

Small spaces, big talk

Embers of love make for stinging repartee, writes **Rebecca Davis**



ENDGAME: Shaun Acker (left) as Glenn and Pieter Bosch Botha as J P in Nicholas Spagnoletti's latest theatre offering, 'Civil Parting' Picture: JESSE K

NICHOLAS Spagnoletti's multiaward winning debut play, *London Road*, continues to garner such lavish praise that it must make subsequent writing projects a bit of a daunting endeavour for Spagnoletti.

London Road, the tragi-comic tale of an unlikely friendship between an elderly Jewish woman and a Nigerian drug dealer, has been the darling of the Grahamstown Festival for the past few years.

This year it received its biggest accolade to date, when actress Robyn Scott won the Best Actress award for her role at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe: no mean feat, considering that the play was up against almost 3 000 other shows and the likes of Dame Janet Suzman were fellow Best Actress nominees.

So there are high expectations

for Spagnoletti's latest, *Civil Parting*, which is having its debut run in Spagnoletti's theatre, Alexander Upstairs — a cosy 40-seater space which is increasingly establishing itself as a home for innovative, short pieces of theatre. *Civil Parting* is just an hour long, which turns out to be a perfectly satisfying length for a play without an interval.

Spagnoletti clearly enjoys the comic and dramatic possibilities of throwing incongruous characters together in a small space and having them talk it out. This was the basis for the narrative of *London Road*, and the formula is at the heart of *Civil Parting* too.

But there's a difference here: the two characters are married gay men, waiting in a lawyer's office for the formalisation of their divorce. In some ways it feels subversive to be making gay divorce a topic for drama-comedy

at a time when much of the world is still fighting for the right to gay marriage. But Spagnoletti's piece doesn't exoticise the phenomenon. It turns out that the ending of a gay

relationship looks much the as the ending of a straight one.

While the play is an acute observed portrait of relational failure, with all its attendant bitterness, it is also exceedingly funny. Spagnoletti excels at writing withering put-down droll one-liners, and the dial positively crackles.

Actors Pieter Bosch Botha and Shaun Acker both convince roles, with Zanne Solomon's free hand to direct them in a snappy, compact performance.

There's a remarkable sheer physical comedy when Acker throws himself across stage in a manner that might injure a less nimble performer. Fortunately, everything about *Civil Parting* is agile.

● *Civil Parting* is on at the Alexander Upstairs in Cape until September 18. Call 021-300-1088

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