

THE CHALK
GARDEN
1990

TEDDINGTON THEATRE CLUB

Brought into focus



A WELL documented programme for Peter Slater's production of *The Chalk Garden* reminds us that Enid Bagnold's best known play was sandwiched between first nights for *The Crucible* and *Look Back in Anger*, and yet still emerged as the outstanding hit of the 1956 London season.

This affectionate Teddington Theatre Club revival, on an open transept stage, gives us so many reasons to understand the play's lasting success which has depended on the sheer quality of the writing: 'ornamental bridges of metaphor' as Tynan puts it, that might have flowed from the pen of Congreve.

At least, that is, if you sit yourself on the far side of the

Hampton Court auditorium. In common with many others at the Sunday performance, I found the first act audible but defeated by the theatre's deadly echo; simply crossing over for the second act every syllable was brought into perfect and natural focus.

If there were casting problems none show. Heather Godley, with something of the late charm and style of Elizabeth Taylor, is a majestic, still glamorous Mrs St Maugham who could well be the maturing Bagnold herself, wandering about her Sussex garden, as described in Anne Sebba's brilliant biography.

Sue Wells is a lovely wraith as daughter Olivia, and Jo Sinnott adds the grace of dancing skill to her disturbed young grandchild Laurel, a personality seen to heal in the care of Miss Madrigal.

Freda Hammerton as Miss Madrigal projects the pale allure of one who, after 15

years of solitude, quietly carries the secrets of horticulture, life and eternity itself: smouldering and mysterious between candid, Vesuvian outburst.

A master-stroke of direction puts Len Court's hanging judge (a fine comedy performance) into protective sunglasses which, when suddenly removed at the luncheon table, provokes Madrigal's guilty shock of recognition.

Alan Dickens is splendid as manservant Maitland, an ex-convict with a taste for criminal law, kept in ever busy servitude but never mistiming a comedy line, and AnneLow and Bernice Warren bring luxury casting to the opening cameo roles.

Antique furniture, a fine Persian carpet and luxuriant foliage distinguish the set created by many hands. The production has been entered for the Richmond Drama Awards.

John Thaxter