



BEVERLY GOODWAY/SYGMA



SIMON WALKER

Are you sitting comfortably? Then we'll begin: Yasmina Reza and Christopher Hampton have collaborated on three plays. He describes their working relationship as initially being "quite sticky"

Straight on till mourning

THEATRE: After their huge hit *Art*, French playwright Yasmina Reza and British translator Christopher Hampton are back together. Jane Hughes reports

Yasmina Reza was understandably nervous. It was ten years since the author of the hugely successful *Art* had seen a performance of her first play, *Conversations After a Burial*, and she was anxious that the work might now show signs of immaturity.

All such doubts were swept away as she watched the first readthrough with Claire Bloom, Amanda Root, David Calder and the other members of the cast at the Almeida Theatre in North London, where the British premiere of the play begins previews this week. "I had concerns about whether I would still connect with the play or whether it would come across as a younger work which no longer spoke to me," says the petite, dark-eyed writer. "But after the reading I felt quite moved and I knew that the play was still very much alive for me."

Slightly confusing, perhaps, for British theatregoers is the fact that Reza's plays have not arrived in London in the order they were written. First, in 1996, came the award-winning *Art* — an astute and extremely funny account of the collapse of a three-way male friendship after one friend

buys a work of minimalist art.

Next was *The Unexpected Man* in 1998, starring Michael Gambon and Eileen Atkins, a more experimental and poetic work. Dwelling on the inner worlds of two strangers as they share a railway carriage, it didn't have the broad, enduring appeal of *Art* but still managed to transfer from the Royal Shakespeare Company's Barbican Pit to the West End for a limited season.

Now we have the belated arrival of *Conversations After a Burial*, the play that marked Reza's transition from actress to playwright. Like her other plays, it explores the deep tensions and emotions triggered by a particular event. This time her subject is sibling rivalry and the search for underlying truths as two brothers and their sister gather with other family members to bury their father in his garden.

A young woman, who for three years had been the lover of the younger brother but who disappeared after falling in love with the elder, arrives to pay her respects. This provokes a mixture of amazement, curiosity and outrage in the assembled party.

The play covers similar territory to the autobiographical musings about Reza's father in her

first book, *Hammerklavier*, and also in her new novel, *Une Désolation*, about a man scandalised by the idea of being happy.

According to the playwright and film director Christopher Hampton, who has translated *Conversations After a Burial* as well as *Art* and *The Unexpected Man*, this first play has a more conventional and naturalistic feel than the later works with their "remorselessly linear focus on one subject".

"It is not a comedy and there aren't the kind of sustained riffs you get in *Art*," he says. "But there is more room for digression and the play has a different kind of humour, which is less pointed and arises from observation."

If Hampton had had his way, he would have brought the play over years ago. "I first saw it when it opened in Paris in 1987 and I felt very strongly that here was a new and truly original voice," he says. "Howard Davies [the director of the Almeida production] and I wanted to put the play on in London back then. Ten years later we still felt as strongly about it, even though Yasmina only found her real voice in the later work."

The Almeida Theatre, with its history of producing internation-

When Reza came to the first British preview of *Art*, she was startled at how much people laughed

al work by the likes of Racine and Pirandello, proved the most logical home. "It is difficult to grasp just how difficult it was to get a foreign play on in London ten years ago," says Hampton. "Art is at least partly responsible for the change in climate today."

While Hampton is currently writing a play himself — about a young patient of Jung's named Sabina Spielrein — his collaboration with Reza continues. *Life Times Three*, her latest drama, which focuses on two married couples, opens in Paris in November, followed by London.

Hampton, whose best-known work includes the acclaimed script for *Dangerous Liaisons*, a 1997 National Theatre version of *An Enemy of the People* and the film *Carrington* (which he wrote and directed), is a veteran translator. Yet, despite his intention to always be as faithful to an original script as possible, he still found Reza "quite sticky" to deal with when they first met.

"She wanted to be absolutely sure that her play was as unmediated as possible. When she came to the first British preview of *Art*, she was rather startled at how much people laughed. She said, 'What have you done?' I said, 'It's not my fault.' The British audience was laughing at the painting even before the first line had been spoken."

Reza tells a slightly different tale. "My French is not typical. I am very inventive with the language and I might use a word in a different way because I like the sound or to create humour. It is more difficult to do that in English and I sometimes accuse Christopher of being too faithful. I have to tell him to take more risks."

● *Conversations After a Burial* previews from tomorrow at the Almeida Theatre, N1 (020-7359 4404)