

## **INTRODUCTION/ REVIEWS FOR COVID -19 LONDON THEATRE 2021**

The reviews, though singly edited and printed for the year of 2021 will inclusively be the sum total of all the shows in 2021, rather than the usual listings that I did previously regardless of being within the year. The reason for this change is because of Covid-19 which changed the whole course of theatre going and theatre productions. Many of the theatres just stopped producing, others shortened productions and runs while still others tried to digitalize their shows online. Many times shows were cancelled even when one has arrived to the theatre because the cast have been struck by the virus. Because of the insecurity of the running of the theatres or their plays I have not been able to do my usual style of reviewing and have instead incorporated the whole of the year with my comments and reviews as concise but fully realized in their productions. Audiences dwindled enormously and reviewing could no longer be consistent to the run of the shows in theatres.

### **westEND**

#### **CURRENT**

#### **London Theatre reviews**

##### **GIELGUD**

\*\*\*\*THE MIRROR AND THE LIGHT novelist HILARY MANTEL adapter BEN MILES, HILARY MANTEL composer STEPHEN WARBECK director JEREMY HERRIN décor, costume CHRISTOPHER ORAM lights JESSICA HUNG HAN YUN with BEN MILES thomas cromwell, NATHANIEL PARKER king henry, OLIVIA MARCUS jane seymour, AURORA DAWSON-HUNTE elizabeth seymour, JORDAN KOUAMÉ rafe sadler, GEOFFREY LUMB thomas wriothesley, TERIQUE JARRET gregory cromwell, GILES TAYLOR archbishop thomas cranmer, UMI MYERS dorothea, NICHOLAS BOULTON duke of suffolk, etc.

#### **Blanche Marvin Critique**

The reviews that are enclosed capture the production and its entire quality. The four stars that I have given it deserve every star because the standard of the production and the actual script are a major work. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

#### **Guardian (\*\*\*) Written by Claire Armitstead**

It's a truism all too well known to Thomas Cromwell that history is written by the victors. By the final volume in Hilary Mantel's magisterial trilogy, Cromwell is on his way out, yet the dark magic of Mantel's pen is such that the blacksmith's boy from Putney has dominated the cultural landscape of the early 21st century – on page, stage and television – for almost as long as he did the political one of the 16th. But all good things come to an end, and the evidence of this third and final play is that the spell is broken. We know that Cromwell's failure to broker a successful fourth marriage for Henry, to Anna of Cleves, will lead to his execution. But this biographical inevitability sucks the life out of the project, returning the Tudor court to a parade of stuffed doublets. There are seven of them on stage within minutes of the curtain rising on Jeremy Herrin's production, and it took most of the first half to work out which was which. It's not that the play is lacking in wit or grace. Co-written by Mantel with its star, Ben Miles, it mines some of the novel's best scenes: when a newly wed Jane Seymour (a nicely po-faced Olivia Marcus) complains about the unreasonable demands of her husband, Cromwell and her retinue squirm with embarrassment before the reason is revealed: he wanted her to ride with him to Dover to inspect the fortifications. But this is more an interlude than part of a dramatic engine. The Cromwell of the novel is a clerical genius, whose obsessive stocktaking illuminates not only his own interiority but the whole world of Tudor England. Here, ghosts stand in for colour and psychology: his father, in workman's brown, heckles him for his failings, while Cardinal Wolsey drifts around in a haze of scarlet, reminding him of his duty to his better nature. At the heart of it all is the relationship between an increasingly despotic monarch and the operator he cannot do without. Miles's lean, silver-haired Cromwell mothers the king through his tantrums, but his shrewd eye becomes increasingly darting as he sees his advantage slipping away. Though Nathaniel Parker's Henry is not as repulsive as the text suggests, age has puffed out his girth while shrinking his temper to a childish petulance as he drags his gammy leg around. After the death in childbirth of Jane Seymour, the pace quickens, the tone darkens and the production belatedly finds its mojo. Christopher Oram's monumental concrete set, which at first seemed a blockade against the very porousness that is the key to Cromwell's genius, is criss-crossed with light as the court dissolves into a ghastly masquerade. The beaky masks of all the aristocratic revellers mirror an earlier shadow play of the scythes and swords of the Pilgrimage of Grace, the popular uprising that was the start of Cromwell's fall from grace. The costumes enact a commentary of their own on the vagaries of the body politic: Nicholas Boulton's wayward Duke of Suffolk sports rucked breeches, in pointed contrast with the mothy velvet of Nick Woodeson's pompous Duke of Norfolk. Jane Seymour and Mary Tudor (Melissa Allan) are virtuous triangles, while Rosanna Adams' refreshing Anna of Cleves is a resolute, and perfect, square. This is all very fine, but there's no grief, no great release at the end, just a dull sense of a historical juggernaut juddering to a halt. 23 September – 28 November 2021

#### **CURRENT**

#### **London Theatre reviews**

##### **VAUDEVILLE**

\*\*\*\*CONSTELLATIONS by NICK PAYNE director MICHAEL LONGHURST décor TOM SCUTT lights LEE CURRAN composer SIMON SLATER producer DONMAR WAREHOUSE, WESSEX GROVE, ELEANOR LLOYD, etc. with OMARI DOUGLAS manuel, RUSSEL TOVEY roland

### **Blanche Marvin Critique**

This was an extraordinary play, production, and acting that can be interpreted and has been in many ways. I want to highlight this particular play and its production very highly. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

### **What's On Stage (\*\*\*\*\*) Written by Alun Hood**

Comparisons are odious, but pretty much inevitable as this Donmar/Royal Court remount of Nick Payne's mini-masterpiece centred on a couple edgily falling in love, while exploring a multitude of subtle variations. The second part of the Constellations season sees Omari Douglas and Russell Tovey (delivering career-best work here) as gay men connecting in a multi-Verse that isn't always sympathetic to them, not because of their sexuality but because life sometimes sucks and is often unpredictable. The Douglas-Tovey is undoubtedly the sexiest iteration of the script. The opening gambit where Marianne, rechristened Manuel for the enchanting Douglas, points out to a bemused Roland that it's impossible to lick your own elbows, has never sounded like such a come-on, and numerous subsequent exchanges appear to be bathed in a post coital glow often unexplored by the other teams of actors. Tovey's laddish persona fits Roland like a glove and he is hilarious as a man often bewildered both by his own feelings and the sheer magnetic force that Douglas's beautiful force of nature pulls on him. This pair may be the funniest but they are also the most heartrending: the break in Tovey's voice as he tries to negotiate his partner's potential descent into the abyss is one of the most moving things on any current London stage. Payne's spare but punishingly essential writing is so truthful, complex and malleable that each moment feels like a cliffhanger even when this is the umpteenth time you're hearing an exchange of dialogue, or you've seen a couple of versions of this exact same scene. One of the great joys of rewatching Longhurst's playful, ingenious staging is noting the ways all four versions differ from each other, in tone, blocking and emphasis. Apart from Payne's words, the other constants are the technical elements, all flawless: Tom Scutt's award-winning abstract set of hanging, sometimes tumbling, spheres resembling planets, party balloons, human brain cells, Lee Curran's vivid, expressive lighting, and David McSeveney's haunting soundscape. This is a production where everybody is at the top of their game. 17 August – 12 September 2021

## **CURRENT**

## **London Theatreviews**

### **VAUDEVILLE**

\*\*\*SIX by TOBY MARLOW & LUCY MOSS director LUCY MOSS & JAMIE ARMITAGE décor EMMA BAILEY costume GABRIELLA SLADE light TIM DEILING choreographer CARRIE-ANNE INGROUILLE musical supervisor JOE BEIGHTON musical director LAUREN HOPKINS producer KENNY WAX, WENDY AND ANDY BARNES, GEORGE STILES with AMY DI BARTOLOMEO catherine of aragon, AMANDA LINDGREN anne boleyn, CLAUDIA KARIUKI jane seymour, DIONNE WARD-ANDERSON anna of cleves, TSEMAYE BOB-EGBE katherine howard, MEESHA TURNER catherine parr, etc.

### **Blanche Marvin Critique**

Though this has received ecstatic reviews I found this another version of the Spice Girls and not at all as inventive as other major musical productions. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

### **Evening Standard (\*\*\*\*\*) Written by Fiona Mountford**

One of the many joyous upshots of Hamilton is that it has stretched our idea of what might combine to make up a hit musical. Thus we now have the six wives of Henry VIII as a kick-ass girl band, singing their hearts out — or should that be their heads off? — on their Divorced Beheaded Live tour. This is quite the most uplifting piece of new British musical theatre I have ever had the privilege to watch and the fact that it comes from two 23-year-olds, Toby Marlow and Lucy Moss, who graduated only last year, is even more delightful. Catherine, Anne, Jane, Anna, Katherine and Catherine are tired of being defined by their husband and reproductive biology and want to claim their rightful place in her-story. They sing and dance up a storm in this production from co-directors Moss and Jamie Armitage, as each give her version of events.

### **British Theatre(\*\*\*\*\*) Written by Paul T Davies**

It is barnstorming, roof-raising, her-story shaking, loud, proud, and has more sass than entire seasons of any Drag Race. From the opening beat, this show is brilliant, audacious in its attitude, but tells us more about the six wives of Henry VIII than we ever learned in school. More a concert than a musical, the band of wives, (I still think they should be called Little Six), gather to tell us their side of the story and compete to be crowned the ultimate Queen, assessed on how much they suffered at the hands of Henry and patriarchy. The tone is set by the opening number, Ex-Wives, the costume design by Gabriella Slade is stunning, as are the lights by Tim Delling, the rousing anthem sets the bar high. And it stays there as each queen gets a solo, backs up each other, and the script is littered with catty one-liners. Several of the wives are characterised as dim and ditzy; some also as sexually provocative and vain. But by adopting the contemporary pop concert milieu, there's no kick-back or real critique of this. Because we do still judge women by their looks, and there are whole industries where women absolutely play to that, only now under a thin veneer of 'empowerment'. It winds up a Taylor Swift, Katy Perry sort of girl-squad feminism: skin-deep, conveniently served in hotpants. Or doublet and fishnet-hose, as the case may be here; Gabriella Slade's spangly costumes made my teeth hurt, but they are a spot-on synthesis of stadium pop princess and Tudor court.

At the very end, the women finally twig that competition doesn't serve them, that it's unfair they've been defined by a man, and that we don't know anything else about them... So why on earth don't Marlow and Moss offer us an alternative instead of a show 90 per cent about their relationship with a man and competition with each other?

## CURRENT

## London Theatreviews

### HAROLD PINTER

\*\*ANNA X by JOSEPH CHARLTON director DANIEL RAGGETT décor MIKAELA LIAKATA, TAL YARDEN costume NATALIE PRYCE lights JESSICA HUNG HAN YUN sound MIKE WINSHIP producer REBECCA GWYTHYER with EMMA CORRIN, NABHAAN RIZWAN

#### Blanche Marvin Critique

I thought this was an illustration as compared to a painting or a sketch. The reviews that I have enclosed have given much greater prestige to a piece that is less than theatre in its format. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

#### Guardian (\*\*\*\*) Written by Arifa Akbar

Damien Hirst's conceptual art is mentioned more than once in Joseph Charlton's play about a con artist who rips off a Silicon Valley tech entrepreneur. It seems appropriate because Anna X feels like a cool, cocky, high-wire stage equivalent. The story itself is a standard romantic sting but combines drama and music with such sophisticated – and stupendous – video projection techniques that it feels like a reconceived theatrical form or a mash-up of film, pop video and immersive "happening". The two-hander features Emma Corrin as Anna, whose character is inspired by "fake heiress" Anna Sorokin, convicted of grand larceny in 2019, and Nabhaan Rizwan as Ariel, who falls for her. Anna, from Ukraine, arrives in New York and creates a new identity as an art collector and scion of a wealthy Russian family. It is, in fact, more a social media-augmented "brand" than an identity, and gives a fraudster's twist to the American dream. Ariel has already become his own brand after creating a high end Tinder-style app (only beautiful people and celebrities allowed in by invitation). They meet in a thrilling nightclub opening which looks like a scene from *Trainspotting*, and Anna proceeds to work the con on Ariel. Both appraise the other through social media and its duplicities enable the self-invention and the seduction. As the third and most arresting of producer Sonia Friedman's *Re:Emergence* season in the West End, this show is exciting in its ambition, originality and execution. There is confident direction from Daniel Raggett, Charlton's script has slick wit and intelligence but it is Mikaela Liakata and Tal Yarden's set and video designs that run the show. Video projections transform the set from moving city skylines to hotel rooms and glass-and-steel elevators at speed. Mike Winship's electro music is an almost perpetual background beat. Together with the graphics, it has an adrenalinising effect while hypnotising us too, as if we are caught in an electronic fever dream. Effect and experience trump the story itself which feels too predictable and we never get beneath the iciness of Anna's character or become invested enough in the couple's romance. There are some brilliantly zinging lines as the script satirises the super-rich. Corrin and Rizwan are both superb, smooth and strong as they speak in parallel monologue. Corrin emanates steely cynicism and Rizwan is lovably gullible. If it looks like a production that is trying very hard to be cool, it must be given full due for succeeding. It's frenetic, fun and ultra-cool. 10 July – 4 Aug 2021

## CURRENT

## London Theatreviews

### TRAFALGAR

\*\*\*JERSEY BOYS by MARSHALL BRICKMAN, RICK ELICE music BOB GAUDIO lyrics BOB CREWE director DES MCANUFF musical director KATY RICHARDSON musical supervision RON MELROSE décor KLARA ZIEGLEROVA costume JESS GOLDSTEIN lights HOWELL BINKLEY choreographer SERGIO TRUJILLO producer THE DODGERS, TRAFALGAR THEATRE PRODUCTIONS, BB INVESTMENTS LLC, etc. with BEN JOYCE frankie valli, ADAM BAILEY bob gaudio, KARL JAMES WILSON nick massi, BENJAMIN YATES tommy devito, etc.

#### Blanche Marvin Critique

This is a well-formulated and produced musical which very clearly and cleanly gives the background and storyline of the actual Jersey Boys who are a singing group. It is not a major production. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

#### London Theatre (\*\*\*\*) Written by Marianka Swain

Marshall Brickman and Rick Elice's show makes a virtue out of the Four Seasons members' conflicting recollections of their rise to fame and subsequent acrimonious split. The tale is told from multiple points of view. The shifting power dynamics and the tussle over what it means to be a man - whether a provider, a boss, or a loyal friend - form the backbone of the story. But, there's a misty nostalgia for this kind of tough-guy masculinity, when you lived by a code, made deals with a handshake, and settled disputes with your fists. It echoes the Four Seasons' view of themselves as the hard-scrabble working man's band - in contrast to those arty Beatles. What about the women, you may ask? They occasionally drift into dismal view, as mothers, wives, hookers, or daughters, always from the perspective of a man - though kudos to Melanie Bright for attempting to breathe life into Frankie's tenacious wife, Mary Delgado. There's also a tiresomely camp portrait of a supporting gay character. All providing smooth vocals and synchronised moves, too (slick choreography by Sergio Trujillo). And it's a star-making West End debut for Ben Joyce, who not only evokes Valli's exceptional voice, but supplies fervent passion and a heartbreaking gradual disillusionment. This pared-back, Off-Broadway version of Des McAnuff's staging works beautifully in the smaller venue. It whizzes efficiently between the short scenes and multiple locations, thanks to

an industrious ensemble, minimal props, and good use of a multi-level scaffold. A video screen on the back wall showing Roy Lichtenstein's pop art is a witty way to frame the action and tie it into the era.

#### **Guardian (\*\*\*\*) Written by Lyndsey Winship**

Jersey Boys is the band's own story, soundtracked by the songs as Bob Gaudio and Bob Crewe wrote them. Similarly straightforward is the single scaffold-style set; the tight on-the-spot choreography, with its rigid-backed stomp and click; the pithy script (co-written by Rick Elice and Marshall Brickman). Each band member directly addresses the audience: Tommy De Vito (Benjamin Yates), the Jersey cliché unable to resist a grift; Gaudio (a very likeable Adam Bailey) the clean-cut kid who quotes TS Eliot; and the enigmatic Nick Massi (Karl James Wilson) a man who irons his shirts twice and writes a killer vocal arrangement. The show's new Frankie Valli, Ben Joyce, who only graduated from drama school this summer, is on point with that distinctive nasal falsetto, heading up to helium territory, although softness creeps in on some solo numbers – his Moody's Mood for Love is a beaut. As time wears on and the touring becomes relentless, Joyce's characterisation moves towards desperation.

### **CURRENT**

### **London Theatreviews**

#### **NOËL COWARD**

\*\*2:22 A GHOST STORY by DANNY ROBINS director MATTHEW DUNSTER décor ANNA FLEISCHLE costume CINDY LIN lights LUCY CARTER sound IAN DICKINSON illusions CHRIS FISHER producer TRISTAN BAKER, CHARLIE PARSONS, RUNAWAY ENTERTAINMENT, etc. with LILY ALLEN jenny, JULIA CHAN lauren, HADLEY FRASER sam, JAKE WOOD ben, RICHARD PRYAL company, BIANCA STEPHENS company

#### **Blanche Marvin Critique**

I found this an unproductive quite ordinary piece of work and it deserves no more than the two stars I have given it. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

#### **Guardian (\*\*\*\*) Written by Kate Wyver**

Lily Allen gives you chills in slick, clever horror. The pop star makes her West End debut in a contemporary haunted-house chiller that smartly plays with all the old tropes and leaves the room electric with fear. Fingernails dig into skin as we watch a neon red digital clock climb through the night. With a brilliant sense of mounting dread and just the right number of jump-scares, Danny Robins' new ghost story is a slick, chilling romp of a play. Jenny (Lily Allen) is convinced the big new house she and her husband Sam (Hadley Fraser) have bought – a beautiful naturalistic set by Anna Fleischle – is haunted. Every night, she hears footsteps around her baby's room at exactly the same time: 2:22am. She insists the sound is real while Sam infuriatingly tries to explain it all away. When the pair throw a dinner party for Sam's old friend Lauren (Julia Chan) and her new man Ben (EastEnders' Jake Wood), the four of them decide to wait up to see who's right. You wouldn't know this is Allen's first time acting in the West End. She is strong as the frantic, afraid and exhausted Jen, though the constant paranoia of her part leans towards feeling strained. Director Matthew Dunster has her constantly moving – tidying, cooking, pacing – though it's in her moments of stillness that the fear best finds its way in. Together, the cast are gleaming. Fraser's Sam is so realistic it's hard to believe he's acting. Wood's part is written more broadly – Ben is primarily there to challenge Sam – but he revels in it, drawing out the humour and diving into the mysticism. Chan does a brilliant balancing act, shifting Lauren's loyalties throughout the night. Robins' script is sharp, quick, and cleverly layered with clues. While his handling of horror is nothing new, it's done smartly, toying with the tropes.

### **CURRENT**

### **London Theatreviews**

#### **WYNDHAM'S**

\*\*\*\*LIFE OF PI novelist YANN MARTEL adapter LOLITA CHAKRABARTI director MAX WEBSTER décor, costume TIM HATLEY puppet, movement director FINN CALDWELL puppet designer NICK BARNES, FINN CALDWELL lights TIM LUTKIN composer ANDREW T. MACKAY sound CAROLYN DOWNING producer SIMON FRIEND ENTERTAINMENT LTD with HIRAN ABEYSEKERA pi, FRED DAVIS tiger head, DAISY FRANKS tiger hind, ROMINA HYTTEN tiger heart, TOM LARKIN tiger head, TOM STACY tiger hind, SCARLET WILDERINK tiger heart, etc.

#### **Blanche Marvin Critique**

This is the most beautifully produced play full of imagination that lifts the spirit, making theatre an exciting and imaginative adventure. It deserves every one of the four stars. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

#### **Guardian (\*\*\*) Written by Arifa Akbar**

Life of Pi had a first life as a Booker prize-winning novel by Yann Martel and a second as an Oscar-winning film by Ang Lee. Both were utterly captivating. Now comes playwright Lolita Chakrabarti's stage spectacular (first presented in Sheffield in 2019) about Piscine "Pi" Patel, the zookeeper's son from Pondicherry who claims to have survived a shipwreck in a life-raft with a Bengal tiger in tow. The magic here lies firmly in aesthetics, from the teeming menagerie of large-scale puppets, exquisitely designed by Nick Barnes and Finn Caldwell, to visual effects that surge, dazzle and undulate like ocean waves (stage design by Tim Hatley with video design by Andrzej Goulding and lighting by Tim Lutkin). The script and characterisation are flat-footed by comparison: "I've had a terrible trip," says Pi from his hospital bed at the start (the framing device here is different from the book and film). It is meant to be wry but, like much of the dialogue, lands with a thud. Martel's original, unreliable narration left enough space for us to decide if Pi's story was one of hope, faith and tiger-taming or of survivor's guilt, trauma and delusion. His subtle explorations of truth and the necessary comforts of make-believe are shoe-horned

in as soundbites about God, the beauty of the world and storytelling. The visual effects seem to compete with, and ultimately drown out, the quieter, more philosophical elements of the drama, not leaving enough room for Pi's existential rumination, which is key to his tale. As Pi, Hiran Abeysekera looks every inch the puckish man-boy and is incredibly light on his feet. He plays him as a 17-year-old survivor with PTSD in hospital, and as a slightly maniacal castaway on the boat. He is good at conjuring alarm in whooping, adrenalised highs but seems tense and overwrought in the softer moments. The characters on the whole are vividly drawn but ironed to a cartoonish flatness, and the tone between them is barking and shrill. Pi's father (Nicholas Khan) has a touch of Basil Fawlty, his mother (Mina Anwar) and sister (Payal Mistry) lack distinction and ancillary characters feel like cardboard cut-outs. As a children's show, the jokes hold but an older audience feels the lack of a finer, more subtle script to square up to the sophisticated visuals. Still, under Max Webster's direction, the stage is full of energy and surprise. "Once upon a time," says Pi, as he takes us on the first of many flashbacks, which transform the stage in seconds. There is a flurry of butterflies, a starry sky, iridescent shoals of fish and immersive storms that wrack the extremities of the stage. Zebras, giraffes, hyenas and turtles are manipulated sublimely, transporting us to the family zoo and then to the high seas. The first sight of Richard Parker, the tiger, is a breathtaking moment and emulates the CGI effects in Lee's film. The life-raft rises out of the floor and the back screen cracks open from its middle, like a suitcase, as the family sets sail for Canada. These animals and effects are a wonder to behold and become the real stars of this show. 14 November 2021 – 15 January 2023

## CURRENT

## London Theatreviews

### PRINCE OF WALES

\*\*THE WINDSORS ENDGAME by GEORGE JEFFRIE, BERT TYLER-MOORE based on the NOHO FILM&TELEVISION'S TV show commissioned by CHANNEL 4 TELEVISION director MICHAEL FENTIMAN décor MADELEINE GIRLING costume HILARY LEWIS lights JACK KNOWLES composer FELIX HAGAN sound GEORGE DENNIS producer TRISTAN BAKER, CHARLIE PARSONS, RUNAWAY ENTERTAINMENT, ISOBEL DAVID with HARRY ENFIELD charles, ELIZA BUTTERWORTH eugenie, CRYSTAL CONDIE megan, MATTHEW COTTLE edward, SOPHIE-LOUISE DANN fergie, TOM DURANT-PRITCHARD harry, TRACY-ANN OBERMAN camilla, CIARÁN OWENS wills, JENNY RAINSFORD beatrice, KARA TOINTON kate, TIM WALLERS andrew, etc.

#### Blanche Marvin Critique

A boring, untheatrical, and unimaginative production deserving no more than two stars. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

#### Guardian (\*) Written by Arifa Akbar

It is momentarily thrilling to see the "royals" on stage, resplendent in ermine and waxed jackets, against the backdrop of Madeleine Girling's palatial sets. This production, directed by Michael Fentiman, is written by the creators of the TV show, Bert Tyler-Moore and George Jeffrie; the latter died in September last year after completing the first draft. The cast is largely different to the series, though Harry Enfield still plays Prince Charles, Tom Durant-Pritchard is Harry and Matthew Cottle plays Edward. Harry and Meghan (Crystal Condie) are California yogis; Kara Tointon, the strongest non-TV series performer, is Kate, who loves her Boden catalogue. We are urged to boo Camilla (Tracy-Ann Oberman), who really is a panto villain. There is topicality, with mentions of the Oprah interview with Harry and Meghan and of the former health secretary, but it is shoehorned in crudely. The central story is outlandish: the Queen has abdicated, Charles is king and power-mad Camilla encourages him to turn his monarchy into absolute rule. A secondary plotline sees Princesses Beatrice (Jenny Rainsford) and Eugenie (Eliza Butterworth) trying to prove their father, Prince Andrew (Tim Wallers), innocent of "nonce-gate". Prince Edward's infamous orchestration of a version of It's a Knockout is mentioned at one point. In its own way, this feels comparable to that royal disaster.

Enfield is well versed in embodying unconsciously monstrous egotists and Oberman gives us a magnificently deadpan, cartoonishly scheming Camilla. Among the caricatured, not-very-lookalike younger royals, Kara Tointon's bright, wry Kate stands out. Her character is mocked for being a Boden bore and, more vilely, as a social-climbing "gypsy". Madeleine Girling's sets are vestigial, the sound is all over the place with the songs frequently inaudible, and scene changes are accompanied by guards – or a stagestruck Prince Edward (Matthew Cottle) – blundering on. 2 August – 9 October 2021

## CURRENT

## London Theatreviews

### CHARING CROSS

\*\*\*\*PIPPIN by ROGER O. HIRSON music, lyrics STEPHEN SCHWARTZ director STEVEN DEXTER musical director CHRIS MA musical supervisor MICHAEL BRADLEY décor, costume DAVID SHIELDS lights AARON J. DOOTSON choreographer NICK WINSTON producer ADAM BLANSHAY, EDWARD JOHNSON with RYAN ANDERSON pippin, IAN CARLYLE leading player, ALEX JAMES-HATTON lewis, DANIEL KRIKLER charles, GABRIELLE LEWIS-DOBSON fastrada, NATALIE MCQUEEN catherine, GENEVIEVE NICOLE berthe, JAYDON VIJN theo

### **Blanche Marvin Critique**

This is one of the most extraordinary productions that realized the true meaning of this piece which is not easy to produce. It was a young cast full of zest and life that brought out all the values that the piece contained. The talent lies in the entire company and each and every one of the performers. Yes indeed to its four stars. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

### **Musical Theatre Musings (\*\*\*\*) Written by Sarah McPartlan**

I am no stranger to Pippin having reviewed it 3 times for my website alone. My most recent review was last year at The Garden Theatre and this is a reincarnation of that show by the director. Pippin tells of a young man who is keen to live an extraordinary life. In trying to do so he experiences many things, from scholarly pursuits to war and from sex to ruling the kingdom. He however ends up meeting a widow and her son and it is this relationship that leads him to think that there may be more to life than simply being extraordinary. Similar to the production at the Garden Theatre this production takes Pippin back to its roots. As you enter the theatre you find yourself surrounded by swathes of tie dye fabric on the wall and a strong smell of incense lingers in the air. The costumes echo this 'summer of love' vibe as do the strings of lights which are placed over the stage. Ryan Anderson returns to the role of Pippin and he retains his boyish charm which ensures that the audience can't help but like Pippin. Anderson has a strong voice and in the auditorium of Charing Cross theatre we are treated to his beautiful rendition of 'Corner of the Sky.' Nearly stealing the show is Genevieve Nicole who plays Berthe, Pippin's grandmother. Her comic timing is impeccable and had the audience laughing along during her number 'No Time At All.' Catherine, Pippin's love interest is played by Natalie McQueen. One thing I love about Pippin is how differently all of those who I have seen play Catherine interpret the role and Natalie McQueen is no exception to this. She had a certain playfulness to her in this role, an ability to both tease Pippin whilst at the same time making him feel welcome in her home. Ian Carlyle took on the role of the Leading Player, making every effort to manipulate the action for Pippin. He had a commanding presence, easily believable by the end that he was pulling the strings. His voice was also remarkably easy to listen to, adding to his smooth veneer that he presented. Despite the director being the same as the garden theatre the show felt different due to the space. In the Garden Theatre many of the one liners landed better, some of the close up magic makes more sense and the energy seemed higher but this was possibly due to the fact that the cast were at the a few meters away from each audience member. At the Charing Cross Theatre however the stakes felt higher for Pippin. At the end when the Leading Player orders everything to be stripped back, this felt more exposed with the uncomfortable silence filling the auditorium, which is exactly what Pippin needs by this point. The sound, designed by Keegan Curran was also spot on. The musicians were just 2 in number with keys and guitar however the orchestration never felt empty and even the moments where the players were facing away from my side of the audience we could hear them easily. This is an accomplished production of Pippin which was visually beautiful and sounded just as stunning. A wonderful vision for this odd show, realised well by the cast. 30 June - 3 October 2021

## **CURRENT**

## **London Theatreviews**

### **GARRICK**

\*\*\*THE LAST FIVE YEARS written, composed by JASON ROBERT BROWN director JONATHAN O'BOYLE musical director LEO MUNBY décor, costume LEE NEWBY lights JAMIE PLATT choreographer SAM SPENCER-LANE original orchestrations GEORGE DYER producer KATY LIPSON for ARIA ENTERTAINMENT, EILENE DAVIDSON PRODUCTIONS, DLAP GROUP, etc. with OLI HIGGINSON jamie, MOLLY LYNCH cathy

### **Blanche Marvin Critique**

This intimate piece regarding the marriage of a young couple following their trials and tribulations was sensitively produced and performed. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

### **Evening Standard (\*\*\*) Written by Nick Curtis**

This bijou, breezy, two-handed musical from 2001 sees a young New York couple explore the arc of their relationship from first meeting to divorce. That's not a spoiler: the twist in writer-composer Jason Robert Brown's tale is that the woman, Cathy, begins telling the story backwards from the end to the beginning, and the man, Jamie, does contrariwise. They take turns to accompany each other's bouncy, sardonic, competitive numbers on a revolving grand piano, backed by a five-piece band in the shadows, and only duet – and embrace – in the middle, on their wedding day. It's a smart, compact, 90-minute piece, zestily acted and sung by Molly Lynch and Oli Higginson. But the conceptual framing that makes it special is also a limitation. I'd add that it lacks dramatic tension as well as dialogue, since we learn in the first ten minutes how the story begins and ends. It's gained scale at the Garrick but lost the intimacy of the in-the-round staging at Southwark. It's still charming, with a score full of recurring earworm signatures and witty rhymes, slickly staged, with likeable, attractive leads. But your enjoyment of it will still be in direct proportion to your tolerance of artsy Manhattan navel-gazing. Jamie is a Jewish writer, his sights firmly set on literary stardom and a hot "shiksa princess" as reward for his brilliance. Cathy is a gentile wannabe actress waiting tables, who seems to take all her validation from him. The gender stereotyping is balanced out somewhat in the score. Cathy gets the best numbers, from the opening lament I'm Still Hurting to dizzy accounts of audition humiliations and the challenge of doing Fiddler on the Roof in Ohio with a midget and a former stripper – "going slowly batty/40 miles east of Cincinnati". Jamie's arrogance and self-absorption become ever more apparent. It's an easy, enjoyable watch. Higginson's rock-star stylings are very funny in the Schmueel Song, where Jamie mansplains his metaphor-laden story about an old Jewish tailor. Lynch has a nice mix of old Hollywood glamour and New York neurosis, and her clear, high voice sometimes recalls Kate Bush, especially when she sends it cantering up the octaves in I Can Do Better Than That. 17 September – 17 October 2021

## LONDON COLISEUM

\*\*\*HAIRSPRAY by MARK O'DONNELL, THOMAS MEEHAN music MARC SHAIMAN lyrics SCOTT WITTMAN, MARC SHAIMAN based on film by JOHN WATERS director JACK O'BRIEN musical director ALAN BERRY décor DAVID ROCKWELL costume WILLIAM IVEY LONG lights KENNETH POSNER choreographer JERRY MITCHELL with MICHAEL BALL edna turnblad, LES DENNIS wilbur turnblad, LIZZE BEA tracy turnblad, JONNY AMIES link larkin, MARISHA WALLACE motormouth maybelle, RITA SIMMONS velma von tussle, GEORGIA ANDERSON amber von tussle, etc.

**Blanche Marvin Critique**

Though this is a very popular musical and has received great reviews it actually is a very ordinary piece which has an underlying theme of "even though you may be fat you may be pretty" and has popular appeal but is no great work. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

**Guardian (\*\*\*\*) Written by Arifa Akbar**

It begins small, with a single spotlight on Tracy (Lizzie Bea), but grows to become bigger, louder, dizzyingly over-the-top, all within minutes of its opening. You wonder how the cast will sustain the demon energy and excess as it hurtles from one number to another, with Mark O'Donnell and Thomas Meehan's book kept minimal. The production has an over-bright, caricatured aesthetic that feels garish at times and becomes wearing. Characters are just a little too flat, speaking in an adenoidal high-school squeak and Velma von Tussle (Rita Simons), intent on racial segregation, is a Disney villain. The show becomes unstoppably joyous, placing its politics (on conventional femininity and on size, as well as race and protest) alongside its joy. This works better for its uplifting message on female self-worth, but the upbeat mood on racial unity strikes a more dissonant note. It captures the hope of the civil rights movement but also, depressingly, the stalled progress since, especially in light of the BLM protests last year. All the elements are there, in bundles. Marc Shaiman's sunny score (with lyrics by Shaiman and Scott Wittman) has instantly infectious songs such as Good Morning Baltimore and Welcome to the 60s. Jack O'Brien's direction is full of verve, David Rockwell's set design is psychedelic and splashy, Jerry Mitchell's choreography high-octane. There is no weak link in the performances either. Michael Ball's mischievous Edna Turnblad bears shades of a pantomime dame, despite the American accent, particularly with Les Dennis as Wilbur, her husband. Dennis plays second fiddle to Ball and is perhaps overshadowed, but the pairing works and evokes romance, comedy and camp. Ball comes into his own during the mother-daughter song Mama, I'm a Big Girl Now and melts you with vulnerability and tenderness. Jonny Amies plays school hunk Link Larkin as a smoky-eyed teen Elvis; Ashley Samuels, as Seaweed, is a pleasure to watch, musical trio the Dynamites (Holly Liburd, Mireia Mambo, Robyn Rose) have dynamite voices. But as far as the singing goes, Marisha Wallace steals the show as the indomitable Motormouth Maybelle. Her gospel song, I Know Where I've Been, is so show-stopping that it brings the audience to its feet. "We can't get lazy when things get crazy," she adds, speaking about the fight for integration and racial equality, which is still applicable today. We are left roused and breathless. The show weaves elements of gospel with cabaret, pantomime, musical hall comedy and classic West End show musicality. 22 June – 1 October 2021

## LONDON PALLADIUM

\*\*\*JOSEPH AND THE AMAZING TECHNICOLOR DREAMCOAT music ANDREW LLOYD WEBBER lyrics TIM RICE director LAURENCE CONNOR musical director, supervisor JOHN RIGBY décor, costume MORGAN LARGE lights BEN CRACKNELL choreographer JOANN M. HUNTER orchestrations JOHN CAMERON producer MICHAEL HARRISON, etc. with ALEXANDRA BURKE narrator, JASON DONOVAN pharaoh, JAC YARROW joseph, LINZI HATELEY narrator (special performances), etc.

**Blanche Marvin Critique**

This production is about the one hundredth production of this musical and with each separate revival it still holds a cartoonish appeal of humour. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

**What's On Stage (\*\*\*\*\*) Written by Alun Hood**

The first post-pandemic run – as opposed to one night concerts and events – at the foremost Variety Theatre in the land needed to be a humdinger really didn't it. Well, so it proves, with a triumphant remounting of this 2019 staging of Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice's adored family classic. It is an absolute pleasure to report that this year's iteration is bolder, brighter, and just plain better, than ever. Nobody goes to Joseph for the subtlety but when Laurence Connor's production premiered two years ago, it felt slightly unbalanced by the omnipresent barnstormery of Sheridan Smith's focus-pulling turn as the Narrator. The new leading lady (a spectacularly good Alexandra Burke, and more on her shortly) still very much commands centre stage but, while wonderfully engaging, feels less overwhelmingly eager to please, giving both the material and her fellow performers more chance to breathe and shine. The result is a much more cohesive, satisfying overall show, one that serves Rice and Lloyd Webber's eclectic, witty, catchy score magnificently well. It's also easier now to appreciate the outstanding technical elements of the lavish staging. From the enormous camel-bicycle hybrids that swagger woozily across designer Morgan Large's earthily colourful sets to the star-filled magic of Jac Yarrow's Joseph's first appearance (stunning lighting by Ben Cracknell), to the inspired use of a troupe of super-charged kids to play Joseph's smallest brothers and fellow prison captives, the inventiveness constantly delights and surprises.

Never is this more evident than in Joann M Hunter's sensationally versatile choreography. Street dance, tap, line dancing, a riotous can-can bursting through a scene of monochrome misery for Joseph's impoverished brothers, it's all here, and it's all glorious. Number after number builds exquisitely before popping in a frenzy of energised ecstasy. This is probably the nearest Joseph will ever come to being a full-out dance show, and a tightly drilled ensemble give it their rip-roaring all, while simultaneously delivering exhilarating vocal harmonies. John Cameron's sparkling orchestrations sound fresh as paint, played by a terrific band under the baton of John Rigby. Two years ago this was Jac Yarrow's first professional job and he was vocally impressive and likeable, but in the intervening time his Joseph has acquired a cheek, charm and depth that genuinely makes one long to see what direction his career takes in the future. You're also unlikely to ever hear his plaintive 'Close Every Door To Me' performed as movingly or to such a crescendo of full-throated intensity as it is in the roof-rattling rendition on offer here. Jason Donovan has also returned as Pharaoh and, if he struggles a bit with singing his Elvis-lite number, he has turned up the camp factor considerably, to satisfying comic effect. His performance is now probably nearer to his headlining turn in Priscilla than to his almost legendary Joseph on this very stage back in the 90s: basically, it works. Alexandra Burke is a knockout success as the Narrator. Combining a beguilingly pure, soaring belt with a smattering of distinctive soulful riffs, she is, as expected, vocally thrilling in the role, as well as being a joyful, high precision dancer. What may come as a surprise, however, is how irresistibly funny she is: whether bumping elbows with her pint-sized storytelling helpers, vamping it up as Potiphar's predatory wife (one of this version's USPs is having the Narrator take on multiple roles) or donning a limp and a stoop to play Joseph's chummy jailer, she's witty, playful and magnetic. This isn't just "celebrity casting", it's an authentic star performance. In a further stroke of casting genius, Linzi Hateley (from the 1990 Palladium version) replaces Burke at selected performances, and if that doesn't make it worth going to see this exhilarating crowdpleaser more than once then I don't know what does. The unbridled joy surging through this most beloved of houses feels like balm for the soul and spirit. This is uplifting, glittering entertainment, entirely worthy of the London Palladium, and what was previously an endearing spectacular has become something to utterly love.

**CURRENT**

**London Theatreviews**

**PALACE**

\*WONDERVILLE director ANNABEL MUTALE REED décor JUSTIN WILLIAMS costume PENN O'GARA composer JACK TRZCINSKI choreographer MERVIN NORONHA producer CARTER DIXON PRODUCTIONS, MCGILL PRODUCTIONS, PIERS COTTEE-JONES ENTERTAINMENT, etc. with CHRIS COX, JOSEPHINE LEE, YOUNG & STRANGE, EDWARD HILSUM, etc.

**Blanche Marvin Critique**

An under magical piece of work which was an unappealing magical show. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

**Guardian (\*\*\*) Written by Arifa Akbar**

The first thing to say about Wonderville is that the magic is good. Coloured handkerchiefs turn into fluttering doves. Someone is sawn in half, another squeezed to a fraction of his size. Chris Cox reads the audience's mind with boggling accuracy. There are few surprises but it is still technically complicated stuff and the illusionists stump up. The magic is not the problem. The show, directed by Annabel Mutale Reed, is presented as a variety performance but it feels ad hoc and suffers from not having a broader, joined-up story or theme. Justin Williams's set appears like a cut-price replica of a Las Vegas magic show (lights, smoke, giant sparklers) and tonally the production is a confusing mix of cabaret, holiday camp entertainment, panto and pub act. Comedy runs through the magic, so little of it feels straightfaced or that it is trying to wow us in the old-fashioned way. The most traditional is Edward Hilsum, a magic champion who does wow us by conjuring birds out of thin air and performing a charming skit with a child from the audience (the child wears a coat and Hilsum manipulates its arms). Cox, also our compere, has the air of a zany kids' TV presenter and at times, it feels like an awkward marriage between a children's show and illusion crossed with standup. There are even beer jokes from Kat Hudson, who asks us to calculate numbers on our mobile phones. Hers is a naturalistic, slow-burn act that doesn't sit neatly with the pace of the rest. It is a shame, too, that illusionist Josephine Lee injures her leg early on and is unable to perform her act. It all abounds with cheesy jokes, the best of which come in visual puns: Lee, at the beginning, points to moving legs with no torso attached and asks us to "welcome my half sister". Richard Young, one half of double act Young and Strange, clammers out of a box spiked with spears to drink a bottle of water and spouts fountains from his suit, as if leaky with holes. The act, also featuring Sam Strange, performs a Las Vegas pastiche to the strains of glam rock which sends up the big, blingy, David Copperfield-style show and is both wry and amusing. But this production as a whole does not offer a cohesive enough alternative style. Its very British cohort – quirky, diverse and self-deprecating – is undoubtedly talented but might have been more inventively showcased beyond the pick 'n' mix we see here.

**CURRENT**

**London Theatreviews**

**ADELPHI**

\*\*\*BACK TO THE FUTURE book BOB GALE based on the film by ROBERT ZEMECKIS, BOB GALE music, lyrics ALAN SILVESTRI, GLEN BALLARD director JOHN RANDO musical director JIM HENSON musical supervisor NICK FINLOW décor YIM HATLEY lights TIM LUTKIN choreographer CHRIS BAILEY orchestrations ETHAN POPP, BRYAN CROOK producer COLIN INGRAM with OLLY DOBSON marty mcfly, ROGER BART doc brown, HUGH COLES george mcfly, ROSANNA HYLAND lorraine baines, etc.

**Blanche Marvin Critique**



This show deserved all the stars it has received and was magical in its effect. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

### **Guardian (\*\*\*) Written by Arifa Akbar**

How does a car speed at 88mph on stage? Kudos to the production for pulling off the effect so spectacularly. The effect is created through a plethora of screens, graphic projections (video design by Finn Ross) and a firework of illuminations (lighting design by Tim Lutkin) that sear beyond the proscenium arch and into the auditorium with the most dazzling illusion of depth at the back of the theatre as well. Beyond the car's star turn, this is an eccentric show, directed by John Rando, that is partly an ode to the film but also a tribute act that speaks to its own theatricality. The book by Bob Gale (who wrote the film with Robert Zemeckis) keeps the film's best lines, and even with the addition of 16 new songs (music and lyrics by Alan Silvestri and Glen Ballard), it seems like a show stuck in time, too uncannily like the original. The graphics alternatively leave us feeling as if we are inside a giant arcade game or a 3D film, but it is a striking integration of forms nonetheless. The second half becomes increasingly offbeat; early on, Doc observes that a chorus line of dancers appears on stage every time he begins singing. The overall effect is cute and pleasantly kitschy, even if it is something of a repeated joke. The songs, at the start, serviceably relay the story, from Got No Future, about Marty's family failures, to another by his brother, Dave (Will Haswell) about working in a takeaway that rhymes "saturated fat" with "You want fries with that?"). These are performed with gusto, though they feel thin and slightly unnecessary at times. Chris Bailey's choreography seems a little underwhelming until the final song when, too late, the routines come fully alive. Tim Hatley's set designs are big, impressive and detailed, capturing the 1950s well, with a wonderful mint-green diner and a sparkly prom ball that sends disco lights revolving around the auditorium. Despite its inventions and its abundant splashiness, it is an odd mishmash of originality and imitation, the DeLorean remaining its biggest star.

## **CURRENT**

## **London Theatreviews**

### **THEATRE ROYAL DRURY LANE**

\*\*\*\*FROZEN book JENNIFER LEE music, lyrics KRISTEN ANDERSON-LOPEZ and ROBERT LOPEZ based on DISNEY FILM directed by CHRIS BUCK and JENNIFER LEE director MICHAEL GRANDAGE supervisor STEPHEN OREMUS choreographer ROB ASHFORD orchestrations DAVE METZGER music director ADAM ROWE sound PETER HYLENSKI puppets MICHAEL CURRY décor, costumes CHRISTOPHER ORAM light NEIL AUSTIN producer DISNEY THEATRICAL PRODUCTIONS with SAMANTHA BARKS elsa, STEPHANIE MCKEON anna, CRAIG GALLIVAN olaf, OLIVER ORMSON hans, OBIOMA UGOALA kristoff, etc.

### **Blanche Marvin Critique**

This amazing physical production is followed by a beautiful story and has enhanced the whole world of theatre on an imaginary path. Four stars are so well-deserved on a very special production in its physical presentation as well as its story line. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

### **Guardian (\*\*\*\*\*) Written by Arifa Akbar**

This is a show every bit as magical as the animation, packed with visual thrills and gorgeous choreography (by Rob Ashford) alongside signature ballads that gain greater power in their live incarnation. It is big on spectacle yet never loses control with special effects that yield some dazzling coups de theatre. Directed by Michael Grandage, it has music and lyrics by Kristen Anderson-Lopez and Robert Lopez – who created the songs for the film – and a book by Jennifer Lee, who wrote the screenplay. The production takes a few scenes to come into its own and the opening appears like a too-exact replica of the animation. Young Anna (Asanda Abbie Masike in the performance I saw) wistfully sings about building a snowman with her sister outside the room in which Elsa (Tilly-Raye Bayer) has barricaded herself, playing out the same tics and vocal inflections of her cartoon counterpart. It carries that ersatz feel even as the older versions of the sisters are introduced: Stephanie McKeon's Anna (bold, goofy, full of yearning) and Samantha Barks's Elsa, a melancholy ice queen from the off. Gradually, however, it grows to become its own magical thing, with some charming inventions and a few new songs (the best of which is an audacious comic number, appearing out of nowhere to satirise the Nordic notion of hygge as naked characters conga out of a sauna). What is more surprising than the uniformly storming singing voices and the theatrical razzmatazz is the sense of a real, beating heart in the relationship between the two tortured sisters. Barks's performance is soaked with sadness as she speaks of the "monstrous" magic within her and the stage comes alive every time she sings. Oscar-winning power ballad Let It Go grows in strength here, saturated with emotional drama as she sheds off her old identity to embrace the magic within and take control of her destiny. It is revised in a way to contain not just self-acceptance and empowerment but also to resist simplified notions of good and bad – when Elsa strikes a fatal shard of ice into Anna's heart, we do not consider her the "evil" snow queen. And while the sisters harm each other, they save each other too and bear flecks of Angela Carter's brave, misbehaving girls in their adventuring fairytale spirits. The ice-seller Kristoff (Obioma Ugoala) is lumbering, earnest and utterly winning as Anna's sidekick and Oliver Ormson is duly duplicitous as Anna's beau, Hans. There is nifty puppetry too: Olaf the snowman is manipulated by Craig Gallivan who looks, disconcertingly, just like him minus the carrot for a nose, while Kristoff's reindeer, Sven, is a big, delightful puppet controlled (at this performance) by Mikayla Jade. There are nimbly executed freezing effects when Elsa unwittingly casts her spell and then, at the end, the landscape melts back to warm colours. These transformational moments video-designed by Finn Ross are big and blinding, and there are breathtaking displays of fizzing light (by Neil Austin) and crackling sound (by Peter Hylenski). Christopher Oram's set design bears layers of visual effects, from a back screen of sky that conjures a perpetual swirl of the Northern Lights and an intricate grid of snowflakes. A central costume change – when Elsa is turned from a dutiful royal in robes to shimmering ice queen, dressed in white – brings gasps from adults as well as children in the audience. The messages at this story's core may be typically saccharine Disney ones – that it is

vital to embrace your own magic and that love can thaw the coldest of hearts -- but they are nevertheless true and important for the army of young Elsas and Annas out there.

## CURRENT

## London Theatreviews

GILLIAN LYNNE

\*\*CINDERELLA book EMERALD FENNEL music ANDREW LLOYD WEBBER lyrics DAVID ZIPPEL director LAURENCE CONNOR music supervisor DAVID ANDREW WILSON and JOHN RIGBY choreographer JOANN M. HUNTER orchestrations ANDREW LLOYD WEBBER music director BEN VAN TIENEN décor, costumes GABRIELA TYLESOVA light BRUNO POET producer THE REALLY USEFUL GROUP with CARRIE HOPE FLETCHER cinderella, IVANO TURCO prince sebastian, REBECCA TREHEARN the queen, VICTORIA HAMILTON-BARRITT the stepmother, etc.

### Blanche Marvin Critique

There are times when something is so bad in the distortion of the story that one can only comment as negatively as it is possible on a musical that has failed miserably. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

### Time Out (\*\*\*) Written by Andrzej Lukowski

Andrew Lloyd Webber's endlessly-delayed new musical is great fun. Generally speaking, if a show's writer comes out at the start and says that he thinks the show will go ahead unless a meteor hits the theatre, you assume he's joking about the meteor. Not so Andrew Lloyd Webber: I finally caught his new musical 'Cinderella' on what was technically the fifth opening night it had scheduled for 2021 (and bear in mind it was originally supposed to open in 2020). The road to opening has been a particularly torturous one, for reasons too complicated to be explained here, but that can easiest be described as 'covid-related'. Finally though, it's here! No lockdown, no meteor, no ping-pong of cast members, no scrap with the government. And I can report back that 'Cinderella' is messy, but fun. With music by Webber, words by 2021 Academy Award winner Emerald Fennell and lyrics by David Zippel, it sets the Cinderella legend in the town Belleville, 'a town so picturesque every other seems grotesque' in which everybody and everything is impossibly beautiful, extra-stacked, and extremely shallow (so no ugly sisters... but ugly-on-the-inside sisters). The only fly in the ointment is Cinderella (Carrie Hope Fletcher). She's an unkempt goth who would appear to be the sole person in town to have any sense of humour: we meet her after the townspeople correctly deduce that she was the one who defaced a statue of Prince Charming, the town's ultra-buff heir to the throne (it's a small town with its own absolute monarchy, best just go with it). Sadly for the adoring townspeople and their hilariously Marie Antoinette-ish Queen – a truly magnificent Rebecca Trehearn, shamelessly vamping her way through the best turn of the show – Charming is missing, presumed dead. The town is therefore stuck with Sebastian (puppyish newcomer Ivano Turco), his weedy little brother, whose only friend is Cinderella. That is until he's declared heir to the throne, when suddenly he becomes the most eligible bachelor in Belleville. Fennell's dialogue is really very amusing, slyly subverting some of the more patriarchal tropes of the story while avoiding panto territory and employing often scathing wit to depict what's essentially a town full of hanger-onners. Nonetheless, beyond the snappy dialogue, the satire feels a bit shaky. Remaking Cinderella into a takedown of human superficiality is a nice enough idea, but there's something a bit self-defeating about hiring a cast of hot young buff people to send up the idea of hot young buff people. Fletcher is great, terrific with a quip and with a voice like an angel: in a fairly daft show, much of the emotional firepower is left up to her to deliver, which she absolutely does with a couple of gale-force late ballads. But the character feels confused: it's fine to have an anarchist Cinders, but there's not really a convincing explanation as to why this free spirit spends her days in meek servitude to Victoria Hamilton-Barritt's growlingly weird Stepmother. It's like they half-changed the character and just hoped we'd be too distracted by Fletcher's bovver boots to worry about it. There are some good ideas, like making Gloria Onitiri's The Godmother a sort of toxic society makeover artist, who enables Cinderella's self-loathing by persuading her to doll up for the ball. But as a rule, none of this stuff feels very coherent. Sebastian's sneering dismissal of the made-over Cinders (who he doesn't recognise) purely based on her looks feels at least as problematic and superficial as anything the hot buff people do. The *deus ex machina* of his brother's unexpected return is amusing, but the implied reasons for his disappearance feel like a missed opportunity for the musical to deal with a more serious topic. I realise I've bleated on like a killjoy here, but when you're talking about the most famous composer of musical theatre in the world, plus a writer who just won an Oscar, I don't think it's unreasonable to expect something a bit more meticulous. There's also a very real question of who it's aimed at: it's too naughty for little kids, but feels like it shies away from actual adult themes. Nonetheless: it really is fun. Aside from Fennell's witty lines and a clutch of great performances from Trehearn, Fletcher et al, it looks great. Gabriela Tylesova's cut-out sets are nice, and there's a spectacular coup de theatre in the ball scene, where the front half of the stalls rotate along with the stage. That means the stage now occupies the spot previously occupied by the front stalls, bringing the actors into touching distance of the audience – it's quite a thrill. The songs are solid: Sebastian and Cinders have a nice, plaintive little love theme, but as a rule with Webber the more OTT it is the better: the campy numbers 'Hunks' Song' and 'Man's Man' are a hoot. There's maybe nothing for the ages here – and a fair bit of wallpaper tinkling – but Webber delivers the goods for what is clearly a lighter show than many of his works. And maybe that's the key to where Webber is at in 2021: after a couple of decades that saw him churning out joyless, self-important nonsense like 'The Beautiful Game', 'Love Never Dies' and 'Stephen Ward', 'Cinderella' follows his smash hit 'School of Rock' in essentially being a pretty good laugh. Laurence Connor, who has directed all of Webber's big recent West End shows, revivals and new, feels like a good fit for him. Webber is never going to be revered in the way Sondheim is, but as his cursed '00s output fades from human memory, he seems to be entering a phase of his career where he just wants to entertain people – and that's definitely a good thing.

## subSIDISED

**CURRENT**

**London Theatreviews**

**ROYAL COURT**

\*\*\*A KIND OF PEOPLE by GURPREET KAUR BHATTI director MICHAEL BUFFONG décor ANNA FLEISCHLE lights AIDEEN MALONE sound EMMA LAXTON with RICHIE CAMPBELL gary, THOMAS COOMBES mark, CLAIRE-LOUISE CORDWELL nicky, ASIF KHAN mo, PETRA LETANG karen, AMY MORGAN victoria, MANJINDER VIRK anjum

### **Blanche Marvin Critique**

It is an ordinary piece specifically highlighting the lives of a working-class family. It has a truth and honesty which is appealing but does not shine with any great brightness of purpose. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

### **Time Out (\*\*\*) Written by Holly Williams**

Button-pushing new drama about race and class from Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti 'You lot are like a real community,' says Victoria, Gary's boss, when she invites herself into a birthday party at his council house on a multicultural city estate. 'This is so nice, like you're off the telly,' she coos. Not for long. Gary's circle might seem tight-knit, with his wife and best mate he's known since school, and their neighbours popping in. But over the course of Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti's new play, personal conflicts get so viciously tangled up with dormant racial, cultural and class tensions, their domestic set-up is soon more melodramatic soap opera than cosy sitcom. Gary is black; he's been working as an electrical engineer for a decade and thinks it's his time to get promoted to team leader. Victoria is white; she gets outrageously drunk at the party and starts ordering Gary around, demanding he show her how to dance like a black woman, 'shaking their big fat bottoms'. Watching Amy Morgan twerk while she sings Missy Elliott's 'Get Ur Freak On' – including, yes, the N word – is so painfully awful I think I actually yelped in the stalls. So when Victoria passes Gary over for promotion in favour of a white colleague, it's too much for his pride. He quits after angrily accusing her of being a racist, puffed up on principle – but his wife Nicky, a white, working-class woman, is horrified. His unemployment piles the pressure on and crushes her dreams of a better life for them and their kids. Nicky's own lack of understanding about how to play the education system forms another plotline, revealed in contrast with their pushier and better off Pakistani neighbours: 'Education is a weapon and we need our kids to be armed.' Best known for her play 'Behzti' (or rather, for the intense protests it provoked from Sikhs, angry at the depiction of a rape in a temple), Bhatti has gone for more button-pushing here. There are times when the rapid whacking at the very many multicultural 'issues' included makes it feel like a race-drama splat the rat, the game we see Gary making for their kids' school fête. But the performances in Michael Buffong's production mostly imbue the play with a natural, relatable air, even if some dialogue feels pretty on the nose. Clare-Louise Cordwell is terrific as Nicky, making her the heart of the show by charting a fall from cheery satisfaction to full-on despair (her character really is put through the wringer). And Petra Letang as Gary's apolitical sister Karen makes off with any scene she's in: gloriously withering, she has such devastating comic delivery it takes three attempts to get through one particular line because the audience keeps laughing too loudly. There's a lot of nicely observed social comedy, and Bhatti is on confident ground revealing these supposed friends' hypocrisies and judgements on each other, as well as more serious structural inequalities. No one is wholly demonised (even the ghastly Victoria). But there is some leaden exposition tennis – with characters volleying things at each other that they'd surely know – and there are thudding chunks of backstory. And Anna Fleischle's imposing, minimalist-chic set – high walls carved into squares, like a grey-and-turquoise Mondrian – seems an odd choice, not exactly helping to cook this pressured domestic drama.

**CURRENT**

**London Theatreviews**

**ROYAL COURT**

\*\*\*\*WHAT IF IF ONLY by CARYL CHURCHILL director JAMES MACDONALD décor MIRIAM BUETHER lights PREMA MEHTA sound CHRISTOPHER SHUTT with LINDA BASSETT, JOHN HEFFERNAN, JASMINE NYENYA or SAMIR SIMON-KEEGAN

### **Blanche Marvin Critique**

The usual dexterity and humor of Caryl Churchill is superbly produced in this production. Caryl Churchill never fails as one of the great writers of the Royal Court. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

### **Evening Standard (\*\*\*\*) Written by Nick Curtis**

Small but beautifully formed is the best description I can think of for Caryl Churchill's audacious theatrical miniature. The 83-year-old writer packs more into this 20-minute piece about death, grief and the multiverse than many writers manage at seven times the length. Less formally experimental than much of her work, it has a crystalline beauty, sly humour and boundless imagination. John Heffernan's unnamed man shares an anecdote with a lost loved one, possibly but not necessarily female, who seems to have died by suicide. His chattiness breaks down. Imagining a world with them still in it he repeats the phrase "I miss you" with heartbreaking intensity. The strength of his emotion conjures up a spirit or force in the shape of the great Linda Bassett. This chatty, bright-eyed older woman represents a different potential future of "equality and cake and no bad bits". If he can bring it/her into full being, his loved one will be restored. But a lot of other stuff will be different, too. As he wavers, powerless and confused, other possible but un-lived timelines voice themselves through Bassett. We glimpse a world where there was "no rule-the-waves, no slaves", where the earth has been wiped out by a meteorite or by human greed. It's a testament to Bassett's virtuosity as a performer that she seems, briefly, to

contain multitudes. The appearance of a young actor near the end – an exuberant Jasmine Nyenya the night I saw it – offers a moment of hope in the face of existential despair. Churchill is exploring the point where scientific thinking and supernatural or spiritual belief start to blur, I think. Unlike her near-contemporary Harold Pinter, whose plays retained a recognisable tone even as they became more concentrated, Churchill's are always surprising and experimental. Sometimes with amusing effect.

## CURRENT

## London Theatreviews

### ROYAL COURT

\*\*\*IS GOD IS by ALESHEA HARRIS director OLA INCE décor CHLOE LAMFORD costume NATALIE PRYCE lights SIMISOLA LUCIA MAJEKODUNMI sound MAX PERRYMENT composer RENELL SHAW with VIVIENNE ACHEAMPONG angle, ADELAYO ADEDAYO anaia, RAY EMMET BROWN chuck hall, ERNEST KINGSLEY JNR scotch, TAMARA LAWRENCE racine, RUDOLPHE MDLONGWA riley, MARK MONERO man, CECILIA NOBLE she

#### Blanche Marvin Critique

An interesting and novel storyline in a production that is mediocre in its execution. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

#### What's On Stage (\*\*\*\*) Written by Sarah Crompton

The English Jacobean revenge playwrights of the 17th century would recognise the young African American Aleshea Harris as one of their own. Her debut play, first seen in 2018, shares their dazzling darkness, a sense of a world so out of kilter that it can only be righted by the most violent and bloody wrongs. Instead of a murderous continental court, she presents us with a suburban family drama, the story of twin sisters, both hideously burned by a fire that they believe killed their mother. In Ola Ince's staggeringly assured, crystal-clear production of the British premiere, that's the first thing we see: flames surging up from the stage to scar their skin as they collapse in stylised movements. Anaia (Adelayo Adedayo) is disfigured and trapped in "a prison of sweetness." "Girl so ugly don't get to be mean," she says. Racine (Tamara Lawrence) is "the rough one". Both have their lives changed by a letter, from the mother they thought to be dead, who turns out to be living, in a rest home for the weary, hiding her "body like an alligator" from the world. She's not only alive, but she assumes the status of God – not a god, but the God, of the blood-thirsty Old Testament kind. It turns out the fire the girls believed to be an accident was in fact deliberately set by their father, in his attempt to burn her to death. Now she wants revenge. In Cecilia Noble's magisterial and terrifying performance, she makes herself absolutely clear. She wants him: "Dead, real dead. Lots of blood is fine." That's what we subsequently get in a staged road movie, presented in cartoon-like tableau, which sends the 21-year-olds out West, where they first encounter a drunk, suicidal lawyer and then the Man's (as their father is known) new family: twin brothers, Riley and Scotch, and his dissatisfied wife Angie. Finally, the Man himself appears. The sisters are armed with a "rock in a sock" which, like every scene on Chloe Lamford's bright, breezy designs, comes labelled with a purpose. In this case it is "the weapon" and it shoots on from the wings, attached to a large boulder. After the women encounter the brothers in their suburban dream home (yellow wood, teal shutters), where the arugula salad is piled high, the ensuing "Showdown" is both inevitable and unexpected. The garish tones of the set are reflected in a language that is consistently sharp and spiked. Is God Is is simultaneously very funny and deeply troubling and its effects spring from the care with which Harris manipulates and fires words. Themes bubble and disperse: the violence of men towards women, the sources of righteous anger, the dark history of America, strewn with burnt and mangled bodies, grown on blood-soaked land, the role of religion in fuelling revenge. Nothing is over-weighted but everything matters as the action reaches a conclusion that is both pointed and poignant. Yet there's no sentiment in the writing, and the performances are also noticeably direct, creating characters who shine brightly. Ernest Kingsley Jnr and Rudolphe Mdlongwa are excellent as the twin brothers, both dislikeable in different ways. Lawrence brings cheery practicality to Racine's avenging spirit, painting in a background of abuse and unhappiness with a smile fixed permanently to her face; Adedayo gives Anaia a constant sulky shrug, a gentle acceptance of the ironies of life and the sense that the universe is against her which gradually morphs into something sadder.

## CURRENT

## London Theatreviews

### WILTON'S MUSIC HALL

\*\*\*CURTAIN RAISERS by OPERA DELLA LUNA director JEFF CLARKE décor ELROY ASHMORE lights IAN WILSON

COX & BOX by F C BURNARD, ARTHUR SULLIVAN with CARL SANDERSON serjeant bouncer, TIM WALTON james john cox, PAUL FEATHERSTONE john james box

LES DEUX AVEUGLES by JULES MOINAUX, JACQUES OFFENBACH with TIM WALTON patachon, PAUL FEATHERSTONE giroffier, CARL SANDERSON passers-by

#### Blanche Marvin Critique

The inventiveness of Opera Della Luna is always a happy surprise and the quality of their singers in their acting ability is a major quality typical of their work. Great in its execution and production. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

#### LondonTheatre1 (\*\*\*\*\*) Written by John Groves

Opera della Luna, under the direction of Jeff Clarke, has built a well-deserved reputation for staging inventive productions of 'forgotten' musical works of the last 150 or so years. Running at Wilton's until 4th September is the

company's latest offering, a double bill of CURTAIN RAISERS, short works that were often played before the main piece in Victorian and Edwardian theatres, until WW1. Both are some of the best works of their type, tuneful, lightweight and great fun! Offenbach's twenty-five-minute "bouffonnerie musicale" The Two Blind Beggars (Le Deux Aveugles) was written for his Theatre des Bouffes-Parisiens in 1855 and concerns two supposedly blind beggars who turn up at the same pitch on a very windy bridge over the Seine. Giraffier, a superb portrayal by Paul Featherstone, accompanies himself on a mandolin – in this production a ukulele – whilst Patachon plays the trombone, which Tim Walton actually did (loudly!), to much amusement. The other actor in the piece plays all the passers-by: in this production hilariously so by Carl Sanderson, who says barely a word, but appears in a multitude of superb costumes. The minimalist set design, showing Notre Dame, was the work of Elroy Ashmore, an ideal backdrop for this piece of frivolity which wears its years well! Preceding this is Cox and Box, a "musical triumviretta" by F C Burnand, based on Maddison Morton's farce Box and Cox, and Sullivan was supposedly inspired to compose the music for it by seeing a performance in London of The Two Blind Beggars. It tells the tale of a rascally ex-military landlord, Bouncer – sung very loudly by Carl Sanderson – who rents a room by day to Box who works at night, and by night to Cox who works during the day. As early as this first 'operetta' Sullivan is already pastiching other composers, in this case, Donizetti, Verdi et al, in the recurrent RATAPLAN motif, which Bouncer sings whenever there are disagreements brewing. Problems arise when Cox is unexpectedly given a day's holiday... Cox is delightfully and wittily played by Tim Walton, who not only has a gorgeous high baritone, but is also able to act and extract as much fun as possible from the, at times, rather dated libretto. Box, Paul Featherstone, was hampered by a silly black wig, which not only looked false from his first entrance, it also refused to behave, becoming unglued and moving around his head, without actually falling off. I am convinced that this was unintentional, but was in fact very funny, and should be kept in! One could not but help watch the wig, even when concentration should have been elsewhere. All three actors found the split level stage at Wilton's difficult to use and one got tired of seeing them continually climbing steps from one level to the next – Les deux Aveugles just used the upper level so the problem did not arise – but, on the whole, this was a hugely successful and most enjoyable evening. Mention must be made of Jacob Savage at the piano, and John Cuthbert at the, presumably electric blown, harmonium.

## CURRENT

## London Theatreviews

### REGENT'S OPEN AIR

\*\*\*CAROUSEL music RICHARD RODGERS book, lyrics OSCAR HAMMERSTEIN II based on LILLIOM by FERENC MOLNAR adaptor BENJAMIN F. GLAZER director TIMOTHY SHEADER décor TOM SCUTT costume MOLLY EINHCOMB, TOM SCUTT lights AIDEEN MALONE music supervision, arrangements, orchestrations TOM DEERING choreographer DREW MCONIE with CARLY BAWDEN julie jordan, DECLAN BENNETT billy bigelow, BRENDAN CHARLESON mr bascombe, JO EATON-KENT mrs mullin, SAM MACKAY jigger craigin, CHRISTINA MODESTOU carrie piperidge, JOHN PFUMOJENA enoch snow, JOANNA RIDING nattie fowler, NATASHA MAY-THOMAS louise bigelow, etc.

#### Blanche Marvin Critique

A great disappointment in that the production was transferred to a UK fishing village. The usual feeling of sorrow that this musical contains did not carry in great depth. The most one can say is that it is an adequate production. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

#### Evening Standard (\*\*\*) Written by Nick Curtis

Was the Open Air Theatre built on an ancient burial ground or something? Its musicals seem to trigger apocalyptic weather. Last night, after waiting out a monsoon, Timothy Sheader's production of Rodgers and Hammerstein's troubling 1945 opus heroically battled squalls and a Covid-depleted cast to win a standing ovation. Partly deserved, although it often felt that the main battle was with the subject matter. Carousel is a much-loved score – with You'll Never Walk Alone as its anthem and June is Busting Out All Over as its bouncy singalong – hung on a thin and nasty story. In late 19th century Maine, feckless carnival barker Billy Bigelow hits his adoring wife Julie Jordan. When she becomes pregnant, he botches a robbery and kills himself. Granted one day back on earth from the afterlife, he sees his now-teenage daughter Louise repeating her mother's mistakes, and hits her too. Sheader has amalgamated and finessed versions of the story to palliate it, replacing Billy's heavenly judges with a chorus of women. The cast use their own British accents throughout to make the milieu more relatable, less a part of rosy Americana. Orchestrator Tom Deering has upped the brass and wind and scaled back the strings to make the score less "lush". There's an admirable programme note about the rise of domestic abuse during the pandemic. Yet it still feels like we're buying these songs at too high a price. Why not rewrite it completely, as the Broadway duo originally did with Ferenc Molnar's original short story and play? The estates of Rodgers and Hammerstein would undoubtedly balk at that: but the tinkering they have permitted is queasy and piecemeal. The execution is largely excellent, though. Carly Bawden's strong, certain voice fills out Julie's thin character. Joanna Riding (who played Julie in the famous 1992 National Theatre production) hunkers enthusiastically into the matriarch role of Nettie and gives You'll Never Walk Alone solo welly. There's good comic and musical support from Christina Modestou and John Pfumojena as Carrie and Enoch, the fecund and pragmatic complement to the dysfunctional Bigelows, and an arresting debut from Natasha May-Thomas in the fleeting role of Louise. The problem is Declan Bennett's Billy, who seemed to be having a bad time on an already difficult night: indistinct when singing and speaking, and a lacklustre stage presence. Drew McOnie's muscular choreography, echoing the physical labours and gender dynamics of this seaside community, is impressive, as are Molly Einchomb and Tom Scutt's evocative, mixed-era costumes. Scutt also designed the very striking set, a slowly turning disc cut and cantilevered out of a ribbed wooden slope. The slope became rain-slick in minutes last night. Maybe Scutt and Sheader should have consulted this theatre's historic summertime runes before opting for it.

## NATIONAL

\*\*\*\*ROCKETS AND BLUE LIGHTS by WINSOME PINNOCK director MIRANDA CROMWELL décor, costume LAURA HOPKINS lights AMY MAE composer, music director FEMI TEMOWO producer FRAN MILLER, RIC WATTS, KATIE VINE with ANTHONY AJE billie, PAUL BRADLEY turner/roy, KARL COLLINS thomas/trevor, KIZA DEEN lou/olu, ROCHELLE ROSE essie/lucy/ruskin/johnson, MATTHEW SEADON-YOUNG decker/peter piper, KUDZAI SITIMA jess/jeanie, CATHY TYSON danby/mary/meg/vonnie, EVERAL A WALSH clarke/pearson/benjamin, LUKE WILSON caesar/reuben

**Blanche Marvin Critique**

This was one of the most beautiful productions both in its detail of the production, its emotional content and its exquisite acting. It was very much a highlight in theatre and deserves to be praised to the skies. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

**Guardian (\*\*\*) Written by Arifa Akbar**

Winsome Pinnock's leviathan of a play opens with a meditation on a slave ship painting by JMW Turner which drew upon the Zong massacre of enslaved Africans in 1781. An actress and artist stand in a gallery, in the present day, talking about bearing witness to the horrors of black British history and all that still remains hidden in plain sight. The tight focus of this opening pans out to become a tidal wave of plotlines, ideas and characters with parallel stories in the past and present that incorporates the slave trade and its abolition as well as debates on the politics of storytelling and representation, Turner's life and politics, and remembering – or forgetting – black trauma. Directed by Miranda Cromwell. Britain's slave past is not dead, it is suggested here, but bleeds into the present and terrorises it. "The woman in the painting moved," says the actress, Lou (Kiza Deen), to the artist, Essie (Rochelle Rose), signalling the direction the play will take. The present day features actors rehearsing a film called The Ghost Ship while the past revolves around a family that has lived through slavery into abolition, alongside Turner himself (Paul Bradley). Laura Hopkins' clear stage design consists of a stripped wooden floor resembling a ship's bare deck. There is an ankle-deep pool of water at one end which conjures the salty broil of sea despite its shallowness. The past at first co-exists with the present and then gatecrashes it as dead characters appear beside the living – Turner's dead mother, for one, hangs above the stage like a gothic mermaid. The surreal and playful meets violence and cruelty and there is marvellously unexpected wit and magical realism. The wealth of overlapping stories – several about storytelling itself – give the drama an exciting, anarchic edge but also create cerebral circles within circles; characters multiply as the cast doubles up across timeframes and speak with a certain duality about their own stories and of a bigger history, until the play seems to list and lurch with the weight of it all. Violence is not enacted on the bodies of slaves but beside them – so that one woman's oppressor whips the floor a few metres away from her. The scene carries great power and is arguably one way to circumvent what Lou calls "torture porn" in slavery narratives. The play feels like a giant, complex, shifting creation by the end, its ideas epic, its ambition radical, its history containing multitudes.

## THEATRE ROYAL WINDSOR

\*\*\*HAMLET by WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE director SEAN MATHIAS décor LEE NEWBY costume LOREN ELSTEIN lights ZOE SPURR composer ADAM CORK choreographer WAYNE MCGREGOR producer JULIUS GREEN, MIKEY COOK, etc. with IAN MCKELLEN hamlet, JENNY SEAGROVE gertrude, JONATHAN HYDE claudius, FRANCESCA ANNIS ghost, FRANCES BARBER polonius, BEN ALLEN horatio, EMMANUELLA COLE laertes, etc.

**Blanche Marvin Critique**

This was an introverted view of the play in which Ian McKellen sought to discover the exploration of Hamlet through his mind only. To get this kind of perspective on the mental format of a young character played by an older Hamlet (McKellen) never caused any confusion. The journey for the audience was a mental one where age played no part. This was McKellen at his intellectual height. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

**Guardian (\*\*\*) Written by Arifa Akbar**

Director Sean Mathias presents a host of interesting ideas yet many fail to take flight. Elsinore is located in a recognizably modern world but lacks a more specific socio-political framework. Pacing is choppy, with scenes passing either too quickly or too slowly. Most criminally, the rich relationships are flattened, from Claudius's insecurity and need for Gertrude to Hamlet's complicated passion for Ophelia, and so is the exploration of love between siblings and children's loyalty to their fathers. Characters appear simplified and undercharged, especially in the play's female roles – always a challenge to make rounded and real. Eccentric decisions include cutting up Hamlet's first, searing soliloquy: McKellen begins it, only to leave the stage and return to resume his thoughts while spinning on a stationary exercise bike. "To be or not to be" is later delivered at a barber's. If the point is that we have the deepest of thoughts in the most banal of places, these scenes still feel strained and removed from the rest of the play. For an age-blind production, Hamlet is primarily dressed for youth by costume designer Loren Elstein, wearing hoodies, woolly hats and trainers while others are in 1940s suits and dresses. McKellen's prince is sad without self-indulgence, his reflections an acceptance of impending mortality. He is sprightly, delivering a fast, physical performance, but trembles and bursts into tender, old man's tears too. McKellen never plays it safe. He brings surprising inflections, shrugging off words in the famous passages in an off-the-cuff, hyper-naturalistic manner so they are divested of their usual rhythms. If this is madness – and it feels like it at times – there is method in it, and McKellen slows down for the lesser-known speeches, drawing the play's heart away from the

big-hitting soliloquies and focusing on the beauty and depth of these meditative moments. He is a prince of wiles and calculations, playing brilliantly at being unhinged and unpredictable – every bit the actor – and the production itself comes to life when the players arrive at court. The characterisation works less well in Hamlet's relationship with Ophelia (Alis Wyn Davies, who plays the guitar and appears empowered, yet this seems out of kilter with her part). The production strips their relationship of its romantic dynamic but puts nothing in its place. Because this remains underdeveloped, along with the lack of emotional intensity between Gertrude and Claudius, the final tragedy leaves us unmoved. The love story here, if there is one, is between Hamlet and Horatio (exquisitely played by Ben Allen) whose warmth and affection – possibly more? – we palpably feel. Jenny Seagrove's Gertrude is woefully wooden and declamatory. As Laertes, Ashley D Gayle – who took over from Emmanuella Cole – does the job well enough under the circumstances. Frances Barber, taking over from the departing Steven Berkoff as Polonius, excels at being the pompous father and comic fool. The production's salvation, ultimately, is the play itself whose power rests so much on the shoulders of its lead part. McKellen's understated artistry renders Hamlet a prince of all – and any – time and age.

## CURRENT

## London Theatreviews

### THEATRE ROYAL WINDSOR

\*\*\*THE CHERRY ORCHARD by ANTON CHEKHOV director SEAN MATHIAS adaptor MARTIN SHERMAN décor LEE NEWBY costume LOREN ELSTEIN lights NICK RICHINGS composer ADAM CORK producer JULIUS GREEN, MIKEY COOK, etc. MARTIN SHAW lopakhin, ALIS WYN DAVIES dunyasha, ASIF KHAN yepikhodov, IAN MCKELLEN firs, FRANCESCA ANNIS ranyevskaya, MISSY MALEK anya, etc.

#### Blanche Marvin Critique

This was a mediocre production but is significant because the policy of the theatre to perform the classics in a repertory theatre is a big step in the direction of saving the repertory theatre in the UK. The fact that a production was created is far more important than how well it achieved its goal. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

#### Evening Standard (\*\*\*\*) Written by Nick Curtis

In the bit part of the aging servant Firs, McKellen still nearly steals this sumptuous rendering of Chekhov's last work from Francesca Annis's regal but feckless landowner Ranyevskaya, and Martin Shaw's charismatic arriviste Lopakhin. Sean Mathias's production includes several cast members from that radical Hamlet. But there's no age-blind casting this time, and only one gender-switched role: Jenny Seagrove as Ranyevskaya's prattling brother Gaev. Martin Sherman's translation doesn't contain anything to frighten the horses. This is a bittersweet, pleasing, relatively traditional reading of the play, where the stripped back set helps to make the characters and relationships pop. Annis captures the character's desperate romanticism and sadness but borders on the maudlin in later scenes. Among the younger generation, Alis Wyn Davies and Missy Malek waft charmingly through the (in)action as the bedazzled maid Dunyasha and Ranyevskaya's daughter Anya. Kezrena James struggles in the more challenging part of Anya's adopted sister, Varya, and Ben Allen is bland as the eternal student Trofimov. Robert Daws is excellent as the absurd, eternally impoverished but eternally optimistic aristocrat Pishchik and Asif Khan manages to make the clumsy Yepikhodov more than a mere caricature. Then there's McKellen, who is not only our finest living classical actor but a great, low-key physical comedian. Having played down his age in Hamlet, he plays it up here. His Firs is a muttering, shuffling, nagging, digressive scene-stealer, with a shaved head and a bushy rectangle of grizzled beard. He uses his native Burnley accent. He plays the final scene for all that it - and he - is worth.

## CURRENT

## London Theatreviews

### YOUNG VIC

\*\*\*HAMLET by WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE director GREG HERSOV décor ANNA FLEISCHLE lights AIDEEN MALONE sound EMMA LAXTON with CUSH JUMBO hamlet, ADRIAN DUNBAR claudius/ghost, TARA FITZGERALD gertrude, NORAH LOPEZ HOLDEN ophelia, JONATHAN LIVINGSTONE horatio, etc.

#### Blanche Marvin Critique

Although this production received great notices for a female Hamlet I was not particularly involved nor did I find anything excitingly new in the performance of an ordinary actress. It is a bit wearying to constantly have to review females playing major male roles. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

#### Time Out (\*\*\*) Written by Andrzej Lukowski

Cush Jumbo sulks her way charismatically through this pacy take on Shakespeare's greatest play. Say what you like about twenty-first century Britain, but it's definitely a positive when a Black woman can play the lead in 'Hamlet' and it barely elicits a shrug. Maybe it's a bit crass to even mention it here. But I think it's worth acknowledging as a milestone: as far as I'm aware, Cush Jumbo is the first Black female Hamlet in a major London production, and the fact that it almost seems vulgar pointing it out reflects a world changed for the better from probably even ten years ago. So! Now that's out of the way with, the play's the thing. It took me a while to attune to Greg Hersov's modern-dress production, and I'm not 100 percent sure I quite got what he was aiming for. But to me its central tenet seemed to be the idea that Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, is a massive douchebag. From the very off, Jumbo's slouching, black-clad Dane is haughty and embittered. Admittedly he's got reason to be: following the death of his father, the king, his mum Gertrude (Tara Fitzgerald) has only gone and quickly remarried, to his uncle Claudius (Adrian Dunbar). The young man's dark thoughts are turbocharged by his encounter with a spirit purporting to be the ghost of his father, which tells Hamlet that Claudius was his killer. This

information effectively radicalises Hamlet, who abandons what limited jollity he may have had as he wholeheartedly resolves to destroy Claudius. It's an ugly, vicious kind of behaviour, fanatical and cruel, with the most obvious collateral being his girlfriend, Norah Lopez Holden's initially delightfully carefree Ophelia, who he gaslights relentlessly and nastily (before, uh, killing her dad). Sure, there's no reason to doubt Dunbar's charismatic, diplomatic Claudius did in fact bump off his own brother. That one small point aside, however, and he genuinely seems like a decent guy: a slick politician, yes (a far cry from Dunbar's most famous character, brash DCI Hastings from 'Line of Duty'). But he's infinitely more pleasant than the mean, sulky Hamlet, and shows a real human concern for Ophelia that his stepson absolutely lacks – quite the opposite, in fact. This probably all sounds unspeakably grim, but it's actually a pretty funny 'Hamlet', frequently milked for levity, perhaps somewhat unshackled by its conviction that its hero is a douche. Joseph Marcell's Polonius still rambles on, but he has a puppyish enthusiasm for his old stories that's rather endearing. You can see the love the other characters hold for him. And Taz Skylar and Joana Borja make a memorable Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, a pair of vacuous, Insta-happy wreckheads who are mountingly alarmed by their old university pal's increasingly erratic behaviour. There's little doubt that it's a proper psycho move of Jumbo's Hamlet to have them offed. He is not wholly unpleasant, but he seems locked on his murderous path from the beginning: this Hamlet seems less actively hesitant than other interpretations; it's more a case of working up the courage to become a killer than having any real doubt he needs to kill. The shaven-headed Jumbo speaks the verse beautifully, chomping down on the elemental wildness of Shakespeare's language. There is even something a little old-fashioned about her booming performance, which feels like it centres the words over the sort of delicately worked psychological acuity we've come to expect from recent. London Danes, more in the lineage of Olivier or Gielgud than Rory Kinnear or Andrew Scott. But she combines it with a modern sense of livewire menace: I don't think Hersov's production really comes with 'a concept', but it certainly explores the idea that Hamlet is not a nice guy: something, it has to be said, that is extremely borne out by the text. And for what it's worth, I very much read the character as male. Inevitably there is a sense of androgyny at play. But Hamlet's pronouns remain he/him, and Jumbo's loud, performatively brooding anger is in a tradition of tortured, Byronic masculinity. The huge downside of this is that having Hamlet as a dick all the way through doesn't make for an especially moving end. In fact it's something of a relief when it's all over. His poetic meditations on death feel legitimate still, an unhappy man rationalising his decision to commit to a path of no going back. But although his old friends seem shocked by the change in him, there is little sense of what he was like before. Hersov's production is slick, watchable and amusing, with big, charismatic turns from Jumbo, Dunbar, Lopez Holden, Marcell and Fitzgerald. Anna Fleischle's set of three tarnished glass monoliths is very cool. It's a fine production in many, many ways, and certainly unusually zippy and accessible. But ultimately it's not very tragic and that's a problem with a tragedy: this is a thrilling three-hour ride, but ultimately a shallow one. At the very end, Hamlet's improbably loyal BFF Horatio is in bits. But we're not. And that's selling 'Hamlet' very short.

## CURRENT

## London Theatreviews

### YOUNG VIC

\*\*\*CHANGING DESTINY by BEN OKRI director KWAME KWEI-ARMAH set, costume SIR DAVID ADJAYE, ADJAYE ASSOCIATES lights JACKIE SHEMESH sound design, musical director XANA composer TUNDE JEGENDE projections DUNCAN MCLEAN movement director RACHAEL NANYONJO fight director YARIT DOR with JOAN IYIOLA, ASHLEY ZHANGAZHA

#### Blanche Marvin Critique

The review in What's On Stage captures the essence of this highly sophisticated drama that appears to be simple despite its intelligence. I recommend the reading of What's On stage Reviews for this particular show. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

#### Whats On Stage (\*\*\*\*) Written by Sarah Crompton

We're so used to hearing the stories of the ancients Greeks and early Christians, to reading their dilemmas into our lives today. So it's fascinating suddenly to encounter Ben Okri's version of Sinuhe, a 4000-year-old poem from ancient Egypt, and to recognise that the questions it poses are remarkably similar. The story of the young warrior Sinuhe, forced into exile when he is falsely suspected of conspiring to kill a corrupt Pharaoh, suffering the slings and arrows of fortune as a refugee in other lands, encountering both acceptance and hostility, and longing all the while for his homeland, recalls texts as varied as Hamlet, The Odyssey and Oedipus Rex. Okri has deliberately shaped it into an African saga, making sure in his prologue that the audience remembers that this "mother civilisation" is "the initiation chamber for future civilisations" but its universal resonance is loud. Director Kwame Kwei-Armah opts for a direct and simple staging. Architect David Adjaye provides a set of two pyramids, one inverted and on top of the other. The one beneath unfolds to provide the playing area; the one above is illuminated by images that range from the shifting sands of deserts, to the faces of Sinuhe's accusers, to hieroglyphics recording his journey through different lands. It's starkly effective, enhanced by Jackie Shemesh's bold lighting, which turns a strip of stage into a sward of green, or a threatening arena for a shadow fight, and by XANA's sound design which sets voices echoing around the auditorium. Tunde Jegede's music and Rachael Nanyonjo's movement are both perfectly pitched, heightening emotion without ever becoming too intrusive. It all starts a bit slowly, with the two actors – Joan Iyiola and Ashley Zhangazha – embarking on a game of rock/paper/scissors to discover who takes the role of Sinuhe and who plays his separated soul – and a host of other characters. The early part of the narrative is confusing too; it doesn't establish why we should care about this particular man or why he runs when he is not guilty of anything. But as it unfolds and explains itself, it exerts a more and more powerful grip, infinitely helped by the communicative and attractive presence of the two actors. In the performance I saw Iyiola played Sinuhe, while Zhangazha took on multiple roles, with simple changes of



costume making the switches clear. Both embody action beautifully: Zhangazha becomes an old king by dint of simply bending his knees and standing with his legs a little apart; Iyiola expresses her sorrow by seeming to let pain run through her body, making it a physical sense. Sometimes Okri's text becomes a little too emphatic – he has made his point about the mistreatment of foreigners long before he makes Sinuhe voice it – but the deeper themes of the play, about the need for each person to be true to themselves, shine through. At just over an hour, the evening doesn't outstay its welcome; has a freshness and a warmth that make it the perfect re-entry point for the Young Vic's return.

## CURRENT

## London Theatreviews

### HAMPSTEAD

\*\*THE TWO CHARACTER PLAY by TENNESSEE WILLIAMS director SAM YATES designer ROSANA VIZE lights LEE CURRAN sound DAN BALFOUR musical director BEN HOLDER with KATE O'FLYNN clare, ZUBIN VARLA felice

#### Blanche Marvin Critique

The less said about this the better. Let the two stars speak for themselves. Other reviews will bring out the points in this production. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

#### Guardian (\*\*\*) Written by Arifa Akbar

Williams called it "my most beautiful play since Streetcar" but unlike that better-known work, this slice of southern gothic is overtly complex, experimental and sometimes confounding. Its perpetually shifting narrative ground features a play within a play, performed by a brother and sister who are actors on tour with a company that has left them behind – just like their dead parents. Clare (Kate O'Flynn) and Felice (Zubin Varla) decide the show must go on and stage a "two character play", slipping in and out of their performance to leave us wondering which part is the play and which their offstage reality or fantasy life. This brings deliberate confusion, with clever theatricality and some terrific song and dance numbers. The sibling intimacy is reminiscent of *The Glass Menagerie*, except more fractious and unsettling. Sam Yates's direction and the creepy shadows in Lee Curran's lighting design accentuate the disturbance felt by the siblings. Clare is too scared to go outside, and her agoraphobia bears resonances of lockdown; however much the siblings seek escape from the inside, they fear what lies outside and so stay stewing. It is about a brother and sister losing their grip on reality, but it is also about performance: how life and fiction can elide in the mind of the actor or writer, and how they can become trapped between both. Rosanna Vize's stage design never lets us forget there are two plays in operation, leaving all dramatic artifice exposed: the light rigging lowered at the start, the sound system at one side, cameras switched on to magnify the actors' faces on a back screen alongside the props and set strewn across the stage. O'Flynn and Varla are superb as the siblings, building an antagonistic intimacy and falling into strops or meltdowns. They bring an unexpected comedy too, which becomes a highlight: when their play begins, they switch from English accents to a hammy southern twang, and there is great wit to the improvised nature of the show they put on. But this comedy runs the risk of blunting the murderous edge to their relationship and we do not believe they hate each other, though Felice declares it. The play drives towards a certain ending and then withholds it, looping back on itself, and revolving in its own locked circuit of which we, the audience, are not a part. There is the uncomfortable sense by the end that these two characters are stranded inside their confined worlds, and we are stranded outside, doomed never to make contact.

## CURRENT

## London Theatreviews

### HAMPSTEAD

\*\*\*THE MEMORY OF WATER by SHELAGH STEPHENSON director ALICE HAMILTON designer ANNA REID lights JOHANNA TOWN composer HARRY BLAKE with LUCY BLACK teresa, KULVINDER GHIR frank, ADAM JAMES mike, CAROLINA MAIN catherine, LIZZY MCINNERNY vi, LAURA ROGERS mary

#### Blanche Marvin Critique

It was a moving production of a family of women in trying to recall their past lives. A simple but moving production. Well-acted. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

#### Guardian (\*\*\*) Written by Chris Wiegand

How should you behave when your mother's just died? There ought to be a Sudden Death Etiquette guide, suggests one of the sisters preparing for their mum's funeral in Shelagh Stephenson's play. That handbook probably wouldn't advise an immediate shag, guffawing with laughter or getting stoned. Finding oneself in the bedroom of the recently deceased, it is equally indecorous to dress up in her clothes, play with her breast pump or kiss your sister's husband. Such transgressions make Stephenson's play sound like a farce. But it precariously balances riotous humour with pathos by exploring the ways we view our parents. Characters openly discuss the nature of memory while specific incidents from their childhood are traded, distorted or misappropriated. The title refers to the concept that pure water can "remember" an essence of the substances that have dissolved in it. Aquatic imagery duly flows through the play: it is snowing when Teresa (Lucy Black), Mary (Laura Rogers) and Catherine (Carolina Main) arrive at their mum Vi's home, which overlooks an encroaching sea. "It'll take the house eventually," says Vi (Lizzy McInnerny), appearing before Mary in the first of a handful of dream sequences which are the play's strongest moments and leave you wanting the pair to talk more. Set designer Anna Reid and lighting designer Johanna Town practically submerge Vi's bedroom in shades of aquarium green, complete with shell-shaped light fixtures. The bedroom stretches across the full stage yet still feels claustrophobic. Light ripples like water on the wardrobe mirrors and above hang clouds that resemble water stains on a ceiling. The design

neatly captures the stasis of winter, of the sisters' lives and of those strange days between a death and a funeral. However, much of the play's humour seems frozen in time too, with flat routines about vitamin fads, leaves on railway lines and colonic irrigation. Although dope and whiskey are passed around, the comedy never achieves a true headiness and the sisters' quips and snipes don't always sting as they should. Still, the bond and the shifting dynamics between the women is handled well, as is the scene in which Teresa and her salesman husband, Frank (Kulvinder Ghir), bicker over the way they advertised themselves through the lonely hearts. Adam James is good as Mary's affably baffled, already married boyfriend and McInnery is superb as Vi, bracing in her bitterness and frustration as she contrasts her own life with her offspring's opportunities. It's the play's melancholia that lingers in the memory rather than the comedy.

### **Evening Standard (\*\*)** Written by Nick Curtis

Fuelled by whisky and marijuana, seismic revelations come thick, fast and improbable. Of course, bereavements trigger all sorts of emotions, but here the flashpoints often feel unearned or contrived. The play is pretty funny and well observed in its depiction of sisterly dynamics and the frantic nature of grief. But the central message is vague, and the script keeps shifting ground. Hamilton's production is polished, and all three lead actresses have fine moments. Rogers is nicely buttoned up as Mary, Black torridly unfulfilled as Teresa, and Main hilarious as the attention-seeking Catherine. The women take centre stage even if they are defined by their relationships to men as well as to their mother. The characters are willfully, infuriatingly inconsistent, though: heartbroken one moment, cheerful and conciliatory the next. Stephenson seems to delight in undercutting herself. Mary's very real trauma is upstaged by Frank's midlife crisis, in which he digresses about Inuits and Woody Allen movies. A reference to Teresa's first husband is thrown away in a row about the lies she and Frank told on the dating service through which they met. Pathos is always subverted by bathos. Also, the story takes place amid a blizzard that has stopped trains and diverted flights. Yet a hearse can deliver Vi's coffin to the house one night, but can't bring pallbearers the next. This bugged me more than I can possibly express.

## **CURRENT**

## **London Theatreviews**

### **THE OLD VIC**

\*\*\*CAMP SIEGFRIED by BESS WOHL director KATY RUDD décor, costume ROSANNA VIZE lights ROB CASEY sound IAN DICKINSON with PATSY FERRAN her, LUKE THALLON him

### **Blanche Marvin Critique**

It was an interesting subject to choose for writing in play form. Nothing extraordinary but rather simple approach to theatre. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

### **Time Out (\*\*\*\*) Written by Andrzej Lukowski**

Camp Siegfried was a real place: to all intents and purposes it was a Nazi summer camp that ran on Long Island in the '30s, indoctrinating young German-Americans in the wholesome family values of the Third Reich. It was a different time: America was going through one of its isolationist phases, fascism had not yet been discredited as an ideology, and it didn't seem unnatural in a country built on immigration to allow Germans to get up to German stuff. However, US playwright Bess Wohl's 'Camp Siegfried' is more subtle than just a historical drama about a place that now, of course, seems like a lurid historical anomaly. It follows two unnamed German-American teens, played by Patsy Ferran and Luke Thallon, who spend a summer, both magical and painful, together. In many ways, Wohl's drama isn't about fascism at all, but about two confused teenagers and the tentative ebb and flow of their relationship. It's based on a fairly familiar dynamic: she's the shy dork, he's the rugged jock. You wouldn't put them together... but they hit it off. And yet: does he really like her? Or does he just want to get laid, thinking the combination of her loneliness and confession to a previous fling with a married man means she'll be an easy target? What does she really want from him? Is it really a meeting of minds or is he just an emotional crutch to be discarded as her stature in the camp community grows? The truth is, neither of them really know what they want, or at least, their feelings constantly lurch and see-saw between extremes over a summer that would be emotionally trying for them even without the addition of Nazi indoctrination. It is, of course, utterly chilling when Ferran's character is rewarded for her hard work by being invited to address the camp, duly giving a thunderous speech extolling Hitler's peaceful virtues and denouncing the Jews. But the ideology underpinning the camp is less significant because it's what the two of them passionately believe – she says these things because she knows they're what she'll get applause for saying – than because the camp enables their worst instincts: violence, vengeance, contempt for the weak, and even ill-advised unprotected sex. Wohl's sensitively wrought play is not an apology for fascism, saying all Nazis are just mixed-up kids. But it is a drama about radicalisation, about two lonely teenagers who don't know how they feel about the world, being exposed to a monolithically certain belief system. Though both actors are considerably north of their teenage years (Ferran is 31, though, admittedly, she does still look about 12), they're both superb at conveying the embarrassment, fear and callousness of teenhood. Ferran is one of the very best actors out there, and she's on fine form here: her hangdog character looks suddenly electrified while she's making the speech, the approval of her peers jolting through her like a million volts as she mouths off Nazi formulae. It doesn't matter that she doesn't really seem to believe any of it yet. The drug of approval is enough to set her down a dark path – although that becomes derailed thanks to unexpected events on an unscheduled trip to New York City. Thallon's performance is bigger and broader: his character is simpler than hers, with an endearingly naive habit of constantly calling her a 'dummy'. But he has a beautiful moment where he quietly reflects on how he thought he'd killed a fellow camper during a wrestling match, and how for the 45 minutes he thought the other pupil was dead he felt different, indelibly a killer. His relief at the injured pupil's recovery is heartening... but again, his story doesn't quite take the path it seems to be set on. The parallels to contemporary America feel inevitable, but not really on-the-nose. I suspect it might have landed a little differently

if Trump were still in the White House, but as it is, it feels more a universal drama about teenagers and radicalisation: you could probably draw a line to Shamima Begum as easily as the January 6 mob. Katy Rudd's production keeps things fairly simple, with the stage virtually bare apart from a backdrop of blank vertical bars. Ferran and Thallon's movements are carefully choreographed by Rachel-Leah Hosker, from awkward distance to stylised passion, and Rosanna Vize's set's cavernous emptiness is occasionally enlivened by disturbing footage of Nazi rallies or impressionistic projections of sea mist. But it's certainly not the most overly theatrical of shows: truth be told, it wouldn't lose a lot if it was a radio play. Possibly the vast Old Vic isn't the obvious venue for it. But that's fine, because I'm sure 'Camp Siegfried' will receive plenty more productions in years to come: sensitive dramas about teenagers and poignant tragedies about radicalisation are not the sort of things that seem liable to date, and Wohl's play is a fine example of both.

## CURRENT

## London Theatreviews

### THE OLD VIC

\*\*BAGDAD CAFE by PERCY & ELEONORE ADLON after CALLING YOU by BOB TELSON adaptor EMMA RICE director EMMA RICE décor LEZ BROTHERSTON with VICKI MORTIMER lights MALCOLM RIPPETH composer IAN ROSS choreography ETTA MURFITT musical director NADINE LEE puppetry director JOHN LEADER with LE GATEAU CHOCOLAT sal, PATRYCJA KUJAWSKA jasmin münchenstettner, NADINE LEE musician, EMLYN MAILLARD musician/lost traveller, SANDRA MARVIN brenda/lost traveller, KANDAKA MOORE phyllis/lost traveller, etc.

#### Blanche Marvin Critique

This was a production that could have been left unproduced. It captured none of the film that had an exciting story to tell. Somehow or other the essence of the piece was lost in this theatrical version. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

#### Variety: Written by David Benedict

"Life is a cabaret, old chum." Oh wait, wrong show. Or is it? Taking on Percy and Eleonore Adlon's 1987 movie "Bagdad Cafe," Emma Rice's music-filled, uber-quirky production boasts everything from onstage guitar, keyboard and drums to puppets, mime, model cars, line-dancing, comedy accents, solo and ensemble numbers, a slash curtain and glitter guns. But despite its heart being manifestly in the right place — definitely, nay defiantly, on its sleeve — the whole thing winds up being considerably less than the sum of its parts. Rice has always been at her best with a strong script, as in her ravishing re-imagining of Noël Coward's classic film "Brief Encounter," or a strong structure, as in her 2017 musical "Romantics Anonymous" (which was on the verge of an international tour beginning in Washington D.C. when COVID-19 struck). But the slighter the narrative the more obviously effortful her work becomes, which makes the play with music "Bagdad Cafe" a particularly tricky proposition, since the screenplay is long on mood and short on tension. The narrative remains the same: Brenda (nicely earthy and addled Sandra Marvin) is already close to the end of her tether running her run-down, middle-of-the-Mojave-desert motel in California's Bagdad with a feckless staff and family when everything is thrown into relief. In walks a mysterious, taciturn, coffee-loving German woman improbably named Jasmin Münchenstettner (Patrycja Kujawska), dressed from hat to shoes in traditional, buttoned-up Bavarian costume. Her extended presence brings hope and unexpected happiness to everyone. While the film lacked dramatic action, that absence was replaced by close-up observation developing and deepening audiences' responses to the characters caught in controlled strangeness. Everything was, literally, brought into focus. On stage, robbed of close-up and stillness, with Lez Brotherston and Vicki Mortimer's multiple little set-pieces being comically wheeled on and off, details don't resonate: everything feels diffuse. To make up for that, Rice adopts a mostly jocular tone, playing up the playfulness of the cast of eccentrics. Cleaving, for the most part, to the film's dialogue, her script fails to provide them with balancing depth but instead, as director, Rice gives everyone idiosyncrasies, routines and tricks to perform. This is all seized upon by the highly skilled company with evident delight, especially Ewan Wardrop, winningly delineating and dancing his way through a stream of sweetly off-beat characters. By contrast, Kujawska offers a distilled, beautifully unfussy performance as Jasmin as both the unintended catalyst and, unexpectedly, as a violinist accompanying Salomé (Nandi Bhebhe), who devotes herself to playing Bach rather than mothering her child (played by a puppet). Operatic bass Le Gateau Chocolat is wasted as Brenda's estranged husband, sitting in a car off the edge of the stage almost throughout but lending rich heft to the ensemble's choral moments. The show's real problem is that little of this coalesces. There's plenty of theatricality but the drama is so threadbare that both of Brenda and Jasmin's would-be strong moments of reconciliation are defined by sentimentality rather than true sentiment, since any emotion elicited by their sudden shared understanding feels unearned. With so much stage activity, "Bagdad Café" is certainly diverting. The trouble is, it's diverting you from the realization that, as Gertrude Stein said of another Californian location, there's no there there.

## CURRENT

## London Theatreviews

### THE ROMAN THEATRE OF VERULAMIUM

No reviews, description of the theatre itself.

#### Blanche Marvin Comment

It is rather exciting to be able to see as much of an ancient theatre under today's circumstances and realise the

importance of the actual theatre as an art form and the deep possibility of communicating how the old invade the new.

#### **Info:**

Built on the site of one of the largest Roman cities in Britain, Verulamium Museum is filled with ancient treasures and some of the finest mosaics outside of the Mediterranean. Bring the entire family and explore the wonders of Roman life, immerse yourself in recreated Roman rooms and admire the craftsmanship of the intricate large-scale mosaics on display. You can also see recent discoveries such as the Sandridge Hoard, a collection of 159 Roman gold coins. After your visit to Verulamium Museum you can explore remains of the Roman town in Verulamium Park. Directly outside the museum you can visit the Roman Hypocaust, and if you venture a little further, you can see visit the Roman Theatre and see the Roman city walls too. Today, Verulamium Park boasts a lovely lake, plenty of wildlife, and children's play areas.

## **nonSUBSIDISED**

### **CURRENT**

### **London Theatreviews**

#### **BRIDGE**

**\*\*WHITE NOISE** by SUZAN-LORI PARKS director POLLY FINDLAY décor LIZZIE CLACHAN lights JACKIE SHEMESH costumes NATALIE PRYCE musical director MARC TRITSCHLER sound DONATO WHARTON producer with KEN NWOSU leo, HELENA WILSON dawn, FAITH OMOLE misha, JAMES CORRIGAN ralph

#### **Blanche Marvin Critique**

The attempted making fun of racial issues while covering serious territory is a noble attempt but it is so intellectual in its approach to the subject that theatricality in a sense is lost in the serious intent despite the fact that this is basically a play with humor. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

#### **Time Out (\*\*\*\*) Written by Andrzej Lukowski**

The premise of 'White Noise' is an eyebrow-raising one. Cursed with insomnia since the age of five, Leo – who is Black – has recently got rid of the white noise machine which his best friend Ralph – who is white – bought him. It helped him sleep: but it killed his artistic inspiration, the echo of its sound filling his head even during the day. As the play begins, he's also just been roughed up by the cops for no reason beyond his race, and his goody-two-shoes white lawyer girlfriend Dawn wants him to sue. Leo has a different idea though: he has concluded that he'll feel a lot happier if he... signs himself away into slavery to Ralph, reasoning that racist cops won't mess with a white man's property. It all sounds a bit yikes, like you're being set up for some sort of didactic, bombastic bad-taste satire. But 'White Noise' is by Suzan-Lori Parks, one of America's greatest playwrights, sadly little-seen over here (albeit largely because of her glacial pace of output). In 'White Noise' she wields absurdity like a delicate medical scalpel: it's there almost constantly, key to the operation, but she controls it with deadly serious, laser focussed intent. That's not to say 'White Noise' isn't funny. Lots of things are funny about it, notably James Corrigan's 'righteous Ralph' and his horribly gripping descent from navel-gazing right-on bore into a smirking, man-bunned member of a clandestine club for rich white men who feel oppressed. Or there's Ask A Black, the hysterically lowest common denominator web phone-in show that Ralph's Black girlfriend Misha (Faith Omole) runs from their apartment, her on-air persona a hammy exaggeration of Black womanhood. And there is a wonderfully whimsical joke about the four characters having formerly been in a modestly successful pop-punk band at college: at one point they perform their solitary hit, dead straight. But Parks's play and Polly Findlay's production take the funniest stuff seriously. It never showboats, or milks a gag. And while it seems profoundly unlikely that a real Leo would even consider selling himself into slavery (something clearly massively illegal), 'White Noise' just goes with it. It's not an angry play. Rather, it's a questing, forensic one, that uses Parks's mischievous humour and Albee-esque sense of character to take a brutally hard look at the constructedness of 'tolerent' Western multicultural society. In many ways Parks's thesis is that liberal society is in a grand act of self-deception, largely underpinned by the power actually lying with white men anyway. But people sleep better when they drown their fears out in white noise, and the liberal lie is objectively preferable to the sort of morality-free nativism Ralph descends to. It's thorny and thoughtful, not nihilistic but possessed of a morbid fascination for the society it is dissecting. It's also finely acted: Corrigan is hypnotically awful as Ralph, but it's the sheer sense of damage that Ken Nwosu conveys as Leo that gives it its emotional heft, and Omole and Helena Wilson are great as Mischa and Dawn, both flawed and mercurial and less virtuous than they aspire to be, but also both representing a more nuanced middle ground between Leo and Ralph's extremes. 'White Noise' is only the third Suzan-Lori Parks play to get a major London production since 2003. Odds are that it's the last of her singular voice we'll be hearing for a while - so cut through the noise and come down.

### **CURRENT**

### **London Theatreviews**

#### **BRIDGE**

**\*\*BACH & SONS** by NINA RAINÉ director NICHOLAS HYTNER décor VICKI MORTIMER lights JON CLARK costumes KHADIJA RAZA music spervisor GEORGE FENTON sound GARETH FRY with SIMON RUSSELL BEALE johann sebastian bach, PANDORA COLIN maria barbara bach, RACHEAL OFORI anna magdalena wilcke, SAMUEL BLENKIN

carl philipp emanuel bach, WILLIAM BARKER/TEDDY BUTTON/ARDAN HENNELLY/HARRY WESTON, RUTH LASS  
katharina, PRAVESSH RANA frederick the great

### **Blanche Marvín Critique**

The actual writing of the play was difficult to follow. The relationship of father and son is established well at the beginning and does not advance much further from the early points being made. The play is not well written and the production tried to compensate for its lack of ingenuity. The performance of Simon Russell Beale was a deeply sincere and moving portrayal, but the sum does not total up to the whole. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

### **Guardian (\*\*) Written by Arifa Akbar**

Study of the man and his music hits a flat note. Simon Russell Beale stars in a visually impressive production of Nina Raine's play that never quite gets off the ground. Raine presents a middle-aged Bach (Simon Russell Beale) with studiousness and teases out power battles between him and his sons Wilhelm (Doggie McMeekin) and Carl (Samuel Blenkin), but her research hangs heavily and leaves the drama often inert, speaking its ideas rather than enacting them. Directed by Nicholas Hytner, it is a visual spectacle despite this. Vicki Mortimer's set is little short of stunning and Jon Clark's lighting evokes gorgeous, candlelit paintings. It is all the more frustrating that even this cannot lift the play off the ground. Her script tells us that the composer was obsessive and exacting in his art, believing his music to be channelled from divine source. The first half feels static and filled with backstory – how Bach was orphaned as a child, how he stabbed a bassoonist and served time in prison, that he hailed from a long line of musicians. This exposition robs the opportunity for the human drama to come alive. And for a life that contained enormous losses – 10 of Bach's 20 children died in infancy – these are reported rather than felt as tragedies in the play. Bach's musical theories are delivered in stagnant conversation. The second half is stronger and Bach's fractious relationship with Wilhelm and Carl gains depth. The composer's intimidating meeting with Frederick the Great (Pravessh Rana, camp and menacing by turns) is faithfully rendered and contains some dread. But Bach's death scene, however exquisitely captured by light and shade, left me dry-eyed. Beale is stately and lugubrious, if not as irascible as Bach was reported to be, and he comes to emanate grief-soaked sadness and regret. The strongest performances are from Blenkin and McMeekin as the sons in awe of their genius father but cowed by the shadow of that genius and resentful of his flaws as a family man. The times when the play feels most alive are when Bach's music is performed in small but gorgeous excerpts from his fugues, cantatas and concertos, although they seem removed from the greater drama, and do not add to its emotional charge. Anna Magdalena (Racheal Ofori), the soprano who becomes his second wife, remains a nondescript figure but sings beautifully. It is maddening to see all the signs of a powerful play folded inside a frustratingly flat one.

## **CURRENT**

## **London Theatre reviews**

### **CORONET**

\*\*THE LODGER by ROBERT HOLMAN director GERALDINE ALEXANDER décor, costume RICHARD KENT lights DAVID PLATER composer SIMON SLATER with PENNY DOWNIE esther, SYLVESTRA LE TOUZEL dolly, MATTHEW TENNYSON jude, INIKI MARIANO anila

### **Blanche Marvín Critique**

The play was badly written with no sense of theatricality and the production added no quality that might camouflage the lack in the play itself. There was little to compensate for anything in the production. Best to leave it end there. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

### **Guardian (\*\*) Written by Arifa Akbar**

Robert Holman's play contains some great riches. A story of sisters and midlife reckonings, it puts two older women centre stage and comes with a seismic sibling betrayal. The Lodger is also the story of good and bad mothers, how the young relate to the old, and how the old nurture the young. Directed by Geraldine Alexander, it takes wildly unexpected turns and is stuffed full of wise statements about life, love and death. It does not feel like a single play and herein lies the problem: too many stories and ideas jostle for focus. It begins with a bristling reunion as Dolly (Sylvestra Le Touzel) arrives in London from Harrogate to visit her sister Esther (Penny Downie), a successful novelist, following their mother's death. There are revelations, fights and forgiveness, alongside a parallel storyline of Esther's young lodger, Jude (Matthew Tennyson), who has suffered maternal abuse and for whom Esther is a substitute mother of sorts. A subplot about Jude's once-famous musician grandfather takes us away to Norway where a love story develops between Jude and Anila (Iniki Mariano), a maths student he meets on a park bench, and who turns out to be his cousin. This romance, unconvincing in both its beginning and its ending, seems like a distraction from the greater intrigue around the sisters and Jude's relationship with Esther – their affection remains vague and underexplored. Le Touzel excels as Dolly, the more opinionated and unfulfilled sister who has just left her unfaithful husband of 46 years, and whose internal midlife audit includes sadness over her childlessness. Esther is the more opaque and complicated sister and Downie appears less certain in the role. Tennyson is sparky in parts but seems like an impassive onlooker for the first part of the play. Another tangential plotline turns him into a successful playwright and this, too, feels unconvincing. Characters proclaim they are "vulnerable" or "conflicted" rather than showing us so, and there are sudden shifts from anger or trauma to everyday observation and whimsy that sound discordant in their delivery. They talk in statements rather than truly talking to each other. Richard Kent's set design is sleek and serene, conjuring the effect of inside and out, dry land and beachy shingle, both at once. Its lingering beauty mirrors a script that is just as lyrical in parts but also frustratingly ungainly.

### **Evening Standard (\*\*\*) Written by Nick Curtis**

A new play by Robert Holman, the most instinctive and humane of British playwrights, is something to celebrate, but *The Lodger* exasperates as well as enthralls. The result is an unbalanced affair that requires a wildly eccentric central section and a fourth character that together undermine Holman's reputation for emotional truth. Geraldine Alexander's production is measured and mostly quite beautiful. She draws performances that are imperfect but distinctive, by turns assertive and skinless, from Tennyson, Penny Downie, Sylvestra Le Touzel and Iniki Mariano in that impossible fourth role. The subject is love that is withheld, foregone, difficult or provisional. After the death of their mother at 98, Harrogate housewife Dolly (Le Touzel) detonates a lifetime of secrets and recriminations with prodigal sister Esther (Downie), a novelist and philosophy professor she's barely seen for 30 years. Dolly, so named because of a childhood fascination with dolls that increased exponentially in her childless married life, is nonplussed that Esther shares her London flat and Dungeness cottage with enigmatic, "paper-thin" twentysomething Jude (Tennyson). Is he a surrogate son, a disgustingly young lover, or the lodger he claims to be? Thwarted motherhood and illicit impulses run through the play like letters through rock. Things go wrong in the narrative when Jude is revealed to have secretly become a successful playwright, having had a show on at the Royal Court (one of Holman's haunts) without Esther noticing. In my experience, things often go wrong when writers write about writing. Especially, as here, when a writer writes about two writers' complicated feelings about each other's writing. Anyway, this plot twist sends the story on a wild jaunt to Norway and the suggestion that Jude has somehow written his own future, and a half-Indian soulmate, Anila, into existence. Though Iniki Mariano winningly delivers the vulnerability and frankness that's Holman's hallmark in this role, this character is as improbable as she is short-lived. The other actors are in gravy. Downie and Le Touzel get a meaty, combative sister act to sink their teeth into. Tennyson displays his range as an abused boy with OCD who's grown a looming, clever carapace. Holman's characters usually say what they feel, then what they mean, more openly and succinctly than we ever could. That's true here too, but for a significant chunk of the play, I simply didn't believe them.

## **emptySPACE**

### **CURRENT**

### **London Theatreviews**

#### **JERMYN STREET**

\*\*\*RELATIVELY SPEAKING by ALAN AYCKBOURN director ROBIN HERFORD décor MICHAEL HOLT costume NATALIE TITCHENER lights MATTHEW BISS with CHRISTOPHER BONWELL greg, RACHEL FIELDING sheila, LIANNE HARVEY ginny, JAMES SIMMONS Philip

#### **Blanche Marvin Critique**

There is no doubt that Alan Ayckbourn can have a twist of humour that is totally original. He can take the cliché and make it a lively exercise as he does in this production which is full of intrigue and the reviews reveal the plot in its many diversions. There's fun, laughter and a good theatre experience. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

#### **Everything Theatre (\*\*\*\*) Written by Mike Carter**

At 82, Sir Alan Ayckbourn is firmly established as a grand old man of British theatre. He has, touch wood, seemingly avoided the self-destructive controversies that have befallen some of his contemporaries. (I mean just stop talking, David Hare!) Resolutely 'uncancelled' Ayckbourn, fortunately, remains a writer we are still allowed to like. Given this status, it is easy to forget there was a time he was an unknown. Back in the mid-1960s, *Relatively Speaking* was his first monster hit – earning 300 West End performances and a congratulatory telegram from Noël Coward, no less. There's a risk to looking back, of course. Would it have aged well? This is the question hanging in the air as we take our seats in the small but beautifully formed Jermyn Street Theatre auditorium. Talking of size, it seems unfair to blame a venue for being a bit tight but while the show's chintzy sets are exactly what you'd picture for a farce, they feel distractingly cramped here, clipping the actors' wings somewhat. No matter, the writing is the big draw here. Ayckbourn's quick-witted catalogue of misunderstandings and crossed purposes is deceptive. He is so easy on the ear; it is easy to miss quite how brilliant his dialogue is. If he was a New Yorker, Ayckbourn would be lauded for his genius. Here, we rather take him for granted as a parochial Home Counties writer. It is a regrettable English attitude born, I fear, of snobbery. Still, it is a shame to dwell on the vagaries of criticism when *Relatively Speaking's* text is such a joy. Farcical confusion and wonderful plotting spin and spin. It's dizzying right from the moment we first see nice but dim Greg wake in his girlfriend Ginny's swinging London flat. It's playwriting as acrobatics. A delightful triple somersault there, an effortless backflip here and more than one bravado swan dive that makes you catch your breath. It's heady stuff if you are a writing fan. It's a masterclass if you do any yourself. This revival, which began life out of town at The Mill at Sonning, is stoically period including the aforementioned sets. A painted drape arrives that will feel charmingly nostalgic or, frankly, a bit tired depending on your point of view. Costumes, especially Miss Harvey's in a bright Carnaby Street yellow, also leave us in no doubt where we are. As slightly dippy, but adorable Greg, Christopher Bonwell also harks back to the play's original era. He brilliantly channels the good egg bonhomie of stars of the day such as Jim Dale, Roy Castle and Richard Briers. As Ginny, Lianne Harvey does a grand job personifying the liberated swinging 60s too. She mercifully avoids 'Dolly Bird' tropes and brings a solid groundedness to her characterisation alongside all the humour. We care about this young couple's romance because, despite the ridiculous events surrounding them, it feels genuine. As the other couple in this strong quartet of actors, James Simmons and Rachel Fielding hit every delightful comic beat they are asked to. Their portrayal of a middle-aged couple bumbling along through their long marriage gains some of the evening's biggest, and most knowing, laughs. It is hard to argue that direction from Robert Herford, a long-time collaborator of Ayckbourn and former artistic director of the Stephen Joseph Theatre

in Scarborough, brings much new to the party. Why should he? His choices are solid, but pacy and laugh-friendly. This all means fans of theatre, and playwriting especially, should get themselves a ticket. In a world where we are re-evaluating so much of what has gone before, revisiting truly great work like *Relatively Speaking* makes for a thoroughly enjoyable and worthwhile night out.

## CURRENT

## London Theatreviews

### NEW DIORAMA

\*\*DECIPHERING by NEW DIORAMA THEATRE and CURIOS DIRECTIVE director JACK LOWE décor ZOË HURWITZ lights KATHERINE GRAHAM composition THEO WHITWORTH producer SUZIE KIRK DUMITRU with AMANDA HADINGUE, ASHA SYLVESTRE, FARAH QADIR, LEWIS MACKINNON, MOHAMAD FAIZAL ABDULLAH

#### Blanche Marvin Critique

A disappointment in its actual staging which never enlightened the text of the piece. A sad tale of misfortune in that the production undermined the actual script. Better luck next time. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

#### Guardian (\*\*\*\*) Written by Miriam Gillinson

There is layer upon layer to Curious Directive's new work, which excavates the past – and takes us deep down into a network of caves in Indonesia – in order to illuminate our present. It's an impressively intricate show, created in collaboration with Indonesian artist collective Bombo, whose video footage of the local caves and landscape lights up the show. But for all its complexity, *Deciphering* is essentially a love letter to learning, brimming with curiosity and suffused with a childish sense of wonder. At the centre of these crisscrossing layers is Elise, played by three different actors at three different life stages. Young Elise occupies the central stage space: a colourful and cluttered school in Indonesia, where Scottish teacher Mr Robins will inspire a lifelong passion for learning. Above the stage – in Zoë Hurwitz's packed but nimble set – is a jumble of scaffolding where twentysomething Elise prowls restlessly, unsure of where to land. And deep below the stage lies a dark cave, where a middle-aged Elise will eventually discover a scientific marvel, as well as a part of herself she thought had disappeared for good. The audience wears headphones throughout. It's a neat touch from director Jack Lowe, which creates a surprisingly gentle and private atmosphere. Elise's story, about a young girl learning to let her passions guide her, begins to feel like our own. The three versions of Elise weave through each other's lives, literally swooping down from the scaffolding above or crawling up from the darkness below. Stephanie Street compels as the fortysomething Elise who lights up amid the mysterious gloom of the caves and re-finds herself in the ancient symbols scrawled across the walls. Legally-required role swapping means young Elise is played by Farah Qadir – so on the night in question there's not the real-life mother-daughter actor relationship publicised online. However, there's still strong chemistry between all the actors and Qadir's young Elise and Lewis Mackinnon's softly spoken Mr Robins work particularly well together. There's something about having a child actor in their shared scenes that makes the lessons feel very live, very real, very now. When young Elise dances, she is really dancing – not just play-acting. Same for when she laughs, listens and learns. It's an amazing sensation, utterly immersed in the present but also filled with the promise of what this young actor, with the help of art and education, might one day become.

## CURRENT

## London Theatreviews

### MENIER CHOCOLATE FACTORY

\*\*\*\*INDECENT by PAULA VOGEL director REBECCA TAICHMAN choreography DAVID DORFMAN décor RICCARDO HERNANDEZ costume EMILY REBHOLZ lights CHRISTOPHER AKERLIND musical supervision LISA GUTKIN music LISA GUTKIN, AARON HALVA musical direction MERLIN SHEPHERD musicians MERLIN SHEPHERD, ANNA LOWENSTEIN, JOSH MIDDLETON with FINBAR LYNCH lemml, CORY ENGLISH actor, BEVERLEY KLEIN actor, MOLLY OSBORNE actor, PETER POLYCARPOU actor, ALEXANDRA SILBER actor, JOSEPH TIMMS actor

#### Blanche Marvin Critique

A fabulous production within genius staging on a subject that was very moving. This was a heightened theatrical experience of an exquisite production. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

#### Guardian (\*\*\*\*) Written by Mark Lawson

Vogel's Tony award-winner *Indecent* begins with a controversial text being privately read in a European household. She sets out from 1907 Poland with a dining-table read of *God of Vengeance*, a drama by a young Yiddish writer, Sholem Asch. Now almost unknown, but globally successful enough to have reached Broadway in 1923, Asch's work attracted opposing intolerance – antisemites finding it too Jewish, orthodox worshippers not Jewish enough – but thematically it was precociously tolerant. A lesbian love story sub-plot – the first on the American stage – brought US courts and Senate to the stage door. Structurally, *Indecent* is a play within a play, positing that we are watching performances across many years by a Yiddish theatre company of a production about the life, despite numerous death threats, of *God of Vengeance*. With spectacular dexterity of voice (speech and song), body and costume, seven actors share, with only spasmodic confusion, 42 roles, ranging from a Warsaw tailor to a Nobel prize winning American playwright. A klezmer band trio is integrated into a Rebecca Taichman production full of visual coups. Projected text falls across faces and the stage like a snowstorm. As the years tick down like a bomb, the defining moral horror of the 20th century waits at the end of the fuse. Having explored – from fresher perspectives than Stoppard – the histories of antisemitism, Jewish culture and the debate between assimilation and celebration of identity, Vogel then includes gruesome 1940s images so familiar

from other plays and movies that indirect reference might have been more effective. Though finishing in the 1950s, *Indecent* throws shadows beyond. Philip Roth, like Asch, later suffered the double jeopardy of being attacked by antisemites and accused of antisemitism by some Jews. Parallels may also be seen with the current cultural conflict over what should be said and by whom. *Indecent* is a brainy play staged with the panache of a musical.

### **Evening Standard (\*\*\*) Written by Nick Curtis**

The first lesbian kiss on the Broadway stage occurred in 1923. That's one of many things I learned from Paula Vogel's fascinating but overwrought play. Vogel uses the creation and early performance history of Sholem Asch's Yiddish drama *The God of Vengeance* to map the experience of European and American Jews in the first half of the 20th century. Director Rebecca Taichman – who won a Tony for the 2017 New York production – draws moving performances from a tight, seven-strong ensemble backed by a three-piece klezmer band, on a stage bare apart from a gold proscenium arch and a few chairs. This simplicity is undercut by a deliberate staginess that sometimes irks, and a tendency to mawkishness. *Warsaw, 1907: Asch* unveils a script about a brothel-keeper who commissions an expensive Torah to mitigate his sins, only to hurl it at his daughter after she falls in love with a prostitute. His fellow Jewish writers are scandalized: "burn it," says one. But the play becomes a hit across Europe and in Manhattan's Yiddish Bowery theatre with Austrian actor Rudolph Schildkraut (a scenery-chewing Peter Polycarpou) in the lead. On Broadway, however, its debate about religion, love and humanity is twisted into melodrama and the cast and crew are charged with obscenity. The prosecution is instigated by a rabbi, fearful the play's inflammatory scenes will further stoke the antisemitism simmering in New York society. Eugene O'Neill tries to defend the play. Asch, obsessed and depressed by pogroms in Europe, won't defend it himself, fearful his English isn't good enough. The question of who gets to speak hangs over the play: Asch gives voice to a prostitute but talks over his own wife. Subsequently, we follow the fate of stage manager Lemml (a soft, still Finbar Lynch) from the Lodz ghetto to a concentration camp. This isn't a spoiler: it's clear from the start where the story will end. A post-script where Asch is hounded from America by Senator Joe McCarthy in 1952 heavily underlines the themes of persecution and writers' responsibility to their work. There's lots to chew on here: perhaps too much. The cast switch between Yiddish, accented and unaccented English, with Hebrew and English subtitles projected behind. The staging is inventive, with one a great coup de theatre, where we finally see the pivotal scene from *The God of Vengeance* that first inspired Vogel. Alongside veterans like Lynch, Polycarpou and Beverley Klein, relative newcomer Molly Osborne confirms the promise she showed in *Fiddler on the Roof* at the Menier and in the West End in 2018/19. The arch theatricality of the acting may be a reference to the way things were done in Yiddish theatre, but alongside some clumsy, declamatory dialogue, it robs the play of power. I still found the story intriguing, though, and it's great to have this eccentric, unpredictable venue back in action.

## **CURRENT**

## **London Theatreviews**

### **STONE NEST**

\*\*MYTHOSPHERE creator, writer, producer and director INNA DULERAYN lights JACKIE SHEMESH costumes ANNA SMIRNOVA music IRAIDA YUSUPOVA motion graphics and animation MASHA YUKHANANOV producer BACCHAE PRODUCTIONS, ISHAN SANJAY DESHPANDE, MARIA DULERAYN with EDYTA BUDNIK girl, LUCIENNE DESCHAMPS granny, SAM KIPLING bird 1/anri/olivia, SCOTT BROOKSBANK bird 2/joshua, ANGLE KWOK bird 3/betsy, ELISA MAMMOLITI bird 4/councilor

### **Blanche Marvin Critique**

The first half of this interesting production takes one's breath away but sadly in the second half, it dulls the senses. However, there is enough magic in the production to be fascinating and compensates for the ill wind that blows no good. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

### **Guardian (\*\*\*) Written by Kate Wyver**

Under the arches of an old Welsh chapel, beaked angels sing to a little lost girl. Inspired by ancient folklore and performed through psychedelic multimedia, this Russian-UK collaboration is a wild, radically uneven ride that believes in the power of magic and the strength of imagination. Enormous stretches of gauze fill the gaps of the beautiful, crumbly building. Behind them, our cast are part shrouded in near-constant hallucinatory projections. The first half of this show, created by Inna Dulerayn, has utter clarity in its strangeness. The story moves gently between a young girl (Edyta Budnik) reading from her diary – plain, clear prose about being bullied at school and escaping to the magical land of Mythosphere v and interludes of opera from the angelic birds who live there. While the pace needs switching up, there is much that amazes: the creatures' costumes, with gorgeous, ribbed cloaks and glittering wings, outfits so solid they'd stand up by themselves; the eerily beautiful video; the sublime singing, particularly Sam Kipling's stunning falsetto. But in the much longer second half, the former restraint breaks apart. The show loses much of its coherence, the videos veer obnoxiously off-piste, the singing is abandoned, and uncomfortable views about mental illness are rattled off. Nothing connects, and it starts to feel interminably long. The saving grace of this act is our new narrator, Lucienne Deschamps. Curled up in front of her television, she tells us about the slow rhythm of her days, of coffee mornings and mercurial cupcakes. In her deadpan mundanity, Deschamps is cacklingly funny. But the show around her dulls and drags. Underneath the chaos, this is a heartfelt story of a girl telling stories to escape the real world. It's just disappointing there's so much else in the way.



## WATERMILL

\*\*\*HOUNDS OF THE BASKERVILLES by ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE director ABIGAIL PICKARD PRICE costume EMILY BARRATT with ROXANA BARTLE, ROSALIND LAILEY, JAMES MACK

**Blanche Marvin Critique**

A charming occasion to watch a storytelling event. A delightful meal in a charming wooden environment with a captivating collection of theatrical scenes is a bright occasion on a beautiful summer's day. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

**Wokingham.Today: Written by Michael Beakhouse**

How do you solve a murder when you have to observe social distancing rules in the crime scene? It's a mystery that would beguile even the greatest of minds – but perhaps not THE greatest mind of all, as Sherlock Holmes (Rosalind Lailey) comes to The Watermill Theatre. But with Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's novel having been successfully adapted many times over, can a new production bring something fresh to the story? The production differentiates itself from other interpretations right from the outset; the action takes place out in the theatre's garden and against the backdrop of the building itself, with the cast entering the stage from behind trees and through fire escape doors. It's a striking setting, with willow trees overhanging a gently flowing river – albeit a far cry from the wild moors of Dartmoor. Yet the incongruity is totally in keeping with the irreverent spirit of the production, for this is definitely not a "Hound" that Basil Rathbone would recognise! With the titular character represented by a cuddly toy, actors often breaking character to don face masks and remind each other not to stand so close, and contemporary beat-box musical numbers deployed to fill in characters' backstories, it's a far more upbeat rendition of the source material that's far more interested in cultivating joy, as actress Rosalind Lailey observes. I won't spoil the myriad ways in which they achieve this – I urge you to see the show and discover for yourself – but I will say that I left with a huge smile on my face, and that I certainly wasn't the only one. As a huge Sherlock fan I have to say that it's also faithful to the source material, and while the humorous tone may not have been in the original book, it's definitely a humour born of fondness for the story. The three incredibly talented actors and actresses who bring the story's characters to life – Rosalind Lailey, Roxana Bartle and James Mack, often bouncing roles between each other in the course of a single scene – are to be commended for delivering such an enjoyable show despite the continuing restrictions that have affected all of us over the past year.