

THEATRE

Theresa Garage, W. Hampstead

A COUPLE of minutes from West Hampstead tube station, this smartly white and high-tech space may once have harboured cars but is now a centre for Jewish Studies organised by the Spiro Institute. For the next two weeks Julia Pascal's poignant and bitter play is showing here, and the photographic-studio look of the piece (designer: Penny Fitt), lit by high lamps on tripods, gives an aptly

nightmarish clarity to the ordeal of Theresa Steiner, born in Vienna, died in Auschwitz.

For 20th-century Jews this turned out to be an all too common *lebensbahn*, but Theresa's itinerary takes in the less familiar stopping-place of the Channel Islands. She was deported from Guernsey with the connivance, not to say fawning readiness, of British officials, which makes the facts of her story hit disturbingly close to home. Collaboration is not, after all, limited to foreign breeds.

The first of the play's three sections opens with Ruth Posner dancing a Viennese waltz. Grad-

ually, while the one-two-three rhythm swoops jauntily on, her arms and posture express alarm, terror and despair. Throughout the play, directed by herself, Pascal uses music to image the surrounding horror and shame. In a scene set after the fall of France, Monique Burg sings *Frère Jacques* and finds her legs begin to goose-step and the words become the German equivalent.

Dismissed as professor of music, Theresa flees from Vienna to London and finds work as a nanny. When war breaks out her employer, fearing raids on Kensington, takes the baffling decision to escape with her children and

Theresa to the supposed safety of the Channel Islands. Bad luck compounds with the pervading cruelty.

Told in a series of shortish scenes, sometimes with German, French and Polish overlapping the English — a dislocating technique that has rarely seemed so effective — Pascal's play is a tense and stirring piece of theatre, acted with fierce intensity by an international cast. The climax comes as non-verbal sound again replaces speech, and rattling train wheels reach a crescendo on the pain threshold and abruptly stop.

JEREMY KINGSTON