

HARPER REGAN
National Theatre, Cottesloe Theatre,
South Bank, SE1

SIMON STEPHENS' new play Harper Regan tells the story of its eponymous protagonist in the days following her father's death.

The production sees Harper (the brilliant Lesley Sharp) engage with a wide range of characters as she journeys from Uxbridge, where she lives with her husband and teenaged daughter, to Stockport, her childhood home.

Hildegard Bechtler's design cleverly contributes to the sense of Harper moving through different worlds and contexts in her search for emotional closure.

Sets drift on and off, taking actors with them as they go, Harper going from one to the next, revealing a little bit more about herself in each interaction.

Stephens' dialogue is flawless, a superb example of realist writing that is both funny and painful.

Director Marianne Elliott creates a series of enthralling situations, exercising tight control over material that is at times deeply shocking. The family relationships explored in the play are particularly affecting. Harper's battles with her mother (Susan Brown) and daughter (Jessica Raine) pose questions about responsibility, trust and filial love, questions which the play bravely refuses to answer.

Relevant, concise and challenging, Harper Regan is British new writing at its best.

- JO CAIRD