

The Two Character Play by Tennessee Williams, Hampstead Theatre, London.

DIRECTOR Sam Yates

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR Lizzie Manwaring

DESIGNER Rosana Vize

LIGHTING Lee Curran

SOUND Dan Balfour

VIDEO Akhila Krishnan

MOVEMENT Malik Nashad Sharpe

ASSOCIATE MOVEMENT DIRECTOR Michela Meazza

VOICE William Conacher

CASTING Stuart Burt CDG

★★★★★ “I was gripped, riveted and moved by this play in ways that both surprised and enthralled me.” (Mark Shenton, Shenton Stage)

★★★★★ “Sam Yates’ staging uses modern theatrical wizardry to restore all its mould-breaking power... Tennessee Williams’ most daring play.” (Evening Standard)

★★★★★ “O’Flynn and Varla are excellent: she’s defiant, volatile and painfully vulnerable; he’s driven, clenched, enraged by his sister but equally protective towards her ... a powerful articulation of loneliness and the gnawing terror of madness.” (Financial Times)

★★★★★ “A strange, profound delight. Tennessee Williams’s experimental late-career work, which premiered at this very theatre in 1967, is revived in ultra meta-textual production.” (Independent)

★★★★★ “Varla and O’Flynn perfectly capture the dichotomous nature of Felice and Clare’s relationship.” (The Stage)

★★★★★ “Yates’s achievement is to match the evident European forbears to this text – Beckett and Pirandello, especially – with a European-flavoured production that exists in the self-referential, video-friendly tradition of Katie Mitchell and Ivo van Hove.” (Matt Wolf, London Theatre)

★★★★★ “Tender, poetic and piercingly cruel - A timely return for Tennessee Williams' long-neglected play... a stiletto-sharp comedy about theatre and the business of theatre-making, written from within – barbed and slyly funny.” (The Arts Desk)

★★★★★ “Always mesmerising, totally memorable. A masterpiece of theatre.” (The Spy in the Stalls)

★★★★★ “Funny, sad, horrific and unbearably poignant. O’Flynn and Varla demonstrate a wide range of emotions in a challenging play that has one foot in reality and another in nightmare. A real discovery.” (The Daily Express)

★★★★ “Enthralling... this production elicits a sobering sense of invigoration, wonder and nostalgia. A memorable experience.” (The Upcoming)

★★★★ “Profound... haunting... It’s an entirely relevant tale to our age of constant performativity (on TikTok or on Zoom) and it’s often uncanny how Williams’s play feels so utterly contemporary.” (Exeunt Magazine)

★★★★ “O’Flynn and Varla sell both of their roles brilliantly and Yates’ direction, both deft and dramatic, lifts The Two Character Play from an interesting curio to a genuinely powerful piece of theatre.” (CITY AM)

★★★★ “Sam Yates’s vibrant production revels in this liminal quality with projected video summoning the childhoods of both sets of siblings.” (The Jewish Chronicle)

★★★★ “Varla and O’Flynn — raging, cowering, struggling and desperate, their contrasting voices forming a mesmeric music — perform exquisitely together: in the end, something of love is salvaged.” (The Morning Star)

★★★★ “Dan Balfour’s genius sound design uses hidden speakers to fill the auditorium with the coughs, laughs and whispers of the internal play’s invisible audience to chilling effect.” (Culture Whisper)

★★★★ “Exquisite... There are parallel worlds touching a myriad of emotional and psychological scars that lie deep in Williams’ head.” (Plays to See)

★★★★ “Sam Yates’s direction, though, makes the production. He expertly melds comedy, drama, and horror to create a package that puts the audience through an emotional roller coaster.” (Theatrely.com)

★★★★ “As lavish as a play for two people can be...as well as raw energy, brings out the pathos within.” (Last Minute Tickets)

★★★★ “A bold, absorbing revival. Both Zubin Varla and Kate O’Flynn are exceptional.” (Ham and High)

★★★★★ “A superb revival, or more appropriately superb rebirth... This production exemplifies this, and is an amazing opportunity to see true theatrical art.” (Theatre-new.com)

★★★★★ “Visually stunning and deeply moving” (Northwestend.com)

★★★★★ “Stunning acting and also a visual treat.” (Bozyz)

The London Evening Standard ★★★★★

Alice Saville

Mould-breaking power restored to Tennessee Williams' most daring play

As he fell messily out of love with the Broadway theatre scene that had once worshipped him, Tennessee Williams scattered an increasingly strange series of plays into the world. The Two Character Play sees him at his most daring. Director Sam Yates' staging brings it back to Hampstead Theatre, where it first premiered in 1967, and uses modern theatrical wizardry to restore all its mould-breaking power.

It's set in a chilly, dream-like theatre where a brother and a sister are putting on a play - but the rest of the cast have deserted them, the script isn't finished, and they're rapidly parting ways with reality after their parents' deaths. Kate O'Flynn and Zubin Varla are mesmerising to watch as these siblings, singing melancholy little songs or blowing bubbles as they desperately try to find a fitting conclusion to their endless imprisoning childhood.

There's lots of vintage Williams stuff in here: stifling family dynamics, mental illness, and Southern-accented melodrama. But this play has a punchy experimental spirit to it, too, as Williams follows Beckett and Pirandello in shattering the neat three-act structure of classic drama. If you smash something, bits get everywhere. And Yates' production embraces this play's broken-apart feel, as the actors haul hackneyed scenery across the stage, or interrupt one of their moving speeches to play a cassette tape of appropriately sentimental music.

Onstage video cameras capture all of O'Flynn's wonderfully heightened gestures and Varla's wry impatience in huge projections that fill the stage's back wall. And the pair deliver masterful shifts in accent and mood, slipping out of their languid Southern drawls to deliver wry Estuary-accented asides to each other. They know the story they're trying to tell is too much, too embarrassingly histrionic to be inflicted on a bewildered audience.

As the tension mounts, the theatre turns into a haunted toybox, with hidden speakers filling the auditorium with disembodied childish giggles. It all starts to feel like a nightmarish retread of Williams' heavily autobiographical A Glass Menagerie, one that explores what would have happened if he'd stayed at home with his mentally ill sister Rose and slowly absorbed her eccentricities, instead of guiltily escaping. Despite Yates' cuts, the play moves at a languorous pace, but it's full of biting insights into how loneliness can be a prison, and the bravery you need to go on living through desperate times.

Williams spent 10 years tinkering with The Two Character Play, and it's easy to see why: as well as being blisteringly personal, it's as dense as molasses. Yates' production has been long delayed by the pandemic but it feels like he never stopped thinking about this fascinating play, either. He knows just when to jolt an audience and when to let us luxuriate in the odd, nostalgic world of Williams' past.

The Financial Times ★★★★★

Sarah Hemming

It struggled in its day, but since then directors such as Ivo van Hove have taken other experimental, stripped-back productions to the mainstream. Yates's fine, intelligent production embraces that vocabulary: here the action plays out on a half-dressed stage (design by Rosanna Vize), the actors push the scenery around, manage the sound effects and sometimes address the onstage cameras so their faces are magnified on the upstage wall. It's a staging that celebrates the radical streak in Williams's work and meets its double focus: we see the play, we see the pain that goes into the play, we see the tormented ambivalence of the artist towards both his creation and its source.

O'Flynn and Varla are excellent: she's defiant, volatile and painfully vulnerable; he's driven, clenched, enraged by his sister but equally protective towards her. By the end, it's clear neither of them can leave: they are locked into the theatre, into their relationship with each other and into the play they must keep performing. It's not an easy watch, but it's a powerful articulation of loneliness and the gnawing terror of madness.

The Independent ★★★★★

Alexandra Pollard

A strange, profound delight. Tennessee Williams's experimental late-career work, which premiered at this very theatre in 1967, is revived in ultra meta-textual production

The Two Character Play is a complete and utter shambles. The set is half- built. Sound cues are missed. Lines are forgotten – or worse, deliberately skipped to spare the feelings of the two openly bickering actors. I am talking, mercifully, about the play within a play, performed by actors playing actors in Tennessee Williams's experimental late-career work, which premiered at this very theatre in 1967. The production itself is a delight: strange and profound.

Kate O'Flynn plays Clare; Zubin Varla is her brother Felice. They are the sole remaining members of a theatre troupe, whose entire cast and crew have abandoned them along with a note: "Your sister and you are insane." Clare – who turned up to the theatre drunk and skittish, flinching at her own shadow – wants to cancel the performance. Felice insists that the show must go on. "Some necessary things are impossible," says Clare. "And some impossible things are necessary," says Felice. "We are performing tonight."

And so they do. The only play in their repertoire they can feasibly perform alone is The Two Character Play – the tale of two reclusive siblings also, confusingly, named Clare and Felice, who have become town pariahs since their father killed their mother and then himself. While the "actors" are English, the "characters" are American. I don't think that's how it is in the script, but it was a canny move from director Sam Yates. Having O'Flynn and Varla start in their native accents, then snap into that Southern American drawl we so associate with Williams' better-known work – A Streetcar Named Desire; Cat On A Hot Tin Roof; The Glass Menagerie – adds another metatextual layer to a play already thick with it. (A particularly awkward moment: when Clare looks into the audience and says, "Where are they? The ladies and gentlemen of the press?") The play within a play is meandering and

hard to follow – especially since Clare is only half-committed, making cuts wherever she pleases, indicating those cuts to Felice by playing a C# on the piano. It's funny and absurd at first, especially in contrast to Felice's over-zealous enthusiasm, as he simpers, over-acts, and scuttles back and forth from the stage to the sound desk in a frenzy. But it gradually becomes tragic.

Clare is based on Williams's own sister Rose, who was in and out of institutions before being lobotomised at the age of 28. No wonder, then, that when Felice goes off-script and utters the word "confined", Clare leaps back in shock and hammers that C#. Shades of Blanche DuBois emerge. O'Flynn – so brilliant in *The End of History* at The Royal Court and *Blank* at the Donmar Warehouse – plays Clare as both pathetic and defiant, childlike and world-weary. And despite his gravitas as Felice, Varla somehow seems like a boy playing at being a grown-up.

By the end, things have descended into a madness that borders on horror. This is a play about confinement and escape; about re-telling our own stories in order to hide from them. Written and rewritten over the course of 10 years while Williams was struggling with addiction and mental health issues of his own, it was once described by the playwright as "my most beautiful play since *Streetcar*, the very heart of my life". This production is empathetic and eccentric enough to do it justice.

The Stage ★★★★★

Varla and O'Flynn perfectly capture the dichotomous nature of Felice and Clare's relationship. There are flashes of violence and snatches of tenderness – moments after smothering Clare with a pillow, Felice is dancing with her in his arms. O'Flynn's doped-up diva Clare, who appears youthful without being young, is haunting in the play's denouement, when Lee Curran's terrifying lighting design and Dan Balfour's brutal soundscape abuse the senses.

Under Yates' direction, the production carefully builds a sense of increasing unease – you feel a growing desperation to claw your way through the crack in the back wall of the stage.

London Theatre ★★★★★

Matt Wolf

Tennessee Williams's strange meta-theatrical play has been given an immensely daring revival at the Hampstead Theatre, where this dense two-hander had its world premiere in 1967. Since then, the play was retitled (as *Out Cry*) for a brief Broadway run in 1973 and has cropped up both at London's Jermyn Street Theatre in 2010 and Off Broadway in 2013, in a starry revival with Brad Dourif and Amanda Plummer that I actually caught at a sparsely attended Wednesday matinee performed to a bewildered scattering of New York playgoers.

Sam Yates's reappraisal is likely to confound spectators, as well, and represents continued risk-taking at this address following the Hampstead's expert reclamation of *The Death of a Black Man* – a play (and production) shamefully underrated in some quarters. *The Two Character Play*, by contrast, is admittedly never going to be to everyone's taste, and I'm not sure citing *A Streetcar Named Desire* in the marketing material does it any favours: the two works are theatrical polar opposites. But Yates's achievement is to match the evident European forbears to this text – Beckett and Pirandello, especially – with a European-

flavoured production that exists in the self-referential, video-friendly tradition of Katie Mitchell and Ivo van Hove, to name but a few modern-day auteurs: theatre devotees will look on rapt even as more casual attendees are scratching their heads.

Running a good half hour longer than its latest New York airing, the play is presented here as a study in the very act of theatricality. Williams's purposefully knotted structure finds Zubin Varla and Kate O'Flynn playing brother and sister: touring actors who happen to be performing a work called *The Two Character Play*, in which they are cast as – you got it! – brother and sister in a play whose horrors bleed out from beyond the constraints of art into the characters' lives. Theatre people are used to “unexpected conditions” due, we're told, to “the perversities of the time,” and the remark explains the disappearance from the siblings' midst of everyone (their manager, Fox, included) with whom they might have formed a company. The result finds them thrown back on one another as pieces of the set get hauled this way and that, self-projections jostling against the back wall with footage of the pair as children: innocents as yet unimpaired by experience.

“Nothing to be done,” or so we hear in a second-act citation drawn directly from Beckett, by which point the mental disturbance of both characters has been ramped up by the appearance of a revolver that seems to tally with the double death featured ominously in the play-within-the-play. Snatches of music (“Love Me Tender,” “Me and My Shadow”) give way to a ferocious closing sequence that tilts the material in the direction of grand opera, Yates all the while clocking the multiple shifts in mood from absurdist comedy to something more ferocious.

One can't forget (and a programme essay makes the connection explicit) the ongoing wound for this dramatist posed by his emotionally blighted sister, Rose, and O'Flynn plays the scatty-seeming Clare with an easeful power no doubt informed by her West End run several years ago as Laura in *The Glass Menagerie*, opposite Cherry Jones. Varla, as much a shape-shifter of an actor in terms of his choices as the English theatre has, brings elements of *Menagerie*'s questing Tom to the appeal to the imagination made by Felice: a theatrical multi-hyphenate all but imprisoned by his art.

The second act feels a bit attenuated, and you can imagine some responding with impatience to the careful layering of the cluttered physical and psychic landscape that unfolds across the full width and depth of Rosanna Vize's set, lit with crepuscular power by Lee Curran even as Dan Balfour's soundscape suggests a gathering foreboding and fear. But you have to hand this latest in the Hampstead's series of “Originals” for taking a lesser-known title and all but jolting it into renewed life. Art is a refuge until such time as it isn't, and *The Two Character Play* responds to that tension with a thorough understanding of what Williams recognised all too well to be the pain of life.

The Arts Desk ★★★★★
Alexandra Coghlan

The Two Character Play, Hampstead Theatre review - tender, poetic and piercingly cruel
A timely return for Tennessee Williams' long-neglected play

The unlikely answer (so unlikely that even artistic director Roxana Silbert apparently didn't know it until now) is the Hampstead Theatre where, in 1967, Williams' *The Two Character Play* was first staged to slightly baffled critical response.

Now, as part of the theatre's "Originals" series, the play Williams himself described a "my most beautiful since *Streetcar*, the very heart of my life" returns in a new production by Sam Yates. It's a gift of a quote for selling tickets, but less so for satisfying an audience which has bought them, setting up an unhelpful comparison, a suggestion of continuity with the more famous work that couldn't be further from the truth.

Ten years in gestation, surviving in multiple published and unpublished versions, *The Two Character Play* is what might have happened if Tennessee Williams had spent a night drinking with Beckett and Sartre then gone home and written in a whisky-fuelled flush of experimental enthusiasm. All the playwright's familiar elements – the Southern setting, the fragile woman inspired by his troubled sister Rose, the desperation clawing just beneath the surface – are here, but married to a complicated play-within-a-play structure that pushes form to the fore in an interrogation of theatre itself.

We meet brother and sister Felice and Clare – touring actors whose erratic behaviour has driven all their fellow cast and crew-members away, leaving just the two of them in a remote venue with a curtain ready to be raised and a public waiting to be entertained. Fortunately they have Felice's own *The Two Character Play* in their repertoire, and proceed to perform it as best they can, their lives and identities echoing, blurring and finally meshing with those of their characters – a brother and sister trapped by fear in their family home after witnessing their parents' murder-suicide.

It's a play about the stories we tell and retell, how they comfort and cushion but also imprison us, the meditation of an author oppressed by success who had written himself out of personal trauma only to create a whole new kind of suffering. It's also, in Yates's hands, a stiletto-sharp comedy about theatre and the business of theatre-making, written from within – barbed and slyly funny.

Yates and designer Rosanna Vize layer the visual storytelling thickly. Live and filmed action, real-time performances projected onto walls and pre-recorded home-movies, imagined props and real-world objects, musical recordings, a piano and guitar all slide over and amongst one another, veils that never quite let us see the action straight. It's playful and lightly worn, references, borrowings and nods everywhere, all reassuring clutter and hubbub and movement until, in Williams' ending, it's suddenly not. Madness is the ever-present threat here, finally and fully realised in a conclusion whose lurch of tone sends us sprawling. There to catch us and tug us reassuringly down into the dark are Kate O'Flynn (**pictured left**) and Zubin Varla as Clare and Felice. O'Flynn, a mesmerising Laura in John Tiffany's *A Glass Menagerie* in 2017, is brittle as kindling here, ready to snap or catch fire at any moment – "a moderately controlled hysteric", as Williams described his own mother. The tension through her body – briefly and gorgeously released in a dance routine, complete with *Singin' in the Rain* sofa-tip – ricochets off Varla's manufactured ease, his tension held tighter and deeper. Yates catches the currents between them: the Hollywood sensuality as one lights a cigarette from the other's; the childish defeat of the pair as they each fail to leave the house; the snappy, screwball comedy of their back and forth; the desperate love of the final scene.

Programmed before Covid and much postponed, the play takes on horrible new resonance after a year of lockdowns has trapped us all with those we love best. We all know more about

isolation and fear now, and perhaps it's finally the right time for this fragile, poetic play to step over the threshold and out into the world again.

The Daily Express ★★★★★

Neil Norman

Funny, sad, horrific and unbearably poignant. O'Flynn and Varla demonstrate a wide range of emotions in a challenging play that has one foot in reality and another in nightmare. A real discovery.

CITY AM ★★★★★

Steve Dinneen

There's something comforting about the way Hampstead Theatre, always a bastion for experimental works that tease at the boundaries of mainstream theatre, has emerged from the pandemic. At a time when the pressure to stick on something that's guaranteed to fill seats must be overwhelming, it instead decided to revive a tricky series of plays that have debuted at the theatre over its history.

December's production of The Dumb Waiter could perhaps be branded a crowd-pleaser of sorts, but The Death of a Black Man, which opened in June, could not. Now we have a Tennessee Williams play, but not one of the ones people tend to know and certainly not one that people tend to like. Dismissed by both critics and audiences when it opened in 1967, The Two Character Play is one of his late works, written after the death of his life's great love, in the midst of depression and alcoholism and drug abuse.

The result is predictably bleak, although that's the only thing that's predictable. It opens amidst what appears to be an anxiety dream. Two actors, siblings Clare (Kate O'Flynn) and Felice (Zubin Varla), are backstage at some ramshackle regional theatre, the curtain about to open on their latest play. The rest of the theatre company has abandoned them – "You and your sister are insane" reads the note – leaving the pair responsible for the sound and lighting as well as the roles of... Clare and Felice. Worse still, they don't know the lines, the stage is only half built and the play isn't finished.

Clare (the actor) is desperate to leave the theatre but her brother insists the show must go on, assuring her they can improvise the unfinished parts. She agrees on the condition she can make cuts on the fly, communicated by playing a C on the on-stage piano.

Just as Clare and Felice the actors are trapped on this nightmarish stage, Clare and Felice the characters are trapped in a nightmarish house in which their parents were killed in a murder/suicide. Both suffer from acute agoraphobia, their fragmented mental states mirroring those of the actors, who share the same dysfunctional co-reliance, which veers from prickly intimacy to murderous hatred.

Director Sam Yates uses some devious methods to unsettle the audience. While the actors bicker about whether the play should go ahead, the theatre lights remain on, a fourth wall breaking trick recently used in the Almeida's production of The Wild Duck.

Throughout the play O'Flynn and Varla flit between their English accents, used to play the actors, and an exaggerated southern drawl for the characters, although it becomes increasingly unclear which reality is being presented at any given time.

Clare's propensity to hit that piano key each time the script goes in a direction she doesn't like further disrupts any sense of narrative flow, with lines of dialogue ending mid-way through and conversations abruptly resetting. Adding to the surreal atmosphere is the use of live projection from an on-stage camera beamed onto the back wall, a technique beloved of superstar director Ivo van Hove, who I imagine would have an absolute field-day with this metatextual tangle of a play.

The uneasy humour of the early scenes, such as Clare's dismay that the stairs she's supposed to climb haven't arrived, give way to something much darker. Heavily inspired by Williams' relationship with his sister Rose, a schizophrenic who was lobotomised and spent her life in an institution, *The Two Character Play* is at its heart desperate a portrait of madness and despair, a reminder that we're all of us trapped on the stage of our own lives, struggling with life's tape decks and lighting rigs and missing staircases in a futile attempt to hold it all together.

It's not the finest of Williams' plays, even if it was one he held dearly. With its navel-gazing fascination with acting and the act of creation, it has the air of an early play rather than a late one. But O'Flynn and Varla sell both of their roles brilliantly and Yates' direction, both deft and dramatic, lifts *The Two Character Play* from an interesting curio to a genuinely powerful piece of theatre.

The Jewish Chronicle ★★★★★

John Nathan

Not many theatres can say they premiered a Tennessee Williams play, and probably only one can outside the United States. The master himself was present at the Hampstead when his strange, eerie two-hander opened in 1967. It is said that he watched the production by the theatre's founding artistic director James Roose-Evans while popping uppers and downers, so angst-ridden was the playwright.

In America Williams had recently failed to match the earlier successes *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. He was also drinking heavily after the death of his partner Frank Merlo. And yet if he was chasing those triumphs, structurally this play-within-a-play could not have been further from their realism.

Set on a shadowy theatre stage strewn with props and the semi-constructed set of a living room, its characters are actor siblings Clare (Kate O'Flynn) and Felice (Zubin Varla) who are touring a two character play about, well two siblings.

This secondary pair live in a house in the Southern states where their mother was shot by their father before he turned the gun on himself. Though adults, they are locked into the legacy of the event and terrified of leaving their home lest they encounter one of the judgmental neighbours who think they murdered their parents.

Williams mirrors this narrative with Felice and Clare's increasingly absurdist circumstances. It emerges that they have been abandoned by the rest of their theatre company who have left a note declaring the duo to be insane.

At the brother's behest they nevertheless continue with the performance. The line where the secondary play starts and the initial play stops becomes increasingly blurred, but Sam Yates's

vibrant production revels in this liminal quality with projected video summoning the childhoods of both sets of siblings.

Varla conveys a fevered intensity throughout and O’Flynn is a marvel, switching between the charisma of an actor out of character and Clare’s distraught and orphaned alter ego.

It may be that Williams was reaching for the new expressionistic forms established by Beckett, Pirandello and Pinter. And when Clare looks around the abandoned theatre and asks “Where is everybody?”, and Felice answers “Everybody is somewhere”, the exchange could have been plucked out of *Waiting For Godot*. But such was the reception for this play it seems theatregoers wanted Williams to stick to his greatest hits.

Unlike other dramatists who excelled in naturalism — say Arthur Miller, whose *Death of a Salesman* broke a fair few theatrical conventions - Williams was refused the licence to explore.

It’s a shame because if the audience of the 1960s had looked harder they might have seen here much of what made his earlier plays so potent, particularly with Clare and her Southern orphaned alter ego, who must surely be drawn from Williams’s beloved and tragic real sister Rose, the inspiration for Laura in *The Glass Menagerie*, Blanche in *Streetcar* and Alma in *Summer and Smoke*.

The Morning Star ★★★★★ **Mary Conway**

BACK at Hampstead Theatre where it premiered in 1967, *The Two Character Play* by Tennessee Williams is a rarely performed study of the hell that is insanity.

It emerges from the late 1960s when the playwright himself was close to breakdown and it is emphatically not a cheery night out.

Yet is a piece to be reckoned with, though at the outset the play has a coolness that seems to lack much of the deep, empathetic quality for which its writer is renowned.

In it, a brother and sister of middling age — speaking in unexpected English accents, though Williams is master of the Deep South vernacular — are preparing to enact a play in a forlorn and abandoned theatre.

The run of the show is interminable and now all support crew have abandoned them so they must do everything themselves.

The brother Felice is the writer of the play and sister Clare cuts and adapts the script at will. Together they inhabit misery.

When they act the play though, shifting almost metaphysically between players and characters, they break down reality’s walls and, Pirandello-like, challenge the substance of life itself.

As the two characters, deeply symbiotic yet mutually destructive, impart their desperate fear and loneliness, the drama emerging in a play within a play is pure Williams.

Stemming from his own relationship with a mentally damaged sister, already immortalised in his earlier masterpiece *The Glass Menagerie*, it approaches the matchless lyricism of the writer, his authenticity of time and place and his visceral capture of souls in torment. Here there is brilliance in abundance and a production to match.

Sam Yates directs with a profound grasp of the work and a passion for it. His theatrical virtuosity brings moments of supreme poignancy and beauty, assisted magnificently by designer Rosanna Vize and Lee Curran (lighting), Dan Balfour (sound) and Akhila Krishnan (video).

Everything, from actor Zubin Varla's (Felice) tantalising piano playing and Kate O'Flynn's (Clare) insistent intrusion with the jarring C-sharp key to the visuals of video shadowing and exquisitely lit show-defining tableaux, contributes to a production of huge artistic merit.

Varla and O'Flynn — raging, cowering, struggling and desperate, their contrasting voices forming a mesmeric music — perform exquisitely together: in the end, something of love is salvaged.

But the play is little performed and for a reason. Williams's awful depression at the time pervades the piece and there are patches of unadulterated wretchedness that alienate rather than seduce the audience.

The play's structure and style has the effect of distancing the audience at times, though they reveal the profound meaning of the work — life's fractured quality and the elusiveness of sanity.

Some may find the production mystifying and even occasionally wearisome but the moments of pure theatrical genius make it worthwhile. A must for all theatre buffs and Williams fans.

Culture Whisper ★★★★★
Holly O'Mahony

'Everything in his life is in his plays and everything in his plays is in his life,' said American director Elia Kazan of Tennessee Williams' work. So is true of *The Two Character Play*, in which siblings Felice and Clare could well be Williams and his mentally troubled sister Rose in an alternate reality in which the writer stayed home instead of leaving her to find success on the page.

In the hands of director Sam Yates, *The Two Character Play* is revived at Hampstead Theatre, the site of its world premiere in 1967 – where it became the only one of Williams' plays to premiere outside the US. Fuelled by brilliant use of technology and masterful performances from Zubin Varla (*Ghost Quartet*, *Fun Home*) as Felice and Kate O'Flynn (*Blank*, *The End of History*) as Clare, the production triumphs.

The story follows two sibling actors, Felice and Clare, who have been deserted by the rest of their troupe, but remain haughtily determined to perform their two-hander (also called *The Two Character Play*) in front of an audience already taking their seats in the auditorium.

The ensuing plot flits between the siblings' real-life dramas of staging a play neither of them are fully on top of – nor have the full set, costumes and props to perform – and their aimless play-within-a-play, set in the deep south of America. In Yates' production, only the comedic drawl of the pair's southern accents helps the audience navigate between the two fictional worlds. As we're drawn deeper into the intentionally muddled narrative, the toxic co-dependence of the pair and their uncomfortable familial relationship with one another becomes more apparent.

Using the creative potential of this multilayered play is a skilful backstage team. Akhila Krishnan's videography projects up-close footage of the duo on a giant screen at the back of the stage, and later takes us eerily inside Clare's childhood memories. Rosanna Vize's production design, including low-strung lighting rigs and a flimsy-looking set, coupled with Lee Curran's lighting, reminds us we are watching a play within a play. As the siblings struggle to keep their audience enrapt, Dan Balfour's genius sound design uses hidden speakers to fill the auditorium with the coughs, laughs and whispers of the internal play's invisible audience to chilling effect.

The production has arrived on stage two years later than scheduled, and yet the sheer buffoonery of *The Two Character Play* finds a special resonance in post-lockdown London, with Yates capitalising astutely on the farce currently faced by the theatre industry, with performances called off as a result of cast and crew members being forced to isolate.

This irony is chewed over deliciously by Varla, who takes his time over Felice's speech informing the audience of the wider company's absence. 'Of course there have been some, a number of, unexpected difficulties,' he spits, emphasising each word to knowing chortles from the audience. As he goes on to comment: 'our company has been delayed by, um, transportation difficulties due to the eccentricities of the time,' it's all too easy to substitute the performers walking out for the dreaded ping-demic currently plaguing the theatre industry.

The play's earlier comic sparkle – a fusion of immaculately-timed slapstick and subtler witty moments such as an overly twee harmony (credit to Varla and O'Flynn's pitch-perfect singing) or the picking up of an invisible prop on a largely naturalistic set – gives way to something altogether more nightmarish once the pair are left without an audience and the drama envelopes us in the tormenting circus of Rose's mind.

More desperate, still, are the final throes of the narrative, in which Felice and Clare choose to climb back inside the play with no ending, where the presence of a gun looms over their life. In painting a claustrophobic existence of waiting for callers and blowing soap bubbles, Williams hints at what may have become of him and Rose had he remained begrudgingly by her side.

The Two Character Play may have arrived two years later than planned, but Yates' technologically apt take on the drama packs a greater punch at a time when the theatre

industry is recovering from the pandemic. As the stage lights dim and the pair realise they're trapped inside a theatre that's locked from the outside, you can't help but think of the ghostly echoes of productions past, haunting the theatres each night with no audiences to entertain during the lockdown.