

Dysfunctional and HISTRIONIC

A crisp comedy lies waiting to be revealed, writes **Nushin Elahi**

The Last of the Haussmans

National Theatre, London

Playwright: Stephen Beresford

Director: Howard Davies

LEO TOLSTOY famously said, in the opening lines of his novel *Anna Karenina*: "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." That may not be quite true, seeing people laugh with a sense of recognition at the play *The Last of the Haussmans*.

No one's family can be quite like this one, yet there is a vicious cut and thrust in family interaction that can leave a stranger gasping in disbelief and laughing at the same time.

This National Theatre production was filmed on the last night of a very long run, and last nights are notoriously over-the-top affairs. This one was no exception, which, when added to a script which piles every possible ill on a horribly dysfunctional family, leads to a rather histrionic show.

Julie Walters on stage for the first time in 12 years was the drawcard here, and playwright Stephen Beresford has created a grand and dramatic role for her. Judy Haussman is a true old hippie, living in decaying splendour in a gorgeous Art Deco house in Dartmouth. It's

an older actress's dream role. Judy is loud, foul-mouthed, flashes at the neighbours, gets very drunk, makes lewd suggestions at men young and old, goes zombie-like on a morphine overdose and then has a kiss and cuddle with her two estranged kids.

If her outsized character were counter-balanced with some rather bland grown-up children, it could perhaps have worked. As it is, her son Nick is a raving camp addict who goes on binges – and the fine actor Rory Kinnear was hammering it up that night, while the daughter Libby (Helen McCrory) is a single mom with bad taste in men. It's no surprise that granddaughter Summer is a shrewish teenager with a venomous tongue. By the time interval comes one is exhausted by the levels of hysterical shrieking.

It's not every first-time playwright who nets a sterling cast, a long run at the National and a film to boot. Beresford's script would have been much better served in a smaller venue after being radically trimmed by director and cast. Judy may recall that she has done wonderful things, but there are simply too many of them here. As Nick and Libby trade memories of their childhood, it seems as if Beresford has packed material for at least three plays into one.

The premise of a feisty old lady raging at the dying light while those around her have to come to terms with her impact on them is the chord that resonates with audi-



Feisty old hippie Judy (Julie Walters) in the raucous comedy *The Last of the Haussmans*.

PICTURES: CATHERINE ASHMORE



Unhappy siblings Libby (Helen McCrory) and Nick (Rory Kinnear).

ences, but Judy's take on feisty isn't remembered after the curtain call.

It's a pity that the National Theatre wasn't more judicious in funding new writing – as it was with the

brilliant piece, *The Collaborators*, which started life in the Cottesloe and then moved to one of the main theatres and a longer run.

Walters looks like she is having

a ball with her role, but it is McCrory as the middle-aged daughter who taps the most humanity out of her part, as a woman torn by the opposing pulls of her own needs and those of other generations.

The superb detail of Vicki Mortimer's set design is one of the major pluses of this production: a sumptuous Art Deco house that has fallen into disrepair, which we see from all angles on the revolving stage.

Visually, and more than many words, it encapsulates the essence of this comedy on ageing. If only Beresford had listened to his own lead character and tossed out so much more, he would have found the crisp comedy that lies waiting to be revealed in his work. Director Howard Davies has mounted a technically fine production, but he would have served it better if he also had been less indulgent.

This play was filmed live at the National Theatre, and will be screened at Cinema Nouveaus nationally today and on Wednesday, November 21 and Thursday, 22.

Beresford's peacenik dramedy fails to ignite

MICHAEL O'SULLIVAN

THE COMBINED acting muscle of Jane Fonda, Catherine Keener and Elizabeth Olsen – playing three generations of women in a fractious family – is not enough to lift *Peace, Love and Misunderstanding* above the level of comfortable mediocrity one has come to expect from former filmmaking powerhouse Bruce Beresford.

The director of *Driving Miss Daisy* is better known nowadays for such middling fare as *Bridge of the Wind* and made-for-TV movies.

Set in a Woodstock, New York, that seems more like a hippie Oz than any place that exists in the real world, the dramatic comedy centres on matriarch Grace (Fonda), a greying free spirit and pot dealer who is visited by her uptight lawyer daughter, Diane (Keener), when Diane's husband (Kyle MacLachlan) suddenly announces he wants a divorce. In tow with Diane are her teenage chil-



Zoe (Elizabeth Olsen) and Grace (Jane Fonda) in *Peace, Love and Misunderstanding*.

dren, Zoe (Olsen) and Jake (Nat Wolff). They've never met grandma, thanks to an estrangement that has kept Diane from

speaking to Grace for 20 years, a falling out over sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll.

Although Wolff makes a suc-

cessful transition from child star to adolescent actor, the movie really belongs to Fonda, Keener and Olsen. It's a shame the material doesn't deserve them. It's little more than a cheesy set-up for the kind of pat reconciliation that occurs in any episode of a TV sitcom.

The joke of the premise could not be broader: Grace is a mellow, moon-worshipping peacenik, while Diane is a brittle Republican shrew who doesn't know how to enjoy life. Zoe is more like Grace than her mother. She's a health nut and poetry buff. But her storyline focuses less on family dynamics than on her budding romance with the cute local butcher's assistant (Chace Crawford). But he smokes, hunts and eats meat.

Under the influence of moonlight, a massive infusion of Hollywood movie magic and a bit of Grace's marijuana, all those obstacles will be whisked away in a swirl of pixie dust.

It's also entirely possible that

Diane might find love on the rebound, in the form of Jude (Jeffrey Dean Morgan), a hunky furniture-maker/musician whose kiss is more potent than Grace's weed. After Grace fixes Jude up with her daughter, it isn't long before the two are crooning classic rock ballads at the local music festival and canoodling on his futon.

It's like *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in the Catskills.

The wit isn't quite Shakespearean. When Jude tells Diane that she needs to just get over her anger at her mother – after a fairly preposterous plot twist premised on the unquenchable nature of Grace's libido – Diane likens her resentment to a balloon that she's unwilling to let go of. No, Jude tells her, it's more like a sandbag holding you down.

I felt the same way about the film, which bogs down a trio of talented actresses with clichés and clunky dialogue. – The Washington Post