

GERMAN SUNSET

As you drive out to the gleaming white purpose built theatre, it seems strange to see the familiar, luminous *Sunset Boulevard* sign backed by a dense green forest. The Really Useful Theatre Company have taken over the tiny German town of Niedernhausen. If you haven't a car the only way to reach the isolated theatre in the German countryside is by a courtesy bus which ferries eager theatregoers. This has not put the German public off, as the show keeps packing them in. Since the glittering premiere in December, attended by Andrew Lloyd Webber, it has been nearly a sell-out. The cast is led by American born Helen Schneider, who plays Norma Desmond, and Uwe Kröger as the struggling writer Joe Gillis. Everything about this production seems much grander than its counterpart in London and no expense has been spared. The stage is wider allowing for a more opulent set. The costumes are richer with Norma's outfits becoming increasingly dramatic and spectacular as the show progresses. It takes all her strength to carry the weight of the gold, black and silver dresses, heavy with jewels and draped in furs, up and down the main staircase.

Helen Schneider is one of the most emotional Norma Desmonds I have seen. A stunning performance matched by a stunning vocal range. She is a huge star in Germany. The very opening scene where Joe's body is pulled out of the pool is much more effective than in the London production. You can actually see clearly what is happening, but in London this scene always seems difficult to visually comprehend hidden murkily behind thick screens.

As If We Never Said Goodbye, upon Norma's return to Paramount Studios, was spine-tingling and one of the best deliveries of the song I have heard. I almost forgot the performance was in German due to the stunning performance of the cast. All those 'people out there in the dark' couldn't have asked for more. □

BY JULIE EAGLETON

This is an extraordinary piece of drama, not only for its outstanding performances but also for its sensitive address of the controversial subject of abortion. Sal, a 35 year old journalist, is pregnant and her partner Ray, a freelance illustrator, can't wait for the patter of tiny feet. Sal's consultant, however, advises she should take an amniocentesis test which detects Down's Syndrome in the unborn child. The results confirm the worst and the couple are left to make the choice of going ahead with the pregnancy or to abort.

Claire Luckham, best known for the play *Trafford Tanzi*, has a brother who was born with Down's Syndrome and here she has cleverly created a role, simply called The Writer, played by Jenny Howe, to speak her words. The Writer narrates intermittently about her brother and his life. With Clare Luckham's experience it would have been easy to create an emotional, unbalanced piece but instead the narrator's story calmly runs parallel with the occasional hysterics of the drama. *The Choice* was voted *Best New Play* in the *Martini/TMA Regional Theatre Awards* in 1992 but it is only now receiving its London premiere.

Eve Matheson exposes raw emotion as the expectant mother wrestling between her head and her heart. Charles Simpson as Ray is quite brilliant, running the gamut of emotions, from jealousy of the baby at the

beginning to a heartbroken wreck at the end. The stiff upper-lipped consultant, played memorably by Robert McBain, drew gasps from the audience at his coldness, pompousness and his apparent indifference to the couple's dilemma. Towards the end, we learn that the consultant and his wife chose not to have children as it would interfere with his career.

It is a while since I have seen members of a theatre audience so moved by a play. The five strong cast gave everything, particularly Matheson who must be emotionally drained after each performance. The ending was as poignant as one could expect. The writer's brother had recently celebrated his 50th birthday and photographs of that occasion had been made into slides which beamed onto three walls of the theatre. Here we see him happy, wearing a party hat covered in colourful streamers and enjoying his life, whilst Sal and Ray sadly mourn the young life that they have just lost. *The Choice* is incredibly emotive, touching and informative at the same time. An experience that will stay with you long after leaving the theatre. □

THE CHOICE

BY CLAIRE LUCKHAM

DIRECTOR
DESIGNER
LIGHTING DESIGNER

DOMINIC HILL
LORNA MARSHALL
JOE WHITE

CAST

JENNY HOWE, TRICIA
KELLY, ROBERT MCBAIN, EVE MATHESON,
CHARLES SIMPSON

JULIE EAGLETON AT THE ORANGE TREE