assumes that youth and colour might have little to do with the equation. The play is there. The play is.

I felt it went a little awry in the second half, or maybe I felt played out by these compelling, if revolting, people. Often, they were grimly humorous, which dispelled some of the desolation they exuded. Obviously, these women hadn't chosen eight discs to be shipwrecked with. Totally unprepared were they. Monstrous Regiment commissioned this play and have done themselves a service; it really is peculiar. And, when the hurly-burly of authorship is over, tremendously impressive.

Terence Stevenson

'Island Life'

Drill Hall

'I hope I don't end up in one of these places,' declares Kate, when she seeks help at an old people's home after her car has broken down. It's a common sentiment which Jenny McLeod bravely tackles in her new play for Monstrous Regiment portraying three ageing women who subsist on a fragile mix of memory, fantasy and illusion. It is a bank holiday weekend; the other inmates have departed leaving Vera, Sophie and Emmy to pass the time by holding a seance. No one responds to their call to the dead yet almost every waking moment of their daily lives is preoccupied with ghosts from their past. For Jamaican-born Emmy who came to this country 40 years ago, there is always the chance that her daughter Daphne may actually come to tea. Vera, ageing mutton dressed as frisky lamb, has had six husbands and countless infants, but her desperation for comfort and love makes her prone to the odd sojourn next door for sex with the men. Wheelchair-ridden Sophia has neither children nor husbands and the measure of her despair is the vengeful malice with which she attacks her 'friends'. Although the dramatic device of the outsider who seeks to destroy the inmates' illusions is somewhat predictable, Ms McLeod writes with empathy and insight for her characters, and she is well served by the finely wrought performances in Jane Collins's fluent production.

Ann McFerran

MONSTROUS REGIMENT

about. Nottingham writer Jenny McLeod won a Nottingham Playhouse competition with her first play, *Cricket At Camp David*, which was premiered at the Bolton Octagon last autumn. *Monstrous Regiment* had by then commissioned this one for a tour, which opened a week later in a co-production with Nottingham Playhouse. What's so special about this 23-year-old writer?

On the evidence of *Island Life*, she certainly has a knack for writing disturbing dialogue — the play has a natural dramatist's gift for telling you things about its characters that are the opposite of what they're saying.

The characters here are three ladies in an old folks' home on a bank holiday weekend and the play's theme is the group dynamics as they cling to closeness, the devious and destructive devices they bring to the shifting alliances of possibly their last intimacies.

It's all meticulously observed in a cold-eyed but not uncaring way and the three old ladies are beautifully brought to life by impeccable performances from Joanna Field, Joan Hooley, and Stella Tanner in Jane Collins's reflective production.

But it seemed to me a bit second-hand: I've seen these stratagems outlined before; the intruder blurring truth into a mutually collusive fantasy world is a familiar fictional device. How often does it really happen? I'd rather hear Jenny McLeod's undeniably listenable voice authentically describing her own experiences.

● *Island Life* tours to Harlow Playhouse on April 1.

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Robin Thornber

Island Life

I CAUGHT this play at Derby Playhouse Studio towards the end of its tour because I wanted to see what all the fuss was

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