

## The Arts

## THEATRE

**The Distance  
From Here**

Almeida, King's Cross

**Nicholas de Jongh**

WHAT dark designs and desires lurk behind the affable, ordinary facades of Neil LaBute's characters. You would never think the people dreamed up by this remarkable American film director and playwright could turn out to be murderers, child-molesters and exploiters. Yet out of the blue, as his chilling, new play *The Distance From Here* demonstrates, a young man turns violent and murderous. LaBute sees America through a glass grimly, everywhere beset by casual amorality, its personal relations no longer humane and family-life a breeding ground for secrets and shame.

How appropriate that the *The Distance From Here*'s first scene should be staged near the monkey cage in a zoo, where 17-year-old schoolboys Darrell and Tim gaze with revulsion at the behaviour of apes. The apes, it eventually transpires, have attained a far superior degree of civilisation to that of Darrell, who lives with his mother, Cammie, and her Gulf War veteran boyfriend, Rich, in threadbare, cheap surrounds: not that David Leaveaux's psychologically astute but socially vague production makes it clear to what class Darrell and his family belong.

Giles Cadle's ingenious, turquoise-painted set, which looks like a tenement-block's flat roof and revolves to disclose a bare living room, has an almost Edward Hopperish air of foreboding to its dark interiors. But where are we, in what part of America, and why are Darrell and Tim, who talk in scatter-gun fusillades of expletives still at school when they come from such obviously deprived families? The



A grim view through a looking glass: Amy Ryan, Enrico Colantoni and Mark Webber play dysfunctional family members

# Family life of an American psycho

questions are unanswered in short-ish, not very sharp scenes, where LaBute provides vignettes from Darrell's family life and gradually reveals the youth's uneasy state of relations with girlfriend Jenn and Tim.

Everywhere, a little sexual provocation, unease or fettered desire hangs in the air. Darrell's 21-year-old

stepsister, Shari, with a baby in tow, makes a risky play both for him and the very blue-collar Rich. Yet there's insufficient pace and definition to these scenes. An atmosphere is created but no dramatic points are made. And the allusions to the Gulf War are gratuitously inserted. It's only in the play's closing stages, when information

leaks out in lurid explanations and forced confessions, that *The Distance From Here* discovers real momentum.

A pathetic teenage sub-culture of sexual ignorance and exploitation is duly discovered. Mark Webber's jaunty, wary Darrell, who's forever coming to blows with Jason Ritter's impressive, troubled Tim, remains

inscrutable until he reacts to revelations by taking a horrifying turn to the psychopathic. Enrico Colantoni's Rich and Ana Reeder's lusty Shari catch that quality of amoral drift and decline in America which LaBute memorably depletes.

● *Until 22 June. Box office: 020 7359 4404.*

## A life of enchantment

IT IS the year 1941, and the world is seized by a monstrous conflagration. Italy, in the grip of a violent dictatorship, is suffering military humiliation. What can an artist do, living through all this, but give voice to the agony of it all?

Not the architect, designer and artist Gio Ponti. His response was to create *The Market*, a pretty little cabinet decorated with playful scenes of Italian piazzas of the kind we all love, and not a bomb in sight. But then his special genius was to live through world wars and revolutions, through the rise and fall of fascism, through economic collapse, mayhem and renewal, and keep on smiling.

"Enchantment, a useless thing, but as indispensable as bread," was one of his aphorisms. "The house should be a simple affair," he wrote, aged 80, in 1971, when others were thumping the platforms with slogans of revolt. "This can be judged from the degree of delight that one experiences when looking at it from the outside, and from the degree of delight that one

## EXHIBITION

**Gio Ponti**

Design Museum

**Rowan Moore**

experiences from living in it."

He was true to his word and his 60-year career consisted of the prolific creation of enchanting objects: from delicate Grecian urns and villas in the 1920s, to the sleek Pirelli tower in Milan, the acme of post-war Italian modernity, into which someone recently flew a light aeroplane. He made languid houses in Venezuela which, for the Wallpaper generation, are to die for. In old age, he decorated a building in Hong Kong with a childlike leaf pattern, and shiny, benign, brass sculptures called things like "Cut thought". Throughout his life he loved patterns, surface and fragile forms.

Yet there was a seriousness to his lightness. "Italy has nothing but its civilisation to save its civilisation," he wrote in 1943, and his life's work

was a prolonged hymn to civilised life. Part of this was the magazine *Domus*, which he founded in 1928 and ran until his death in 1979. A wall of the Design Museum is filled with copies of the magazine, the first costing 7.50 lire, the last 3,000 lire, and only this inflation hints at the turmoil Italy suffered in the meantime.

The Design Museum successfully imports the gentle intoxication that was Ponti's speciality and, as you wander around the dream-like array of delightful, slightly surreal objects, you realise that Ponti was, on his terms, perfect. Of course, you could ask for more fire, more *Sturm und Drang*, more rage; you could ask, but you won't get it.

There is only one snag: architecture, as Ponti said, was the most important of the several forms of art and design he practised. Yet architecture is represented in the show only by a few grainy black-and-white blow-ups. Otherwise it is pure pleasure.

● *Until 6 October. Information: 020 7940 8790.*



Gio Ponti: "The house should be a simple affair"

## Will yoga and a little Plexiglas add up to a Turner?

## EXHIBITION

**Liam Gillick: Get Lost**Wood Way Whitechapel  
Art Gallery**Nick Hackworth**

ON the strength of this exhibition, Liam Gillick is widely tipped to be nominated for this year's Turner Prize. His general concerns revolve around the urban environment and its political and economic dimensions. The precise nature of these concerns, though, are hard to fathom, either from the art works themselves or from his writing (he operates in both disciplines) — but perhaps such pedantic exactitude should be left at the door.

In the Whitechapel's expansive lower gallery, Gillick's concerns have taken material form. He has created a labyrinthine structure out of wooden planks, with regular gaps between them that give the structure a lightness and allow visitors to see through it. Set in and around the construction are about 20 of the hollow, box-like works that Gillick is best known for.

The frames are formed from grey, paint-coated aluminium struts and hold in place pieces of brightly coloured Plexiglas. The forms are varied in size and shape, though all are square or rectangular. The size, colour and location of the Plexiglas within the frames vary too, as does the display of the pieces. Most sit on the floor, but a few, flatter, crate-shaped forms are mounted on the ceiling.

A walk around the gallery is pleasant enough. The works are colourful and evoke a high-modernist chic with their obvious homage to the minimalist, rectilinear aesthetic of Miles van der Roche. I doubt, however, that they will stimulate much debate about the built environment and the power relationships concealed within it, as Gillick's windy statements suggest they ought to.

Enlightenment is imminent, however: within Gillick's installations, German artists Benita and Immanuel Grosser will be conducting regular yoga sessions that will "integrate the philosophy and practice of yoga into the context of art, and provide an intersection between the two kinds of work" — which sounds great.

● *Until 23 June. Information: 020 7522 7878.*

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