

GAYDAR NATION

RELAX by Robert Farrar

The advance publicity name checks the farces of Georges Feydeau, but Robert Farrar's new comedy, *Relax*, has just as much in common with the dark sexual sensibilities lurking beneath the surfaces of the best British sitcoms of the 1970s, most obviously *Rising Damp*. *Relax* is also indebted to the work of Farrar's grandfather, Kenneth Horne, whose play *Love in a Mist* is referenced here, albeit with homosexuality not so much a subtext as its *raison d'être*, its single *entendre*, a relief valve for the torpidity of grey English life. The only pity is that, since Farrar controls the pressure so expertly, the play does not in the end explode.

Set over two days in the front room of Gemini Lodge – a guesthouse in Weston-Super-Mare with a reputation for more than just cable access and 'gourmet' breakfasts – *Relax* is charmed with a commanding, nuanced performance from James Holmes as the uptight hotelier Sandy, whom we meet recruiting for a new houseboy (the charming Alberto, we learn, has "flown the nest").

Tony Bluto's 'Bijan', a dissolute New Ager and masochist, attempts to fill the role just as virginal hedgehog enthusiast Fred (Dominic Cazenove) turns up in his 2CV to spend the night. Sandy – who has the unerring skill of making any given clause sound like innuendo – has strict rules forbidding fraternising with guests, but the same can't be said for his supposed 'twin brother', a mentally disabled libertine who, naturally, is loosed in the night-time.

Add to the mix Mike (Mark Leeson), a carnally adventurous RAC man who receives occasional meals and unorthodox psychotherapy from Sandy and Mari-Claire (Nadia Kamil), a manic, car-crashing dog lover willing to wield a magnifying glass at only the slightest provocation, and you have Farrar's basic ingredients for mayhem.

Everyone is repressed in his or her own way and there's a typically thin line between unleashing vital, libidinous energies and sheer psychological abuse. But what kind of behaviour do you expect when there is, in Sandy's words, "not an awful lot going on in Weston Super Mare of a weekday evening"?

There's something bygone about Sandy's chintzy, mist-shrouded guesthouse, which speaks of the play's nostalgic instincts. With its mystic jokes ("mist running in from the ancient Isle of Avalon") and 'exotic' temptations ("coq-au-vin"), *Relax* is a play that could have been written at any time in the last 40 years. But Farrar (who wrote the Bill Murray vehicle *The Man Who Knew Too Little*) is a canny technician. He breathes the same air as Pinter and Joe Orton.

Relax, the play urges. The characters might seem schizophrenic and dangerous, but their release valve - a stay in the Gemini Lodge - is working just fine.

Thom Hutchinson 17.03.10