

LA MAMMA

STILL LIFE

Suzanne Spinner

STILL LIFE by James Clayden. La Mama (opened 9.xii.76).
Director James Clayden.
Man. JAMES CLAYDEN. Woman. VAL KIRWAN.

La Mama consists of one modest room so any determined director can utterly transform it. For *Still Life*, James Clayden has: everything is stripped away - even the urn and coffee cups, and the usually miniscule audience is pared even further to ten people sitting in serried rows on wooden chairs. The walls are painted black and a small self-contained set has been built in one corner. Plywood flats cut into scallops of waves

or clouds frame the sky blue painted back walls. The set was dotted with objects domestic and familiar: cocoa boxes, tomato tins, a fish, a tail coat, a bag of wheat When the play opens this set is hidden by a sheet strung up by its four corners as an improvised curtain, later it is rolled up like the awning on a shop window. Then the objects are separately illuminated until finally the whole stage is lit—the cinematic nature of this effect is further emphasised by the symmetrical mirror image ending. In the middle sitting at a table apparently experimenting with eggs is a man in a white coat. He cuts a string and releases a brilliant yellow blanket to reveal the back of a red-haired woman. Some time later she says something and frequently when he is not talking she says something. The words are a sort of musical accompaniment, only rarely does the actual sense of a particular phrase impinge. Speech is disembodied—the red-haired woman (Val Kirwan) never shows her face and the man (James Clayden) often hid when he spoke or looked away from the audience. Their words were neither addressed to each other nor to the audience, and no-one could have felt spoken to.

There is no plot only a succession of events; no characters but subjects facilitating images. One feels in the presence of an illusionist or magician as we watch in awe and suspended disbelief—we are not there to be engaged but to gaze.

Many of the images were violent: a full bag of wheat is slashed and shiny grains cascade out, a bloody stain spreads across the man's white coat—but they contain no threat, rather they have an aesthetic amorality and exist in the realm of pure acts. In *Still Life* actions have no consequences and are devoid of narrative responsibility.

Often two unrelated events are conjoined to convey the illusion of causality - for instance as the leaping golden fish is wound out of its foamy bed of polystyrene balls, the noise of a clacker is heard; as if the fish leapt by clockwork.

The man wears a white coat which he later exchanges for a swallow-tail evening jacket hanging high up on the blue wall. He takes it down with one of those long sticks grocers use. The man has four eggs - one of which he sucks, another he blows, the third he carefully places in the breast-pocket of his suit and the last he breaks.

The experience of *Still Life* is primarily visual, secondarily aural and emotional only by personal association. As well as the monotone music of the words the only other introduced sound is a tape of one active cricket played at different speeds, producing an odd and beautiful sound. The programme was in a brown paper bag with a red paper seal and contained a colour photo of Phar Lap, some small drawings and an exhortation by the author to 'try issues that bump'. *Still Life* lasts one hour and is uniquely spell-binding. If it is not a play it certainly qualifies as performance par excellence. Benignly indifferent towards its audience, *Still Life* has more affinities with an art object or living sculpture than a theatre piece. A performance by Gilbert and George doing their soft-shoe routine to 'Underneath the Arches' has as great a claim to be called 'play' as *Still Life* has to be called sculpture.

Edging those barriers and definitions back is a valuable enterprise and *Still Life* goes some distance in making us ask what it is we want from a play. It was engrossing and aesthetically delightful, as well; to ask more of it is to abandon dealing with the play as it is/was.