INTRODUCTION/REVIEWS COVID-19 THEATRE 2023

The reviews, though singly edited and printed for the year of 2022 will inclusively be the sum total of all the shows in 2022, 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.

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DEFINITION OF HEALTH IN THEATRE

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

DONMAR

****NEXT TO NORMAL music TOM KITT book/lyrics BRIAN YORKEY director MICHAEL LONGHURST musical supervisor NIGEL LILLEY décor CHLOE LAMFORD movement/choreography/additional direction AN YEE lights LEE CURRAN sound TONY GAYLE video TAL ROSNER musical director NICK BARSTOW orchestrations MICHAEL STAROBIN, TOM KITT vocal arrangements ANNMARIE MILAZZO with CAISSIE LEVY diana, JACK WOLFE gabe, JAMIE PARKER gabe, ELEANOR WORTHINGTON-COX natalie, JACK OFRECIO henry, TREVOR DION NICHOLAS dr. madden/dr. fine, NICK BARSTOW piano, SHELLEY BRITTON violin/synth, TOM COPPIN guitar, MATT FRENCH drums, JO NICHOLS bass guitar, DOM PECHEUR cello

Blanche Marvin Critique
An exciting use of the musical in the most intimate fashion where one follows the psychological health of the mother of an American family. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

Guardian (***) Written by Emma John
Next to Normal review – fizzing musical about mental illness. The performances are superb in this tale of a family dealing with bipolar disorder but the storyline is thin. iven that Next to Normal is about a woman with bipolar disorder, it is presumably intentional that the Donmar's revival of this 2010 Pulitzer prize-winning musical feels, at times, somewhat overwhelming. The songs and emotions come at you in a barrage, their multiplicity of genres underlining the confused and sometimes heightened reality in which the protagonist lives.
The show begins with ebullience and panache as we watch a loving, modern family sharing jokes and neuroses. There is a Red Bull-chugging daughter, a perfectionist prepping for her piano recital, and a cheeky, slightly unreliable son; their father has no idea what his wife, Diana, is talking about half the time, while she – compellingly portrayed by Caissie Levy – appears to be holding their busy lives together on "a latte and a prayer". But by the end of the opening number, she is behaving strangely; it is here that the truth of the situation begins to emerge. Brian Yorkey's book and lyrics prove that a portrait of a chronic mental illness doesn't have to be grim. There is plenty of verve and momentum in a first half that fizzes with humour, from a sexy jazz number about Diana's pill regimen to the patter song in which her well-intentioned, desperate husband (Jamie Parker) tries to convince himself that all will be well. Chloe Lamford's stylish design reflects the energy on stage with screens that sometimes hide and sometimes reveal the musicians, and mirror manic episodes with dizzying electric patterns. While the musical raises questions about treatment for mental illness and about the impact and legacy of Diana's condition on her family, it delivers far less narratively. The thinness of the secondary plot, in which the daughter, Natalie, self-medicates to cope with what is happening at home, is at least strengthened by a superb performance from Eleanor Worthington-Cox, while Jack Wolfe's impassioned vocals as her brother, Gabe, light up the moments of rock opera that are the closest Tom Kitt's music comes to a unifying theme. The strength of Michael Longhurst's six-strong ensemble prevents the production from sagging too early, but the second half still feels overlong, as songs crash into each other without any concomitant plot development. What will stay with you is less a story and more a sense of empathy for the characters, struggling to survive in a world where "everything is perfect and nothing is real". 14 August – 7 October

Evening Standard (****) Written by Nick Curtis
Broadway musical about grief and depression treads a fine line. Caissie Levy, the original Elsa in Frozen on Broadway, is terrific. Wonderfully sung and staged, this show detailing the effects of grief and mental illness on an ordinary American family comes from the "relentless" school of Broadway musical. More than 37 rock numbers, ballads and reprises are packed into two hours, all of them catchily scored by Tom Kitt and given witty lyrics by Brian Yorkey. And all are given the full-throated, eyes-aloft, maximum-emotion treatment. Next to Normal won a Pulitzer and three Tony Awards in New York in 2010, and Michael Longhurst's London premiere is led from the front by Broadway stalwart Caissie Levy, who has a big, steely voice and a warm personality to match. If the show weren't also complex, sardonic and wary of looming cliché, it might be too much. Levy's Diana Goodman is, it says

here, a "suburban wife and mother" whose hectic, sitcom-ish existence spirals out of control during the first number, Just Another Day. Diana has bipolar disorder and this – along with the hidden loss that fuels it – blights her life and the lives of her husband Dan (Jamie Parker) and daughter Natalie (Eleanor Worthington-Cox). It's hard to talk about the plot without spoilers, but suffice to say that a character called Gabe, endowed with an almost satanic creepiness by Jack Wolfe, haunts the action, and sings one of the show's most strident and chilling numbers, I'm Alive. Kitt and Yorkey's decision to write about mental health implicitly rebukes those who think musicals can't be serious. Their approach is compassionate, thoughtful, but also witty, showing us the fantasies Diana projects on her doctors (both played with extravagant gusto by Trevor Dion Nicholas). Healthcare has been weaponised by conspiracy theorists since the show was written but it somehow navigates Diana's choices – drugs, ECT or potentially-suicidal refusal of treatment – without scaring the horses. Longhurst's production powers forward, on the sort of kitchen set (by Chloe Lamford) that once looked desirable but now looks bog-standard. The six-strong band is periodically revealed and veiled by opaque screens above the action. There is something similarly mechanical in the way Diana's life is revealed to her, and the way it is mirrored by her daughter. Parker's Dan is a model of patient adoration, his fragile high notes when singing an expression of his sensitivity. (Although as Diana says, he is also boring). As gifted musician Natalie, Worthington-Cox unleashes a splendid singing voice but the script and score keep her in a state of twitchy, needy resentment, character-wise. Natalie's relationship with adoring pothead Henry (Jack Ofrecio) offers a too-neat parallel with Diana and Dan. Indeed, the two couples share a couple of confrontational duets. I expected everyone to hug and learn at the end, like they do in sitcoms. Actually the creators opt for something much more bittersweet and interesting, which lifted my appreciation of the whole show. Caissie Levy – who originated the role of Elsa in Frozen on Broadway – is terrific in it, and she has a fine supporting cast. The Donmar could have been designed for this domestic chamber musical. The final song, Light, brings the house down. I'm never sure if Broadway's impassioned style of performance will work in London. This time, it does.

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

SADLER'S WELLS

****ROMEO AND JULIET director/choreographer MATTHEW BOURNE music SERGEI PROKOFIEV décor/costume LEZ BROTHERSTON lights PAULE CONSTABLE sound PAUL GROOTHUIS orchestrations TERRY DAVIES principal conductor BRETT MORRIS conductor DANIEL PARKINSON with PARIS FITZPATRICK, ANDY MONAGHAN romeo CORDELIA BRAITHWAITE, MONIQUE JONAS juliet, DANNY REUBENS, RICHARD WINSOR tybalt, RORY MACLEOD, HARRY ONDRAK-WRIGHT, DANNY REUBENS mercutio, JACKSON FISCH, PARIS FITZPATRICK, LEONARDO MCCORKINDALE balthasar, CAMERON FLYNN, EUAN GARRETT, RORY MACLEOD benvolio, CORDELIA BRAITHWAITE, DAISY MAY KEMP, BRYONY PENNINGTON rev. bernadette laurence/brie montague/nurse, ANDY MONAGHAN, ALAN VINCENT, RICHARD WINSOR senator montague/guard/orderly ANYA FERDINAND, KURUMI KAMAYACHI, BLUE MAKWANA frenchie, CARLA CONTINI, BRYONY PENNINGTON dorcas, TASHA CHU, MONIQUE JONAS, GABRIELLE DE SOUZA magdalen/governor escalus, TASHA CHU, HANNAH KREMER, BLUE MAKWANA lavinia, TANISHA ADDICOTT, ELEANOR MCGRATH, GABRIELLE DE SOUZA morgan, TANISHA ADDICOTT, CARLA CONTINI, KURUMI KAMAYACHI martha, MATTHEW AMOS, CAMERON FLYNN, HARRY ONDRAK-WRIGHT edmund, JACKSON FISCH, ENRIQUE NGBOKOTA lennox, ADAM DAVIES, LEONARDO MCCORKINDALE sebastian, MATTHEW AMOS, ADAM DAVIES, EVAN GARRETT fabian, ANYA FERDINAND, HANNAH KREMER, ELEANOR MCGRATH faith, KATE LYONS swing

Blanche Marvin Critique
Nothing matches the unique and explosive choreography of Matthew Bourne. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

The Guardian (*****) Written by Sarah Crompton
Matthew Bourne's Romeo + Juliet review – more compelling than ever. Set in an asylum, the choreographer's bleak yet passionate adaptation of Shakespeare's tragic romance triumphs in a newly honed revival. The choreographer Matthew Bourne tends to be seen as a family favourite – someone who makes works that everyone can enjoy. That's true, but what gets missed in that judgment is just how good he is at putting passion – suppressed and expressed – on stage. His Romeo + Juliet, returning four years after its premiere, is a case in point. Set in the Verona Institute, some kind of asylum-cum-borstal designed to incarcerate problem youths, it's designed by Lez Brotherston as a white world of smooth surfaces, barred doors and staircases that lead nowhere. Yet within this setting, the white-clad characters strive all the time to break from the uniformity imposed on them, introducing a jerk of the head, a twitch of the arms, into their mechanical marches, stretching their limbs into embraces that are forbidden, snatching a kiss under the fierce eye of the guards. When Romeo meets Juliet at a ball organised by ineffectual do-gooder Rev Bernadette Laurence, they circle each other, entranced, under a glitter ball. But around them, their fellows bend deep into the ground, their bodies catching the weight and beat of Prokofiev's score as they meld together in forbidden passion. By the balcony scene, brilliantly conceived to make use of the ladders and the upper walkway of the set, with the lovers dodging the warders' searchlights, Romeo and Juliet have found a way to express their feelings that is at once ecstatic and chaste. It begins as Romeo nuzzles his head into Juliet's neck, moulding his body to her shape, fluidly following her round and round the stage. They are equals in love, lifting one another, tumbling with incredible lightness over each other's backs, and finally locking lips in a kiss that doesn't break even though they roll across the floor and climb the stairs. The message of this radical take on Shakespeare's tale is quite clear: love and sex are powerful – threatening to a society that wants people to conform. The brutal Tybalt (danced with tormented nuance by Richard Winsor) precipitates the tragedy not just because he is obsessed with Juliet but because he is full of homophobic hatred for Ben Brown's swaggering, brave Mercutio. Since the piece first appeared in 2019, Bourne has worked – as he

always does – on refining and adding clarity. The ending is still shocking, but now more directly seems to spring from Juliet's trauma. Returning to the role she created, Cordelia Braithwaite finds new strains of suffering; her Juliet is tragic precisely because her strength and courage have been distorted by the life imposed upon her. Paris Fitzpatrick's goofy, charming Romeo is the perfect foil. But the entire cast shines. There's a delicate solo of traumatised mourning for Jackson Fisch's Balthasar set to the section of music that often announces the arrival of Juliet's bridesmaids, and fluent, clever dances for the other characters that capture both their initial capacity for joy and resistance and the drugged, shell-shocked state to which they are finally reduced. Fabulously responsive to the melancholy that underpins Prokofiev's score, which is brilliantly adapted by Terry Davies and played live under the conductor Daniel Parkinson by the New Adventures orchestra, this is a bleak adaptation of a dark play. Absolutely compelling. 1 Aug – 2 Sep

Evening Standard (****) Written by David Jays
A night of dance to give you goosebumps. This thrilling revival boasts a terrific, detailed ensemble and some gorgeous choreography. Heartstopper may have returned to insist that young love can thrive. But the original teenaged love story is doomy as they come – Romeo and Juliet propels its star-crossed lovers to their deaths. Matthew Bourne's stark 2019 dance version is set in a harsh correctional facility called the Verona Institute, where young people get the hope squeezed out of them. It's a horribly effective frame for the old story. In this chilly white-tiled clinic, designed for surveillance, exercise, everything is regimented. Thuggish guard Tybalt (Danny Reubens), a bully and rapist, treats Juliet (Cordelia Braithwaite) as his doll. Their scenes are genuinely distressing, as he clasps her by the neck and drags her behind locked doors. Prokofiev's heartsick score, played live with tremendous verve, here kicks off with the bloodcurdling Dance of the Knights (there's a reason it's The Apprentice's foreboding theme tune). Here, it introduces the youthful inmates, shows them restricted but resisting. They march onto the stage with stiff arms, bunched fists, grabbing at air and falling to their knees. You sense them crying out at every attempt to pummel them into uniformity. New to Verona is Romeo (Paris Fitzpatrick): a bit bored, a bit unruly. He's not sick, he's just a teenager. Yet his frosty politician parents would rather shut him away than offer a cuddle. He's callow – while Juliet has experience that she'd rather be without. A terrific, detailed ensemble includes Daisy May Kemp's earnest pastor and an incandescent Ben Brown, leading a trio of cheeky boys who befriend Romeo. The urgent first half is one of Bourne's best sweeps of dance-drama. The kids register jolts of impotent anger, tiny fractures of dissent (even if only a shared look or sarcastic stomp) and little nicks of individuality. Braithwaite, the first night Juliet, is an expressive dancer with a long face made for woe. She and Romeo clock each other when he arrives, then meet at an awkward institute social. Their swooning twirls and clever footwork are immediately in synch. Late at night they dodge the guards' flashlights for an exuberant encounter, joined at the lips and truly dancing like no one's watching – a rarity in this world. All the kids unite to celebrate their love (Paule Constable's lighting briefly transforms the clinic into a romantic sanctuary) – rapture cut terribly short when Tybalt, drunk and dangerous, blunders in. The second half barrels downhill to tragedy – but leans so hard on this trajectory that it flattens out the story. The medicated inmates lose their individuality, melodrama douses the lovers' pained realism. Even so, Bourne's Romeo and Juliet harnesses youthful ardour in a goosebumping night of dance.

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

HAROLD PINTER

****DR SEMMELWEIS by STEPHEN BROWN director TOM MORRIS décor/costume TI GREEN lights RICHARD HOWELL choreographer ANTONIA FRANCESCHI music ADRIAN SUTTON with MARK RYLANCE ignaz semmelweis, ROSEANNA ANDERSON marja seidel/baroness maria-theresa, ZOE ARSHAMIAN annalise rósza, JOSHUA BEN-TOVIM hospital porter/death, HELEN BELBIN midwife caroline flint, EWAN BLACK franz arneth, CHRISSY BROOKE lisa elstein, MEGUMI EDA aiko eda, SUZY HALSTEAD violet-may blackledge, FELIX HAYES ferdinand von hebra, ANDRCDONALD scanzoni, PAULINE MCLYNN anna müller, JUDE OWUSU jakob kolletshcka/levy, OXANA PANCHENKO polina nagy, MILLIE THOMAS beatrix pfieller, MAX WESTWELLhospital porter/death, AMANDA WILKIN maria semmelweis, ALAN WILLIAMS johann klein, DANIEL YORK LOH karl von rokitansky, PATRICIA ZHOU antoinette du boisson, HAIM CHOI music director/violin/suk hee apfelbaum, COCO INMAN violin2/sarah schmidt, SHIZUKU TATSUNO cello/oshizu yukimura, KASIA ZIMIŃSKA viola/eszter horowitz, VICTORIA GILL, ANNA TULCHINSKAYA violin 1, NATASHA HUMPHRIES, ZEA HUNT violin 2, GEORGIE DAVIS, FRANCESCA GILBERT viola, ABBY LORIMER, ALICE PURTON cello

Blanche Marvin Critique
One of the most unique and moving pieces of theatre which is not only verbally is electrifying but also in dance movements and the actual concept of direction. Brilliantly performed as well as produced by Mark Rylance along with the master hand of Tom Morris. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

Time Out (****) Written by Andrzej Lukowski
Mark Rylance is astonishing – again – in this unsettling, atmospheric drama about the downfall of a pioneering doctor. About the most boring thing you can say about Mark Rylance is that he's the greatest actor of our age, a fact so irrefutably established by his superhuman turn in Jez Butterworth's 'Jerusalem' that his 2016 Oscar for 'Bridge of Spies' felt faintly extra, like giving an astronaut a little certificate saying 'well done for going to space'. What distinguishes Rylance from his peers is that he is an unrepentantly eccentric individual. While that has led to him saying some dubious things – Google his name and 'distilled garlic solution' if you dare – it's absolutely fascinating to see where his mix of capriciousness and industry clout takes him when he's not occupied with Shakespeare, Spielberg or revivals of 'Jerusalem'. Last time he appeared in a drama at the Harold Pinter, it was

'Nice Fish', a strange and amusing play he'd stitched together from the deadpan poems of US writer Louis Jenkins. And now he returns with a deceptively bleak drama about nineteenth-century Hungarian doctor Ignaz Semmelweis, the little-remembered godfather of antiseptic hospital treatment. To be fair, Semmelweis has inspired other works: Ibsen's monumental 'An Enemy of the People' is at least tangentially based on his story. Nonetheless, he remains a relatively obscure figure outside his native Hungary. At first Stephen Brown's new play – written after the idea by Rylance – feels like it's setting itself up as 'ER' with stovepipe hats, as we're plunged into the Vienna General Hospital of the 1840s. Here socially inept, uncultured young physician Semmelweis has his eureka moment: that unwashed hands are clearly linked to mortality rates in a surgical setting, and that handwashing with a chlorine-based solution will greatly reduce patient deaths. Unfortunately, he has no scientific explanation for his discovery, and in the golden age of rationalist discovery, the great doctors simply refuse to believe a theory that Semmelweis can't back up to their satisfaction. Rylance could play a stammering outsider physician in his sleep, but it's the pitch into tragedy that he really gets his teeth into here. As the play wears on, Semmelweis's homespun charm and serious-minded devotion to saving lives changes into something more disturbing; a raw, insatiable obsession that clots into incandescent rage with anyone who defies him or disbelieves him. His mind becomes overwhelmed: he's not so much a genius as an average guy who has become the custodian of an idea that he simply lacks the charisma or diplomacy to spread. There's something of Shakespeare's great fallen heroes – Brutus, Othello – to the way Rylance tackles the lead role, a man whose energies are ultimately channelled into his own downfall. But there's also something more disturbing there, an almost horror-like aspect to Semmelweis's psychological descent, an eerie brokenness that takes hold. The lead performance is more than enough to elevate Brown's script, which is solid and poetic but leans into exposition and flashback too much, with an ending that gallops through the story a bit too quickly. It should also be stressed that Rylance is far from alone on stage, with Jude Owusu and Pauline McLynn giving fine tragicomic turns as colleagues of Semmelweis's, whose lower-key ends foreshadow the doctor's own. But it's Tom Morris's virtuoso direction that ultimately defines the show, even more so than Rylance. In his production the actors are augmented by a grungy all-female string quartet, plus skirted dancers who whirl across the stage like carrion crows taking skittish flight. Absolute fair play to producer Sonia Friedman stumping up for at least eight more performers than the text strictly requires, but it really pays off. Under Richard Howell's exquisitely moody lighting, Vienna becomes an unearthly phantasmagoria, a blur of bodies and music and collapsing minds, a frenzied dance into the void.

Guardian (****) Written by Arifa Akbar

Dr Semmelweis review – Mark Rylance's riveting tale of medical hygiene pioneer. Rylance turns the life of the 19th-century doctor and campaigner for antiseptic practices into a tragedy of almost Shakespearean proportion. few months ahead of bringing "Rooster" Byron's band of outsiders back to the stage in a revival of Jez Butterworth's Jerusalem, Mark Rylance breathes life into a very different kind of anti-establishment figure: Dr Ignaz Semmelweis, a pioneer too ahead of his own time. Based on an original idea by Rylance and written with Stephen Brown, this play explores the life of the Hungarian doctor who worked in 19th-century Vienna's maternity wards. Semmelweis's groundbreaking practices in antiseptic procedure saved thousands of lives – particularly those of impoverished mothers – and might have saved more had his findings been recognised by the medical community. But he was doubted and disbelieved, and died in an asylum without due recognition and, in a final twist of bad fate, of sepsis, from which he had battled to save his patients. His story becomes a tragedy of almost Shakespearean proportions in the hands of Rylance, who appears plaintive, hollow-eyed, by turns diffident and absolute in his unbending sense of right. But the cast around him keep up, from Thalissa Teixeira as his wife Maria to, as Semmelweis's medical allies, Jackie Clune, Sandy Grierson, Felix Hayes and Enyi Okoronkwo among others, each as good as the next. Under the direction of Tom Morris, the production is almost as much a dance as it is a play, with expressionist movement (choreography by Antonia Franceschi) and music (by Adrian Sutton) that take us inside Semmelweis's mind, from his bursts of anger to his final unravelling. A chorus of ghostly dancers – the women he has been unable to save – enact anguish while violins and the cello weep. These elements together run the risk of an overwrought atmosphere but the production steers clear of that. Instead there is intensity, and the drama feels drawn out in its pain. It paints a picture of a thwarted life but also, more obliquely, explores why some people are lauded as pioneers, their theories welcomed and their genius immortalised, while others are cast as outsiders. Semmelweis made breakthroughs long before Joseph Lister and Louis Pasteur's work in germ theory. But in his exacting nature, his single-minded zeal to save lives and his gruff manner, he reveals medical science to be governed by – of course – its own politics of personality when it comes to toppling old paradigms for new. Two time frames are navigated with magnificent fluidity on Ti Green's set (spare yet dramatic, an oculus above, a revolve below and an almost eerie blackness from which characters emerge). In these switches of time, we get a keen sense of Semmelweis's inner fracturing: he seems involuntarily pulled into the past, which is enacted on stage, with his present world simultaneously observing it. Richard Howell's lighting works within this duality – warm and sepia-tinted in the domestic present but a starkly spotlit past which throngs with shadows in the backdrop. Death is all around the maternity ward at which Semmelweis works and every loss has an emotional impact, even when it happens in passing. Meanwhile there is a visceral edge to the scenes of autopsies and childbirths, which are gestured in dance or mimed. Although this is its own specific story, and emphatically a period piece, there is a relevance to the themes of new science and distrust that chimes in our Covid era. The play was conceived before the pandemic but Semmelweis's pleas for fellow doctors to "wash your hands" makes it feel, uncannily, as if the past is haunting our present too.

REGENT'S OPEN AIR

***LA CAGE AUX FOLLE book HARVEY FIERSTEIN music/lyrics JERRY HERMAN based on the play by JEAN POIRET orchestrations/dance arrangements JASON CARR make up GUY COMMON costume RYAN DAWSON LAIGHT lights HOWARD HUDSON sound NICK LINDSTER choreographer STEPHEN MEAR décor COLIN RICHMOND director TIM SHEADER assistant musical director TOM SLADE musical director BEN VAN TIENEN musical supervisor JENNIFER WHYTE with JAK ALLEN-ANDERSON hanna, CRAIG ARMSTRONG cagelle, TOM BALES cagelle, TAYLOR BRADSHAW cagelle, BILLY CARTER georges, DANIELE COMBE mme. renaud, BEN CULLETON jean-michel, JORDAN LEE DAVIES chantal, NICOLE DEON ensemble, LEWIS EASTER cagelle/swing/dance captain, HARVEY EBBAGE cagelle, EMMA JOHNSON ensemble/swing, JULIE JUPP marie dindon, SHAKEEL KIMOTHO jacob, DEBBIE KURUP jacqeline, GEORGE LYNHAM phaedra, JP MCCUE cagelle, CARL MULLANEY albin, RISHARD-KYRO NELSON cagelle/swing, JOHN OWEN-JONES edward dindon, SOPHIE POURRET anne dindon, ALEXANDRA WAITE-ROBERTS cagelle/ensemble, HEMI YEROHAM francis

Blanche Marvin Critique
A delightfully warm-hearting revival of a delightfully charming musical seen through the eyes of the open air and sky… a special occasion. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

Time Out (****) Written by Tom Wicker
The iconic gay musical has taken on renewed relevance amidst the culture wars of 2023, but this is a gloriously big-hearted revival. Tim Sheader's 16-year tenure as artistic director of Regent Park's Open Air Theatre ends with a blaze of colour and a timely punch in the air for self-expression. His production of Harvey Fierstein and Jerry Herman's musical 'La Cage aux Folles' – based on the play by Jean Poiret – lights up the night sky. Georges (Billy Carter) manages the titular San Tropez drag nightclub, whose star attraction is his partner, Albin (Carl Mullaney), who performs as the fabulous Zaza. Their lives are thrown into chaos when Georges' son, Jean-Michel (Ben Culleton), announces he wants to marry Anne (Sophie Pourret), whose father is the bigoted head of the anti-drag Tradition, Family and Morality Party. And guess who's imminently arriving to see if their prospective son-in-law comes from the 'right' family? Current right-wing scaremongering over drag acts and people's right to claim their own identities inevitably casts a shadow of renewed relevancy over this show. In this light, Sheader really brings to the fore in Fierstein and Herman's book and lyrics the warm and genuine sense of family that binds everyone at the club together. Mullaney's rendition of the anthemic 'I Am What I Am' ends defiantly, but starts on a note of heartbroken betrayal at discovering Jean-Michel doesn't want Albin – who's raised him since he was a child in the absence of his mother – to meet Anne's parents because he's 'different'. The wonderful Mullaney threads this vulnerability throughout his performance, starting with '(A Little More) Mascara', a gorgeous ode to the empowering effect of putting on drag. He and Carter, as Georges, create a sweepingly romantic relationship amid the manager-star squabbling. 'With You on My Arm' acts as a gentle echo and counterpoint to Jean-Michel's 'With Anne on My Arm' – making the latter's insistence on erasing any trace of Albin even more painful. While a sweet Culleton softens a few of Jean-Michel's edges, he's still a self-absorbed dick for most of the show. In case you're worried that this is making the production sound heavy-going, don't be – Mullaney plays up to us – the in-story and actual audience – with winking ease. Sheader, choreographer Stephen Mear and costume designer Ryan Dawson Laight also ensure that the club's resident drag queen (and king) ensemble, The Cagelles, brim with individuality. The big set-piece numbers are staged with pizzazz and humour, showcasing each character's diversity. Shakeel Kimotho's puckish turn as Albin's maid, Jacob, is a delight. It makes a heel-turn into drawing-room farce after the interval, when Anne's parents arrive, which quickens the pace and the laughter rate. It's a welcome pivot after the more emotional first act, tying everything together a little more tightly as the show barrels towards its life-affirming climax. The way in which Anne's awful father, Edward Dindon – played by Craig Armstrong on the night I saw the show and John Owen-Jones the rest of the run – gets his bewigged comeuppance is beautifully fitting. This is a big blow-out of a show that wraps up as a gloriously camp celebration of found family and living exactly as who you are. It needs no apology. 29 July – 16 September

Guardian (****) Written by Miriam Gillinson
La Cage aux Folles review – dazzling revival is hilarious and heartfelt. This adaptation of the classic musical is a joy, from the faded nightclub set to Carl Mullaney's showstopping I Am What I Am. Tim Sheader's revival of the 1983 musical about a gay nightclub owner and his drag queen partner is a total joy. Ryan Dawson Laight's costumes dazzle; one skirt has its own set of wheels, another its own set of legs. Stephen Mear's choreography is slick but – even better – very funny. Harvey Fierstein's witty book still crackles 40 years on from the Broadway premiere and Jerry Herman's heartfelt score (so pure and romantic) seduces us all. Yet what is most striking about this memorable production, led by an all-queer creative team, is how authentic and truthful it feels. This is a show that has taken Herman's astute lyric "what we are is an illusion" utterly to heart. La Cage aux Folles – a popular 70s St Tropez nightclub that has seen better days – is a little raggedy around the edges. Gold fades to green. Shrubs creep through the cracked windows. The singers pant and groan at the end of their big numbers and, when they're done, watch the action from the wings. They're bored, tired, perhaps a little lonely. Playing the central role of Albin, the nightclub's headline drag act, is Carl Mullaney, an actor with cabaret in his blood. His patter is excellent, his singing better yet. Above all, there's an extraordinary vulnerability in Mullaney's performance. After he is shunned by his son – who is desperate to make a good impression on his ultra conservative in-laws – Albin takes to the stage to sing I Am What I Am, that open heart of a song. He is a wounded animal sheathed in gold, howling into the night in pain and sorrow. There are a few dips – particularly in the second half, when the life and colour is drained from the show as Albin and nightclub owner, Georges (Billy Carter), try to "straighten" up their act for their son. But the relationship between Georges and Albin lights up the show. Their partnership is laced

through with tender moments: a loving glance here; a stroked shoulder there. For all the madcap costumes, flashes of leather, trilling singers and eccentric cabaret acts, this is a simple and moving love story that gives two men their chance to stride off into the sunset.

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

LYRIC

****DEATH NOTE based on manga by TSUGUMI OHBA, TAKESHI OBATA music FRANK WILDHORN lyrics JACK MURPHY book IVAN MENCHELL arrangements/orchestrations JASON HOWLAND original director TAMIYA KURIYAMA director/choreographer NICK WINSTON décor JUSTIN WILLIAMS musical supervisor KATY RICHARDSON sound BEN HARRISON lights BEN CRACKNELL costumer KIMIE NAKANO musical director CHRIS MA with JESSICA LEE misa , JOAQUIN PEDRO VALDES light, CHRISTIAN REY MARBELLA soichiro, DEAN JOHN WILSON l, GEORGE MAGUIRE ryuk, RACEL CLARE CHAN sayu, CARL MAN alternate l, AIMIE ATKINSON rem, ADAM PASCAL ryuk (palladium), FRANCES MAYLI McCANN misa (palladium)

Blanche Marvin Critique
The great imagination of the piece itself is brilliantly brought to life in this production. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

Theatre Weekly (*****) Written by Greg Stewart
Unless you're a fan of manga or anime, you're probably wondering why the arrival of the European premiere of Death Note The Musical, the first time it's been performed in an English speaking country, has caused such a stir. This concert version sold out three performances at the London Palladium and immediately announced a transfer to the West End's Lyric Theatre. The 'In Concert' tagged on to the title of Death Note The Musical might be doing the team a disservice, because this is about as close to a fully staged production as you can get. Director and choreographer, Nick Winston, has brought this musical to life in spectacular fashion, from Justin Williams' set design to Kimie Nakano's authentic costumes. Based on the original manga series written by Tsugumi Ohba and illustrated by Takeshi Obata, this musical version has an electrifying score from Frank Wildhorn with lyrics by Jack Murphy. Following the source material, we meet Light Yagami, an intelligent high school student with firm views on justice, or lack of it. Ryuk, a shinigami passes a special notebook into the human world, and Light discovers that by simply writing a name in the Death Note, that person will die. Light takes on a vigilante persona of Kira and sets about disposing of the world's most hardened criminals. This obviously draws a bit of attention, and a police task force, led by L, endeavour to hunt down this criminal killing hero… to some, villain to others. This is where Ivan Menchell's book has to work hard (not forgetting the original manga series ran to twelve volumes). Something has to give, but Menchell manages to capture the dichotomy of the characters. Light doesn't just sit in divine judgement but also in retribution, while L is successful in catching criminals, his methods are often called into question. This is more than good versus evil, it's far more nuanced, and while the musical can't possibly hope to replicate the original story, it does do a sterling job. Looking at the queue outside the Lyric theatre, it's abundantly clear this story already has a dedicated fan base, and they almost certainly get a little more out of this musical than everyone else. Yet, even for someone who's never heard of Death Note, the musical version very comprehensively ensures that no-one is left behind. The story is clear, well-paced, and at times, utterly gripping. With three male leads, the female characters are somewhat sidelined, though ironically, they do get the best songs. As Rem, Aimie Atkinson soars with 'When Love Comes', while Jessica Lee as Misa turns the Lyric into a concert stadium for the bouncing 'We All Need A Hero', which also includes just one of many examples of Ben Cracknell's exquisite lighting design. There's not a bad song in the bunch, and numbers like 'Hurricane' and 'Playing His Game' give the cast plenty of opportunity to show off their vocal prowess. George Maguire, who joins the company for this Lyric run as Ryuk, revels in the camp villainy of the shinigami. Dean John Wilson has a host of musical theatre credits to his name, but it's as L, that Wilson really seems to shine. It's a pitch perfect performance of an intriguing and enigmatic character. Joaquin Pedro Valdes' gentle and subtle portrayal of Light is a joy from beginning to end, as Light transforms from idealistic student to cold-hearted strategist, Valdes never misses a beat. The producers and their creative team have achieved something incredible, not only bringing something entirely different to the West End, and by extension a whole new audience. But in their hands this beloved manga becomes a magnificent musical. Death Note The Musical in Concert runs at the Lyric Theatre for ten performances, but if this doesn't have a further life then audiences may be echoing the sentiments of Light by asking 'Where Is The Justice?' September 7-September 11

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

GILLIAN LYNNE

****CRAZY FOR YOU music/lyrics GEORGE GERSWHIN, IRA GERSHWIN book KEN LUDWIG co-conception KEN LUDWIG, MIKE OCKRENT direction/choreography SUSAN STROMAN décor BEOWULF BORITT costume WILLIAM IVEY LONG lights KEN BILLINGTON sound KAI HARADA musical supervisor/musical director ALAN WILLIAMS new orchestrations DOUG BESTERMAN, MARK CUMBERLAND new arrangements DAVID KRANE original arrangements PETER HOWARD original orchestrations WILLIAM DAVID BROHN orchestral management ANDY BARNWELL, RICH WEEDON fight directors RACHEL BROWN WILLIAMS, RUTH COOPER BROWN with CHARLIE STEMP bobby child, CARLY ANDERSON polly baker, TOM EDDEN bela zangler, NATALIE KASSANGA irene roth, MATHEW CRAIG lank hawkins, DUNCAN SMITH everett baker, MARILYIN CUTTS lottie child, SAM HARRISON eugene fodor, RINA FATANIA patricia fodor, JACK WILCOX standby bobby child, KAYLEIGH THADANI tess, KATE PARR patsy, LILA ANDERSON vera, HARRIET SAMUEL-GRAY sheila, IMOGEN BOWTELL elaine, LAURA HILLS mitzi, ELLA VALENTINE

margie, TARA YASMIN louise, MARC AKINFOLARIN moose, LUCAS KOCH sam, PHILIP BERTIOLI mingo, JASON BATTERSBY junior, ASHLEY-JORDON PACKER wyatt, NICHOLAS DUNCAN jimmy, NATHAN ELWICK custus, LIAM WRATE pete, JOSHUA NKEMDILIM billy, NELL MARTIN swing/dance captain, BRADLEY TREVETHAN swing/ass. dance captain, BETHAN DOWNING swing, RYAN JUPP swing, JINNY GOULD swing, GEORGE BRAY swing

Blanche Marvin Critique
Great fun with lots of laughs. It fulfils its raison d'etre. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

WhatsOnStage (*****) Written by Sarah Crompton
The first act curtain of Crazy for You comes down on a dance routine that brings the audience to its feet. To the joyful sound of George and Ira Gershwin's "I've Got Rhythm", it begins with a man banging two cups together. He's joined by another hitting an axe with a hammer, then a third, blowing into a jug.
A chorus line of tapping girls appears; so do washboards, corrugated roofs, and saws. As it grows, with irresistible momentum, the men make panning trays bounce to the beat of their feet and swing the women on wooden picks like pendulums. Every detail has its own place in a structure that feels at once spontaneous and yet perfectly planned. This was the dance routine that turned Susan Stroman into a star; she won her first Tony for choreography when the show (directed by her late husband Mike Ockrent) premiered on Broadway in 1992. She's added director to her credits for this 2022 revival, originally seen at the Chichester Festival Theatre, but it's still her choreography that feels like genius. It's just bliss. In the very best sense, Crazy for You is a dance show. It's not that it hasn't got fabulous, melting songs – drawn from a 1930 Gershwin show called Girl Crazy with a few standards and a few lesser known numbers added. It's got a witty, smart book too, written by Ken Ludwig, and full of jokes both cheesy and wry. They propel the action through a wafer thin plot about a disenchanted banker Bobby Child, who dreams of being a dancer who gets a chance to make his dreams reality when he is dispatched to close a theatre in Deadrock, Nevada – "the armpit of the American West" – and instead falls for local girl Polly, and attempts to stage a show to save the theatre, and win her heart. Yet for all its cleverness and charm, Crazy for You swings into most vivid life when the characters dance. Each routine has its own flavour, whether it's the elongated lines and pure, lovely expressiveness of the first moment Bobby and Polly kiss to "Shall We Dance?", or the delirious wonder of "Slap That Bass" where you watch a dance built in front of your eyes, or simply the moment the chorus line taps its way into view, silhouetted against the pink sky of Beowulf Boritt's set, washed with mood-setting colour by Ken Billington's lights. It's so inventive, so beautifully judged. It's also exceptionally performed by Charlie Stemp as Bobby, who combines a gift for wonderful, prat-falling physical comedy, with light, insouciant grace, and percussively accurate feet. Whether sliding drunk down a staircase, sweeping his girl off her feet, or extending his legs and his heart in a longing-filled solo, he makes every step count. He's matched by Carly Anderson who brings spirit and soul to Polly, a woman who knows her own mind and is humiliated when – by means too tiring to explain – she feels she has been tricked into falling for the wrong man. She makes ballads such as "But Not for Me" resound with feeling, but her performance also has an appealing lightness. The whole evening is full of joy. Tom Edden is a comic pleasure as the impresario Bella Zangler, particularly in the scene where he and Bobby (for reasons once again too complicated to explain) are dressed identically and drunkenly mirror each other's movements; Kayleigh Thadani makes the most of dance captain Tess, while Natalie Kassanga, as Bobby's much-ignored fiancée, is absolutely terrific when she sets about capturing a different partner in a slinky "Naughty Baby". As for the chorus, each and every one of them is superb, making an impact through through their ability to make every moment of Stroman's dancing magic pure, irresistible fun.

Evening Standard (****) Written by Nick Curtis
A joyous love letter to old school American showbiz. The show has a delirious weightlessness: for 150 minutes, you're lifted out of care, and logic. This delicious confection of a musical banishes the cares of the world with sublime songs and dynamic tap routines. A Gershwin-scored boy-meets-girl story and a love letter to old-school American showbiz, it's fronted with brio by boyish, buoyant Charlie Stemp as Bobby Child, the Depression-era banking heir who dreams of being a Broadway hoofer. Susan Stroman created a new dance vocabulary for the first production in 1992 and directs and choreographs this revival, which started at Chichester Festival Theatre last year and arrives in the West End with razzle-dazzle to spare. It's a joy: just don't squint at the plot too hard. The show is a do-over of George and Ira Gershwin's 1930 film musical Girl Crazy, for which writer Ken Ludwig fashioned a new narrative. Bobby is sent by his bossy ma (and pursued by his importunate fiancée Irene) to defunct Nevada mining town Deadrock to foreclose on its theatre. Instead, he falls in love with the owner's daughter Polly (Carly Anderson) and decides to win her heart – and save the town – by impersonating Hungarian impresario Bela Zangler and putting on his own version of the Ziegfield Follies. The cuckoo economics of this plan drew bleak titters from the theatre folk in the audience on opening night. Credibility is further stretched as Bobby and Polly are manoeuvred into endless inventive dance routines and the real Zangler (Tom Edden) inevitably turns up. Ludwig augments great songs from the original – including Embraceable You and I Got Rhythm – with bangers culled from other parts of the Gershwin brothers' back catalogue. Sometimes the plot is bent to fit them. Natalie Kassanga's Irene is kept hanging around purely so she can deliver a breathy, fruity version of Naughty Baby; she does it beautifully, mind. But the genius of Ludwig, Stroman and original director Mike Ockrent was to infuse this rickety structure with the wisecracking dialogue and heedless, who-cares-if-it-makes-sense energy of much American interwar entertainment. So we don't just get dazzling New York showgirl costumes and parodies of Western saloon bar fights, but the sort of sly dialogue that existed before the Hays Code censored Hollywood in 1934. Bobby looks at Polly "like a cow who needs milking". Told that Polly is the only girl in Deadrock, Irene remarks: "I guess that's why she looks so tired." There's physical comedy reminiscent of Bugs Bunny or Tex Avery cartoons. The scene where the real and fake Zengler mirror each other, both drunk and despondent, is pure Marx Brothers. It wouldn't work without the complete conviction of the cast, who bring equal sincerity to corny lines and to exquisite dance routines that rope in pickaxes and prospecting pans. The sketchiness of Beowulf Borrit's set

becomes a virtue, the cast pulling off corrugated iron panels to tapdance on or forming themselves into Ziegfield-esque constructions. Edden delivers an outrageous comic turn as Zangler. Anderson has a bright, bold voice and plenty of sass. Most importantly, she and Stemp seem to defy gravity when they dance. The show has a delirious weightlessness: for 150 minutes, you're lifted out of care, and logic. How fitting that it's in the first major London theatre to be named after a choreographer. Broadway hits don't always translate to London but this show does the business. Gillian Lynne Theatre, booking to January 20, 2024

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

SHAFTESBURY

***MRS. DOUBTFIRE based on the TWENTIETH CENTURY MOTION PICTURE music/lyrics WAYNE KIRKPATRICK, KAREY KIRKPATRICK book by KAREY KIRKPATRICK, JOHN O'FARREL director JERRY ZAKS décor DAVID KORINS costume CATHERINE ZUBER lights PHILIP S. ROSENBERG sound BRIAN RONAN hair DAVID BRIAN BROWN musical director ELLIOT WARE dance arrangements ZANE MARK musical supervision/arrangements/orchestration ETHAN POPP choreography LORIN LATARRO with GABRIEL VICK daniel hillard, LAURA TEBBUTT miranda hillard, CARLA DIXON-HERNANDEZ lydia hillard, CAMERON BLAKELY frank hillard, MARCUS COLLINS andre mayem, SAMUEL EDWARDS stuart dunmire, KELLY AGBOWU wanda sellner, IAN TALBOT mr. jolly, MICHA RICHARDSON janet lundy, LISA MATHIESON flamenco singer/uk associate choreographer, MAX BISPHAM/ELLIOT MUGUME/FRANKIE TREADAWAY christopher hillard, SCARLETT DAVIES/AVA POSNIAK/ANGELICA PEARL-SCOTT natalie hillard, RHYS OWEN, JOSHUA DEVER, MARIA GARRETT, KIERA HAYNES, ADAM LYONS, COREY MITCHELL, ELLIE MITCHELL, MATT OVERFIELD, TOM SCANLON, VICKI LEE TAYLOR, SAMUEL WILSON-FREEMAN, NICOLE CARLISLE, REBECCA DONNELLY, JOSEPH DOCKREE, AMY EVERETT, CHRISTOPHER PARKINSON, PAULO TEIXEIRA

Blanche Marvin Critique
Fun and games are fulfilled to their limits. Laughter and love are its essence. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

Time Out (****) Written by Alice Saville
This winning new musical is a surprisingly clever stage update of the '90s Robin Williams hit. 'Mrs Doubtfire' is the latest in a seemingly endless post-pandemic string of musical takes on retro movies. 'Back to the Future', 'Dirty Dancing', 'Groundhog Day'... if you were born in the '80s, the West End has decided that by now you're obviously loaded and ready to be milked of your money like a pantomime cow. Only this genuinely funny comedy musical doesn't feel like a cash grab, thanks to its twenty-first-century jokes, perfectly paced book, and silly voices galore. Writer John O'Farrell has worked on 'Have I Got News For You' and 'Spitting Image', and some of that topical flair can be seen here. Freshly divorced dad Daniel is a comic actor whose voiceover recording seshes ingeniously break out of the American world of the story: he begins with a witty theatre pre-show announcement, then breaks into non-naff impressions of Prince Harry and Boris Johnson. Refreshingly, this production has resisted the temptation to cast a famous funny person in the role, and musical theatre actor Gabriel Vick pulls off both the gags and the songs with impressive aplomb. This story's serious bits aren't quite as well-handled. O'Farrell struggles a little to make Daniel's ex-wife Miranda (Laura Tebbutt) more than a boring disciplinarian foil to Daniel's relentless zaniness (here, she gets an improbable fashion career and a 2D hunky love interest). Karey and Wayne Kirkpatricks' lyrics don't zing with the kind of psychological insights or witty couplets musical theatre fans dream of. But who cares, when director Jerry Zaks so thoroughly nails the bits we're all really here for: Daniel's lightning transitions from hapless Dad to fiesty Scottish nanny Mrs Doubtfire, who he dresses up as in a desperate bid to see his children. The original movie mostly ignored the idea that dressing up as a woman is a pretty queer thing to do: this show embraces it. Makeover number 'Make Me a Woman' is a camp joy, any hint of dated gender politics dispelled by Daniel's gay brother and his husband, who summon the spirits of Cher and Tina Turner in a kind of funky disco seance. But things sizzle even more in the chaotic restaurant scene where Daniel has to switch between his two personas at lightning speed: flamenco number 'He Lied to Me' keeps things moving in style as Daniel wrestles with a latex face mask, tartan skirt and ample padding. Daniel's definitely the focus here. But his three kids don't get forgotten, with angsty Alanis Morissette-esque number 'What the Hell' giving vent to their teen and pre-teen frustration at their squabbling parents. There's no sugarcoating the emotional pain everyone's in here. Ultimately, this show reaches a conclusion that's both warm and unsaccharine: family is what you make it. How refreshing, in a world where the '90s cultural interest in divorce and alternative families has given way to a backward-looking cultural fixation with stories about happy mummies and daddies. 'Mrs Doubtfire' feels like it melds the best of past and present, offering a dose of nostalgia that's more complicated than Mary Poppins's spoonful of sugar - but just as sweet.

Evening Standard (***) Written by Tim Bano
Mrs Doubtfire at the Shaftesbury Theatre review: this musical is well done, just don't think too hard about it. Fun farce and silly comedy make this perfect for kids, if you don't worry too much about the whole email hacking thing... It's probably best not to think too hard about this one. A recently divorced dad pretends to be an old Scottish nanny so he can see his kids, deceiving them and his ex-wife in the process. Ya couldn't get away with it nowadays, eh? Except here we are, revisiting the 1993 film in the form of (what else?) a musical. A damp squib on Broadway – Covid was partly to blame – this adaptation by brothers Wayne and Karey Kirkpatrick and writer/satirist John O'Farrell entertains plenty, even if the songs dissolve like sugar as soon as we've heard them. There's lots of fun farce and very silly comedy, which is what you'd expect from the co-writers of Chicken Run, and it's clear that this is a show for young kids, in the elevated realm of dancing grannies and silly voices. We're in San Francisco. Fashion designer Miranda Hillard – Laura Tebbutt, who brings emotional range and an incredibly resonant voice – wants a divorce from her annoying voice-actor husband Daniel (Gabriel Vick). He doesn't want to

lose access to his three children, so when Miranda advertises for a nanny he hacks into her email (erm?), changes the ad and invents the perfect candidate in no-nonsense Scottish granny Mrs Doubtfire. And there she is: tartan skirt, and thick wodges of latex mined from the Uncanny Valley, everything slightly misshapen like someone asked Dall-E to recreate Mrs Doubtfire. But underneath the mask, Vick gets to prove himself the star of the show. He latches on to the whole Robin Williams schtick as he zaps between impressions of King Charles and Homer Simpson, letting the fourth wall bulge slightly when, despite the show being set in California, he riffs on Partygate as Boris Johnson (again, don't think too hard). More impressive is the number of quick changes: in and out of that bodysuit and mask a couple of dozen times. Director Jerry Zaks decides not to hide the transitions and it's amazing seeing Vick transform so instantly. The latex limits his facial expressions, so it's not a performance that digs too deep emotionally; Williams always got the comedy/tragedy equation right – something about those rueful eyes – where Vick just seems very lovely. But his performance is technically spectacular, and very funny, particularly in a farce scene where he tries to spatchcock a chicken. The second act becomes slightly more imaginative as a coven of Doubtfires appears and cartoonishly beats up Daniel, but for every elevated moment there are misfires, too: the scene where Daniel is first transformed into Doubtfire has Angela Merkel and Margaret Thatcher come on as drag harridans – smeared rouge, ill-fitting wigs – and dance. Again, there's probably no point here other than 'lol dancing grannies' but it doesn't do any favours to a show that's been criticised by some communities for its purely comic approach to drag. In the great glut of movie-to-musical adaptations currently force-feeding the West End, this is some kind of exact median. It's not superb, like Groundhog Day, but it's not Pretty Woman either, thank God. Aimed squarely at young audiences, there are laughs, some great performances, a couple of big notes and a zippy plot, all aided by the technical slickness of Zaks's direction. Just don't look too deeply under those layers of latex, because you might not like what you find. Shaftesbury Theatre, booking to January 13.

WhatsOnStage (****) Written by Alun Hood

Given the universal adoration for the late Robin Williams, the producers of this musical version of his 1993 smash hit Mrs Doubtfire were always going to have to find somebody pretty special to take on the stage incarnation of the feisty Scottish housekeeper and Daniel Hillard, the sad but resourceful family man who creates her as a means to see his children following his divorce. The good news is that they absolutely have. Gabriel Vick is more than simply a safe pair of hands though, and equally he's not just a stage avatar for Williams's acclaimed screen turn, although he captures the anarchic spirit and slightly deranged bonhomie that were the essence of it. He's astonishing in a part that demands full throttle singing and dancing, lightning quick costume changes, challenging physical comedy, vocal impersonations of everyone from Kermit the Frog to Boris Johnson, puppetry, and genuine, heartfelt emotion. It's an epic task, and he executes it with a twinkle-eyed charm and playfulness that gives way when required to moments of real anguish when Hillard thinks he's going to lose his beloved children. Vick has the comedy instincts of a real master, a rangy, powerful singing voice, and an ability to switch between character voices in the blink of an eye that takes the breath away. In the moments when he breaks the fourth wall as Mrs Doubtfire, the audience go crazy with delight. Whatever he's being paid, it isn't enough. This is probably the most demanding male central role in a musical comedy since Barnum, and he is giving a star-making performance that should, if there's any justice, catapult him to the top of every casting director's list of go-to leading men for the foreseeable future. The show he's holding together is bouncy and generic, a thoroughly enjoyable musical that wears its heart on its sleeve, and makes up in rumbustious good humour what it lacks in originality. It has been worked on since it's not-too-successful New York premiere but will still feel comfortably familiar to fans of the film: book writers Karey Kirkpatrick and John O'Farrell don't stray too far from the screenplay, and all the big set pieces are here, from Mrs Doubtfire's ample embonpoint being accidentally set on fire on the cooker (with pan lids used to put out the conflagration), to the high farce of the climactic restaurant scene where Daniel repeatedly switches personas and dinner tables in an effort to be in two places at once. In the musical, this sequence is punctuated, hilariously, by a flamenco floor show where a histrionic señorita (Lisa Mathieson, hysterical) belts out an aria of romantic betrayal, the lyrics of which unfortunately seem to comment on the ensuing Hillard/Doubtfiredisaster-in-hand ("Decepción! Decepción!…Bastardo!…Mentiroso!…Why did he lie? Why!") It's one of numerous sections in the show where it's virtually impossible to stop laughing. Brothers Karey and Wayne Kirkpatrick wrote the score and display the same gift for pastiching popular musical forms that they demonstrated in the songs for their earlier Broadway hit Something Rotten!. The music here is attractive but mostly only memorable when it sounds like something else (the disco-dynamic transformation number "Make Me A Woman" could have come straight out of Kinky Boots, and the Hillman kids' anthem of discontent, "What The Hell" is reminiscent of Beetlejuice). This lack of specificity works to their advantage though in the banging act one closer "I'm Rockin' Now" which is a suitably similar substitute for the movie's "Dude (Looks Like A Lady)" by Aerosmith which features the comically iconic sequence where a dancing Doubtfire gets down and dirty while doing the vacuuming. Choreographer Lorin Latarro even gives Vick identical moves (her work elsewhere is less derivative but equally exhilarating). There's a moment in the second half where the musical authentically improves on the film; the superior ballad "Let Go" for Miranda, Daniel's ex-wife as she chronicles the breakdown of their relationship, is not just the best song in the show, but it fleshes out the character in a way that Sally Field was never afforded in the movie. Laura Tebbutt delivers it stunningly, with powerhouse vocals and honest emoting that never feels self-indulgent. The supporting cast is full of lovable, caffeinated performances, notably Cameron Blakely as Daniel's make-up designer brother whose unusual tic of involuntarily shouting when not telling the truth is the source of huge merriment, and Marcus Collins as his sassy, Donna Summer-obsessed husband. Ian Talbot as a perpetually bewildered children's TV presenter long past his sell-by date, Micha Richardson as his comically dead-pan producer, and Kelly Agbowu, delightful as a suspicious but not unkind social worker, also contribute valuably. The role of Miranda's musclebound new British beau, whom Mrs D memorably refers to as "too tall and too British, too well chiselled and too Brad Pitt-ish", is pretty thankless but Samuel Edwards makes him surprisingly likeable. At the press performance I saw, Carla Dixon-Hernandez was sidelined from the role of Lydia, the older Hillman daughter, by an injury, but understudy

Amy Everett was wonderful, suggesting with beguiling warmth the pain of a teenager watching her parents hurt each other. Broadway's Jerry Zaks directs with polish and verve, and David Korins's sets are a very pretty eyeful with their gleaming visualisation of a semi-romanticised San Francisco, lit with colourful invention by Philip S Rosenberg. Catherine Zuber's costumes look like reality turned up a few decibels, which feels about right for this good-hearted fantasia, although there's not much she or the make-up team can do about the outlandish look of Mrs Doubtfire herself: a flaw in both the film and the show is that you occasionally find yourself wondering about the sanity, or at the very least the eyesight, of all the characters involved if they really accept they're looking at a convincing woman. I guess few will care, as this is a show that ticks so many of the boxes musical goers look for on their big night out. It's loud, it's bright, it looks expensive, it has big energy, belly laughs, tunes and tears, plus characters to root for, adorable kids, a truly unforgettable central performance, and a really beautiful message about the importance of finding your family, whether or not it's a conventional one. In these uncertain times, this theatrical equivalent to comfort food, that sends you out with a big grin on your face and a warmth in your heart, is a pretty appealing place to be. Don't worry poppets! Mrs Doubtfire looks like she could be around for quite a while.

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

DUKE OF YORK'S

***THE PILLOWMAN by MARTIN McDONAGH director MATTHEW DUNSTER décor ANNA FLEISCHLE lights NEIL AUSTIN sound IAN DICKINSON video DICK STRAKER with LILY ALLEN katurian, STEVE PEMBERTON tupolski, PAUL KAYE ariel, MATTHEW TENNYSON michal, REBECCA LEE mother, DANIEL MILLAR father, DAVID ANGLAND blind man, CARLOTTA DE GREGORI, MADELYNNE MILLS/SOPHIA CULLINGFORD/RUBY SIDDLE child 1, LILLIE STOCKER/DARCY CROSBY/LEXI ANNA SCOTT child 2

Blanche Marvin Critique
Fascinating in its mysterious way of digging deep into one's psyche. Fascinating use of horror that children usually project. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

Guardian (**) Written by Arifa Akbar
Lily Allen fails to deliver visceral punch. In this revival of Martin McDonagh's play about child mutilation, tyranny and freedom of expression, the twists and turns between comic and macabre sadly do not come off. ily Allen's star casting worked wonders for the West End run of ghost story 2:22. But The Pillowman, Martin McDonagh's 2003 play about child mutilation, state tyranny and freedom of expression (this production is partnered with PEN International), is a very different kind of gothic horror. Cerebral and slippery, it requires an accomplished actor to navigate its odd structure and changes of tone that slide between horror and humour, with punchlines tucked in between tales of children buried alive or attacked with drills. Allen does not meet the challenge. The singer turned actor plays Katurian, a writer held prisoner in a police state reminiscent of a 1970s eastern bloc country, awaiting execution without trial, with her brother Michal (Matthew Tennyson, bringing eerie energy) arrested in the next room. She has written stories featuring eye-watering murders and mutilations that are being enacted by a copycat killer. Under the direction of Matthew Dunster, who also directed Allen in 2:22, the shifts between the comic and macabre do not come off. Allen's Katurian is too indistinct, quivering with fear or blank-faced, though she delivers her lines efficiently. In the play's original staging, the part was played by David Tennant, and the character's gender reversal brings nothing new. The unfailingly excellent Steve Pemberton plays Katurian's interrogator, Tupolski, like a darker version of Eric Morecambe, and Paul Kaye as his thuggish sidekick, Ariel, is also marvellous. They do an entertaining turn in Pinteresque menace with added comic twists, while Allen ends up looking like their anodyne foil. When she has to hold the stage alone, the drama, as shocking as it is, fails to grab viscerally. Even with Pemberton and Kaye there, the production does not work on a dramatic level overall and feels like an extended version of Inside No 9 without the clever twist. Katurian insists her stories carry no political message, although the analogy between their violence and the tyranny of the unnamed state torturing her is clear enough. The play was written in the shadow of the Iraq invasion, and an essay in the programme by Andrey Kurkov reminds us of the current atrocities in Ukraine. Then again, Katurian's stories signify a host of ideas. There is the question of what happens to your writing after your death: the novelist is desperate for these stories to be preserved, perhaps so they can serve as encoded political testimony. There is the more dangerous idea that Katurian needed a tortured childhood as grist for her creativity. This brings with it the cliche that happiness writes white, and sits oddly beside the analogy of the storyteller as witness and chronicler of truth. That Katurian's stories inspire the killer to imitate their crimes compounds the confusion: is this a critique of the idea that stories are capable of moral corruption or its opposite? It is a loaded theme, ever live now with British rappers being criminalised for their lyrics, but it does not resonate. It merely adds to the soup of ideological opacity in which this play swims. Anna Fleischle's gloomily atmospheric set unleashes the gothic psychodrama of fairytales: children lost in forests, psychotic parents whose savagery might be a metaphor for state brutality, too, and a gallery of deaf, mute and blind characters as heavy-handed reminders that McDonagh is working from a Brothers Grimm tradition. There is a potentially explosive brilliance in this play, but its many ideas do not make a coherent whole here. When, at one point, Katurian retells a bedtime story about "a pillowman" to her brother, he says he has never understood the ending. He might be speaking for us. At Duke of York's theatre, London, until 2 September

Evening Standard (****) Written by Nick Curtis
The 2003 premiere of Martin McDonagh's jet-black melding of fairytales, fascism and in-your-face offensiveness is one of my top 10 favourite productions. Matthew Dunster's revival, featuring an impressive Steve Pemberton and a watchable but emotionally off-key Lily Allen doesn't quite match that memory. Maybe my tolerance for the ironic use of hate-speech, and for writers writing about writing, has ebbed. Anyway: this remains an audacious,

wickedly funny work that implicates and wrong-foots the audience throughout. It took nerve to write it, and it takes a strong stomach to watch it. In a shabby police building in an unnamed totalitarian state, cops Ariel (Paul Kaye) and Tupolski (Pemberton) browbeat, threaten and assault Allen's character, whose first, middle and last names are all Katurian, and who doesn't know what she's accused of. She calls herself a writer, though only one of her 400 mostly macabre stories has been published, so she works in an abattoir and cares for her child-like brother Michal (Matthew Tennyson) who is also in custody. Gradually it transpires that Katurian's stories about children having toes cut off, being fed razor blades in figurines made of apples, or being scourged like Jesus, were inspired by her own parents: they doted on her but tortured Michal in her hearing, damaging his development, to see what effect this would have on her nascent but saccharine writing talent. Some of her grimmer-than-Grimm tales also foreshadow recent child murders, of which she and/or Michal are suspected. One mark of McDonagh's swagger is that many of these stories are simply, starkly read out onstage. Another is that horror is repeatedly upended by absurdity or plain silliness: the cops are part-Tarantino, part-panto. This play is a display of writerly virtuosity and a mea culpa about a writer's heartlessness and vanity: Katurian is more concerned about the fate of her manuscripts than the more immediate prospect of pain and death for herself and Michal. However, the police-state setting, and references to persecuted authors around the theatre, feel like a specious legitimisation for a play that invites the audience to laugh at 'ironic' racist and ableist slurs. There was a lot of this in the early 2000s, and taboo-breaking of this kind is a signature of McDonagh's. It feels uncomfortable now. His dialogue is terrifically elegant, though, particularly in its use of repetition and juxtaposition. My favourite passage in modern drama is Tupolski's: "My father was a violent alcoholic. Am I a violent alcoholic? [Pause] Yes I am. [Pause] But it's a personal choice…" Pemberton is great in this brutally funny role, as is the fiercely grungy Kaye as Ariel. Allen, who made an impressive stage-acting debut in Dunster's ongoing 2:22 A Ghost Story, is compulsively watchable: drawn, intense, angular. But this show requires a juggling of emotional states she can't quite muster. Tennyson, winner of the Outstanding Newcomer prize in the 2013 Evening Standard Theatre Awards, is very good as the damaged Michal: but again, the characterisation feels problematic. The Pillowman himself, by the way, is a friendly spirit who persuades children to kill themselves before they go through the years of trauma that will make them want to commit suicide as adults. That's pretty deep. McDonagh's play remains brightly hilarious even at its darkest moments.

Time Out (***) Written by Andrzej Lukowski

In a workmanlike Lily Allen-starring West End revival, Martin McDonagh's dark 2003 play doesn't quite live up to its own legend. 'The Pillowman' is the great '00s British play that got away. Martin McDonagh's dark 2003 comedy – which starred a pre-'Doctor Who' David Tennant – was extravagantly praised upon its debut at the National Theatre's smallest venue, the Cottesloe. But for whatever reason it never made it to the West End: all the more frustrating because it splashily transferred to Broadway, with Jeff Goldblum and Billy Crudup joining the cast. McDonagh's subsequent colossal film success has only embellished its legend, and plans for a West End revival have long been mooted. And so now, 20 years after the National it's here and it's… …quite good..? Set in a nameless totalitarian state, 'The Pillowman' follows the police interrogation of Katurian, an abattoir worker and prolific amateur writer of horrifying short stories. As the play wears on, it turns into an intricate, gristly Chinese box of horror, a horrible story made up of horrible stories, that serves as a consideration of the purpose of writing and the impulse to do so. McDonagh's more frequently revived, Ireland-set earlier plays have generally stood up well. And 'The Pillowman' is full of brilliant bits, as the bemused Katurian is aggressively questioned by cops Tupolski and Ariel about a string of horrifying child murders that would appear to exactly replicate the writer's (largely unpublished) stories. But there's something about its obvious desire to shock that's dated it somewhat: the constant dwelling on child abuse and murder in Katurian's stories feel more of a piece with the '90s In Yer Face scene McDonagh emerged from than the actual plays he wrote in the '90s. It's not that we've become more prudish or that Katurian's Hans Christian Andersen-with-the-bleakness-turned-up-to-11 fables lack cruel elegance. But it's left with an air of contrivance, and the sense it's no longer saying the unsayable because it already said it 20 years ago. 'The Pillowman' isn't fatally dated: its vision of the world as an endless, interlocking world of bleak fables is darkly seductive. I'm sure it could have a classic 2023 production, but '2:22' and 'Shirley Valentine' director Matthew Dunster only half gets there. Regular stage collaborator with McDonagh – who has complained about other directors tinkering with his work – you sense that his goal here isn't to reevaluate or update 'The Pillowman' or otherwise rock the boat, but simply to finally put it on a West End stage. It comes down to the cast to carry it off, and on that score it's largely good news. Steve Pemberton is tremendous as Tupolski, the self-regarding yet self-aware authoritarian who never seems to bear Katurian any real ill will, even as he wearily gears up to execute the writer. Paul Kaye is livewire intense as the violent, dim, emotional Ariel. And Matthew Tennyson (Michal) is very enjoyable as Katurian's blithe, selfish brother (a character it doesn't bear getting too much into for fear of spoilers). And what of Lily Allen as Katurian? Flipping the character's gender is not really a big deal: perhaps there's something a bit less grubby and a bit more dignified about the character in the crisply spoken former pop star's hands, the sense that maybe a posh woman with an elegant bob writing stories about child murder in her spare time is less sordid than a shabby man doing so. Star of the original run of '2:22', Allen displays more range here: when she's first brought into the police station Katurian is in a state of high middle-class fluster, embarrassed by her situation as much as anything, desperate to get out. As the play wears on she settles into her role of straight woman to the increasingly vexed men around her, facing almost certain death with a mix of boredom and irritation. She acquits herself well in the storytelling sections. She's up to the task. But this is only her second stage role – she's not a world-class actor. Despite holding her own she seems like a perverse piece of casting: neither so famous she's guaranteed to sell tickets, nor so gifted that she's guaranteed to sell the play. In particular, I was never convinced by Katurian's desperation that her work be preserved – it seemed to be something she felt fairly strongly about, but there was no fanaticism of self-delusion there. Having missed the original production, I wonder if perhaps I've been telling myself a story about how 'The Pillowman' was a masterpiece. And I think I still believe that story on some level: with a bolder director and a really great lead, I

think 'The Pillowman' could be more than this dark, funny, thrilling but ultimately contrived revival. Let's try this again properly in another 20 years, maybe.

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

LYRIC

**ASPECTS OF LOVE music ANDREW LLOYD WEBBER lyrics DON BLACK, CHARLES HART novel DAVID GARNETT new orchestration TOM KELLY original orchestration DAVID CULLEN, ANDREW LLOYD WEBBER director JONATHAN KENT décor JOHN MACFARLANE movement director DENNI SAYERS musical supervisor NICHOLAS SKILBECK musical director CAT BEVERIDGE sound PAUL GROOTHUIS lights JON CLARK video/projection DOUGLAS O'CONNELL with MICHAEL BALL sir george dillingham, LAURA PIT-PULFORD rose vibert, JAMIE BOGYO alex dillingham, DANIELLE DE NIESE giulietta trapani, ANNA UNWIN jenny dillingham, DAVE WILLETS alternate george, ROSEMARY ASHE elizabeth, ANTHONY CABLE ensemble, VINNY COYLE hugo le meunier/1st cover alex, CHUMISA DORNFORD-MAY ensemble/1st cover jenny, SOOPHIA FOROUGHI alternate giulietta/ensemble, DICKON GOUGH barker/ensemble, BEN HEATHCOTE co-barker/ensemble, EU JIN HWANG swing/first cover marcel, DANIEL JAGUSZ-HOLLEY swing/first cover hugo, LINDA JARVIS ensemble/1st cover elizabeth, MICHAEL MATUS marcel richard, NATASHA O'BRIEN swing, JOANNA O'HARE swing/1st cover rose, INDIANA ASHWORTH/MILLIE GUBBY/KATIE MITTON young jenny

Blanche Marvin Critique
Not my favourite production with less to say about its appeal. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

Guardian (**) written by Arifa Akbar
Aspects of Love review – a preposterous blast from the past. If Aspects of Love is a blast from the past for some of us, it must surely be a nostalgia fest for Michael Ball, who played the musical's young lover Alex when it premiered in 1989, and found himself propelled into the pop charts with its signature ballad, Love Changes Everything. It was Ball's suggestion that this story of Parisian love triangles and romantic family entanglements be revived, with the star now playing Alex's uncle, George. With music by Andrew Lloyd Webber and lyrics by Don Black and Charles Hart, there are some strong numbers such as Seeing is Believing. But it is Love Changes Everything that dominates the production, directed by Jonathan Kentfirst belted out by Ball and reprised many times over. It is, without doubt, a well-oiled show, easy on the eye and ear. John Macfarlane's gliding screens reveal gorgeous sets and the voices are strong across the board. But for all its smoothness, there is a preposterousness to it. Much of this is down to the story, which begins as love-struck Alex (Jamie Bogyo) meets actor Rose (Laura Pitt-Pulford), several years his senior, and scoops her into a too sudden romance, just as quickly stymied when Uncle George falls for her too. George's Italian lover, the artist Giulietta (Danielle de Niese), is also thrown into the fray while Rose acquires her own squeeze, Hugo (Vinny Coyle), though he seems more like a butler than a lover. Meanwhile, Giulietta's kiss with Rose comes out of nowhere and goes nowhere too. The bohemian passions of David Garnett's 1955 novella, on which this musical is based, appear more like incestuous wrangles. These include an unsavoury development when the greying Alex falls for his cousin, Jenny (Anna Unwin), who is 18 (three years older than she was in the original musical). This prompts another tussle of love with her father, George, whose disapproval bears hints of sexual jealousy. In fact, these characters seem far from bohemian, their gender dynamics built on a conventional notion of male sexual jealousy or competition and female need or naivety. Giulietta is the only real bohemian, though her free spirit seems directly channelled from Frida Kahlo. We get the sense that these people could only ever exist within the bounds of a musical – one that is easy enough to watch but entirely unconvincing in its emotions. At the Lyric theatre, London, until 11 November

Time Out (***) Written by Andrzej Lukowski
Andrew Lloyd Webber's breathtakingly inappropriate 1989 musical is a delight so long as you ignore basically the entire plot. Even in a toned-down new version, Andrew Lloyd Webber's wildly problematic 1989 musical leaves me unsure how to rationally respond to it. Part of me thinks I should be trying to whip up a pitchfork-wielding mob to drive it out of town. Another part of me thinks… eh, it's quite good fun if you can avoid thinking too hard about what's actually going on. Adapted from David Garnett's 1955 novella, 'Aspects of Love' is a story of boho Brits taking a stab at sexual liberation in '50s and '60s France. Its first truly WTF moment comes in the middle of the first half, when young protagonist Alex (Jamie Bogoyo) literally shoots his former lover Rose (Laura Pitt-Pulford) out of jealousy over her new relationship with his uncle George (national treasure Michael Ball). Nobody seems to find this particularly amiss – perhaps because it's only a flesh wound – and indeed George ignores Rose and gives Alex a sort of bros before hoes pep talk, encouraging him to get together with Rose, the woman he literally just shot. How can you possibly relate to these people? And that's got nothing on the second half, wherein an older Alex inveigles his way into the now-married Rose and George's home and spends five years essentially grooming their daughter (aka his cousin) Jenny. Crucially, this is different to the old version of the musical by Webber, Don Black and Charles Hart: originally, Alex only spends two years grooming Jenny, meaning she's 15 at the end of the story, as opposed to 18 now. It ended with a number that was called – I kid you not – 'It Won't Be Long till Jenny's a Woman'. I say all this not from a position of righteous fury but because I'm still trying to scrape my jaw off the floor and maybe writing about the experience will help me understand what I just saw. Maybe. But why go to all this effort to revive it? The answer is fairly apparent: its elegant, string-driven, sung-through score is up there with Webber's best, and includes 'Love Changes Everything', possibly his most beloved song. Back in the day it was an actual chart hit for cuddly musical theatre legend Ball, who played Alex in the original production and clearly feels sufficient fondness for the show that he's up for revisiting it in the role of George – you get the impression this particular revival was contingent on his presence. And setting aside questions about the story, it's hard to really see this as anything other than a solid production from Jonathan Kent – John MacFarlane's huge

painted sets are ravishing, Ball is very watchable (his pipes remain in good order), and Pitt-Pulver is terrific as the mercurial, maddening Rose. I don't want to overreact to what is basically a pretty silly musical with nice tunes and solid performances: in some respects Webber tackles sexually inappropriate Bohemians in a similarly daft manner to the one in which he tackled cats or trains – nobody looks to 'Starlight Express' for guidance on the UK locomotive industry. On the other hand, 'Aspects of Love' is such a seething ethical mess that it's literally had to be rewritten to make its lead character seem less like a predatory paedophile – I'm not sure to what extent it's reasonable to sit with that and go 'lol, musicals'. Ultimately the story of 'Aspects of Love' is probably best viewed as a relic of a different era, when people did actually cop off with their teenage cousins and the British were only just fumblingly acknowledging that sex was a thing. If you can stomach that then the nice music and lovely Michael Ball will help 'Aspects of Love' go down more smoothly. But really it would probably be easier for everyone if this is the last time we try to rehabilitate this thing.

Evening Standard (**) Written by Nick Curtis
Michael Ball twinkles but why revive this silly, creepy musical?
The dislikeable characters and preposterous plot, despite the stylish staging, make this revival hard to love.
t's hard to see why Andrew Lloyd Webber thought this creepy and downright silly chamber musical was a good idea in 1989, let alone ripe for revival now. A story of postwar, would-be bohemians engaged in cross-generation, borderline-incestuous romances within their own family and social circle, its characters are thin and dislikeable, its plot preposterous. The lyrics, by Don Black and Charles Hart, veer from the sophisticated to the unintentionally cringeworthy. The mostly sung-through score is adapted from the novel by Bloomsbury Group-shagger David Garnett. Supposedly a celebration of love in all its forms, it ends up tarnishing even paternal affection with 'ick'. On the plus side, the music, weaving endlessly around the big numbers Love Changes Everything and Seeing is Believing, is lushly romantic, and Jonathan Kent's staging is both briskly efficient and stylish. Michael Ball – whose idea this new production was – plays the old rival to the young lover he played in the original, and duly belts out one big, crowd-pleasing, front-of-stage top note. He's matched by strong voices across the board. But just when you think you are enjoying it, a new lapse into buttock-clenching bad taste pulls you back. In 1947, older actress Rose (Laura Pitt-Pulford, silvery) impulsively runs off from Paris with besotted teenage fan Alex (Jamie Bogyo, vocally impressive but over-emoting) to his uncle George's villa in Pau. Fruity roué George (Ball) turns up and… guess what happens? Rose wavers between the two, and years go by, while George's Venetian sculptor lover Giulietta (Danielle de Niese, exercising her operatic lungs) seems happy to shag or snog just about everyone involved. Things get properly complicated when Jenny (Anna Unwin), the teenage daughter of George and Rose, falls for Alex. I mean, ewwww. David Garnett ended up marrying the daughter of his lover Duncan Grant, by the way. The main characters go from screaming jealousy to indulgent indifference, or vice versa, in a heartbeat. The height of absurdity comes when Alex shoots Rose, then he and George argue amiably in song who she'd be better off with. If you get bored with this sort of stuff, you can try and calculate how many decades of the story have passed by the increasing grey in Ball's hair and the mutating stubble on Bogyo's face. Or you can work out the age differences between George, Rose, Alex and Jenny, which in a pivotal scene I reckon goes 70, 50, 30, 18. Utterly unsexy, this is a story about egotism rather than passion. And the whole thing feels off, like a day-old fish. Supposedly wholesome numbers sound deeply wrong, particularly Mermaid Song by the pubescent Jenny and The First Man You Remember, sung by George to her slightly older incarnation. Rose's final number Anything But Lonely is a mad scream of neediness. Kent's revival is beautifully designed by John Macfarlane, with evocative watercolour backdrops and projection screens that swipe one scene off the stage before the next, or focus down like a camera aperture. Ball's fanbase will be delighted to see him twinkle and decorously emote in an undemanding role. But really, the score and the daft narrative aren't substantial enough to make us care about these smug, silly people and their lazy, messy, pervy liaisons. "Love makes fools of everyone," booms Ball's George. Well, quite.

WhatsOnStage (**) Written by Theo Bosanquet
Michael Ball can't change much in this problematic tale. Jonathan Kent's new production of Aspects of Love opens in the West End. Aspects of Love, Andrew Lloyd Webber's 1989 chamber musical that has returned to the West End in a lavishly reworked production, is overtly melodramatic even by his lofty standards. Centring on a love triangle between a young soldier, his uncle and an actress, it's based on the novella by Bloomsbury grouper David Garnett and is best known for its stand out number "Love Changes Everything", which helped propel the young Michael Ball to megastardom (I had it on a well-worn cassette back in the day). Ball returns here to play the uncle, George, and the show has been rejigged by Lloyd Webber, lyricists Don Black and Charles Hart, and director Jonathan Kent to enable him to still sing the big number. He duly delivers it with lashings of his trademark vibrato, less as a romantic ode and more a nostalgic rumination. It's undoubtedly the evening's highlight, though I can't help wonder whether having to rewrite a show so your star man can sing the hit indicates there may be a fundamental problem with the show itself. The narrative manages to feel both conventional and deeply, deeply weird. In postwar France, 18 year-old American Alex (Jamie Bogyo) becomes infatuated with Rose Vibert (Laura Pitt-Pulford) after visiting her dressing room following her performance in an Ibsen play. He takes her to a beautiful bohemian house belonging to his uncle George, who soon arrives and falls madly for Rose himself. They all end up at George's apartment in Paris, where shortly after sleeping with her Alex shoots Rose in a scene so over-stuffed that Ray Cooney would blanch. However, this doesn't seem to dim their attraction and many years later, when Rose and George have had a daughter, Jenny (Anna Unwin), Alex returns to the country house and becomes the subject of infatuation himself from his young cousin, much to George's (and our) horror. The show is almost entirely sung-through, with lyrics ranging in quality from lazy doggerel to moments of brilliance. The score certainly has merit beyond the central number, though it can't be denied there is a feeling of anticlimax once "Love Changes Everything" has come and gone. The cast – which also includes Danielle de Niese as George's fiery Italian lover Giuletta – sing it all superbly and the orchestra, who appear occasionally on a raised platform at the

back of the stage, is sumptuous under the baton of Cat Beveridge. Kent's mostly cogent production is notable for marking the long-awaited West End debut of legendary opera designer Jon Macfarlane, who serves up a selection of gorgeously painted flats that suit the show's exaggerated sense of romanticism. So it's rather baffling that scenes are demarcated by a sliding projection screen featuring shonky videos that depict a succession of cliché scenes (such as when the action moves to Venice and we get pigeons in St Mark's Square). The revolve is oddly employed too, at one point moving Ball to the back of the stage like a rejected gameshow contestant. Perhaps one day there will be a boldly revisionist revival that proves Aspects of Love has merit beyond its central ballad. But as it stands the story is too problematic, and the characters so unempathetic (it's never a good sign when the audience laugh during a death scene), that it feels best to consign it to the occasional concert performance. However, it does at least provide the opportunity to pay homage to one of our greatest musical performers singing an undoubted modern classic.

The Stage (*) Written by Sam Marlowe
One giant ick. Return of Michael Ball can't redeem this baffling revival of the thin, sugary musical or excuse its offensive sexual politics. What a gooey, oozy, gaudy box of stale chocolates this is. Based on a 1955 novella by David Garnett, Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical made its first West End appearance back in 1989, before flopping spectacularly on Broadway the following year. This revival is, frankly, mystifying. It's not just that the sung-through show is thinly written, mawkish and meandering; it's not just that the music is Lloyd Webber at his most blandly saccharine or that the lyrics, by Don Black and Charles Hart, are trite – although all those things, unfortunately, are true. What's most howlingly problematic is the plot: a textureless glob of sexist cliche that surely must have seemed faintly nauseating even three decades ago, and now looks creepy and, at its most flagrant, startlingly offensive. Jonathan Kent's production features a lead performance by original cast member Michael Ball, who made something of a signature tune of the earworm number Love Changes Everything. Ball certainly has his superfans. But it would take more than his golden-syrup vocals and twinkly charm to make wading through this sugary sludge worthwhile. Everything about it feels fake – from the forced, phoney passions to designer John MacFarlane's cod-Impressionist backdrops painted on cardboardish flats, and Douglas O'Connell's sliding video screens with their blurred, screensaver vistas. Our story (brace yourself) begins in post-war France – cue, naturally, cobbles and accordions – where Rose Vibert (Laura Pitt-Pulford), a young actress, is struggling to make her name. When a teenage fan, Alex (Jamie Bogyo), visits her dressing room, she improbably agrees to flit off with him to a villa in the Pyrenees before she even knows his name. There, she meets his wealthy uncle George (Ball) – and whoops, being a brainless creature for whom the dehumanising phrase "object of desire" might have been invented, she falls for him too. The love triangle thus constructed, we're then treated to 20 narrative years of maundering, bickering and bed-swapping, in which the low points include Rose and George's arty Italian mistress (operatic soprano Danielle de Niese) bonding over his adorable little ways ("shameless old Romeo", they coo), and the arrival of George and Rose's daughter Jenny (Anna Unwin), who swiftly becomes underage catnip to cousin Alex and subject to a bilious, quasi-incestuous tug-of-love between him and her own father. The enormously gifted Pitt-Pulford is wasted here, reduced to endless pouting and girly twirling; Bogyo is petulant and De Niese a cringe-inducingly cartoonish sex bomb. Ball performs with characteristic ease, soaringly delivering the song everyone's waiting for, which has been shamelessly reallocated from Alex to George for the occasion. But enduring this lurid musical male fantasy is a high price to pay: one tiny spark of nostalgia for one giant ick.

iNews (****) Written by Fiona Mountford
It's cool to mock Andrew Lloyd Webber, but this is a stylish update. Michael Ball is among the stars of this sophisticated revival for the post-Me Too era. Multiple eyebrows were raised when it was announced that this 1989 Andrew Lloyd Webber musical was to receive a West End revival. Based upon a 1955 Bloomsbury Group novella by David Garnett, who himself married the daughter of his former lover Duncan Grant, it portrays a world of Bohemian lifestyles, morals and art – as well as some notable age-gap romances. Would it, could it, stand scrutiny in this post-Me Too era? Yes, is the answer, not least because of some sensibly rigorous editing of the book (Lloyd Webber) and lyrics (Don Black and Charles Hart), most notably the change of age of a key character, Jenny, from 15 to 18. But Jenny doesn't arrive until the second half of this all-but through-sung piece, which is operatic in both emotional and musical scope. It's fashionable currently to knock Lloyd Webber, but this is an elegant and elegiac work of interwoven musical strains, echoes and motifs, as well as that belter of a showstopper "Love Changes Everything". This is the third major production of Aspects of Love that I have seen in more than 30 years and each time the show has moved me immensely with its haunting lyricism and romantic longing. The daisy chain of encounters begins when Alex (Jamie Bogyo) – "In two years I'll be 20" – meets the much-older, chic and impoverished actress Rose (Laura Pitt-Pulford). He invites her to spend two weeks in a French villa, a beautiful house that turns out to be owned by his uncle George (Michael Ball, who played Alex in the 1989 premiere). Rose's affections are torn between the ardour of youth and the monied security of middle age and she vacillates accordingly between the men, something that continues even after her marriage to George. George himself continues to maintain more than cordial relations with his Italian lover Giulietta (opera singer Danielle de Niese). This is not your typical overblown West End musical – and is all the better for it. Instead, it is a stylish chamber piece: our first glimpse of the under-used ensemble comes after a whole 40 minutes. Jonathan Kent's sophisticated production has a charmingly stripped-back staging, with a beautiful design from John Macfarlane that includes large Vanessa Bell-style painted backdrops. Ball proves that he still has a notable set of lungs with a glorious rendition of "Love Changes Everything", but the real star is the luminous Pitt-Pulford, magnificent of voice, who has us rooting for the capricious Rose all the way through, including the moment when she realises that Jenny, her attractive 18-year-old daughter – see how crucial that age adjustment was? – now possesses greater sexual allure. Ignore the detractors – and there will be many – and judge for yourself.

ENO

****PETER GRIMES music BENJAMIN BRITTEN libretto MONTAGU SLATTER from poem of GEORGE CRABBE conductor MARTYN BRABBINS director DAVID ALDEN assistant director IAN RUTHERFORD décor PAUL STEINBERG costume BRIGITTE REIFFENSTRUEL lights ADAM SILVERMAN movement director MAXINE BRAHAM assistant conductor MARK BIGGINS chorus director JAMES HENSHAW leader RICHARD BLAYDEN with GWYN HUGHES JONES peter grimes, ELIZABETH LLEWELLYN ellen orford, SIMON BAILEY captain balstrode, CHRISTINE RICE auntie, CLEO LEE-McGOWAN first niece, AVA DODD second niece, JOHN FINDON bob boles, CLIVE BAYLEY swallow, ANNE-MARIE OWENS mrs sedley, RONALD SAMM revd horace adams, ALEX OTTERBURN ned keene, DAVID SOAR hobson, WILLIAM BILETSKY/RUDY WILLIAMS john, PAUL TATE doctor crabbe

Blanche Marvin Critique
One of the most stirring performances which elightened the whole Opear in its staging and in the brilliant singing of the leading actor Gwyn Hughes Jones. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

Guardian (*****) Written by Flora Willson
Grim but compelling, Alden's nightmarish staging returns to Coliseum. Everyone is traumatised in David Alden's 2009 production of Britten's opera. With Gwyn Hughes Jones and Elizabeth Llewellyn leading a standout cast, this is an evening of beauty and terror. Maybe it is the harsh chiaroscuro of grit and beauty. Maybe it's the unflinching display of community at its worst – of isolation in closeup. Either way, Britten's Peter Grimes is an opera that gets under your skin. Its characters can haunt and its strange, stark soundworld can linger long after curtain-down. To state the obvious, Grimes is never a cosy night at the opera. But David Alden's award-winning 2009 production for English National Opera – back on stage for the first time since 2014 – makes for especially grim viewing. We're in the mid-century: no Ercol in sight, just bare corrugated iron and drab Sunday best, where violence is barely concealed behind stiff upper lips. In Alden's Borough, virtually everyone seems traumatised. Grimes has his mad scene, but is anyone really sane in a world where women wiping-down tables do so in slow motion with fixed, empty stares? Or where a folk song precipitates a zombie-like mass dance routine? Even the raked stage in the opening courtroom scene is aggressive, plunging towards the audience as the mob behind it (the ENO chorus at its best) jeers at Grimes. The stage pictures are striking, lit like so many nightmarish paintings in Adam Silverman's designs. In the final scene, having run the gauntlet of the Borough's many demons, we are suddenly confronted by the shattering beauty of an empty space – just clouds and grey, watery horizon. The demons are internal now, as Grimes raves alone before being sent to his death; Alden allows us no comfort. In this context, casting Elizabeth Llewellyn as Ellen, Grimes's hope and support, is a masterstroke. No comfort there either. Her gleaming, laser-like upper register is as hard as nails and she softens from the upright, uptight to the desperately warm only when it is too late. Simon Bailey's Balstrode, Clive Bayley's Swallow and John Findon's Bob Boles provide huge vocal power and are, in the latter cases, unforgettably repellent. Christine Rice's butch publican Auntie, her horror-film-ish nieces (Cleo Lee-McGowan and Ava Dodd) and Alex Otterburn's Suffolk wide boy Ned Keene are intensely compelling. In the title role, Gwyn Hughes Jones is a conflicted and awkward Grimes, his optimistic credo ("I'll marry Ellen!") is shouted, the monotone of his aria "Now the Great Bear and Pleiades" effortful, his final soliloquy desperate. Through it all though, the ENO orchestra under music director Martyn Brabbins are on cut-throat form, the score's fleeting moments of delicacy and splendour proving precious amid the roiling terror. 21 September – 11 October 2023

The Stage (***) Written by Inge Kjemtrup
Flawed but fascinating. There are many moments of gripping dramatic intensity in English National Opera's revival of David Alden's Peter Grimes, as well as a fine role debut by Gwyn Hughes Jones as Grimes. Yet the production of Benjamin Britten's great opera doesn't fully cohere. In choosing George Crabbe's poem The Borough as the source for his opera, Britten deliberately built in multiple layers of meaning. Set in his native Suffolk, on the surface the opera is the story of outsider Grimes and his persecution by the small-minded and hypocritical citizens of the fishing village of Aldeburgh. But it is also about Britten and his partner Peter Pears as outsiders themselves: conscientious objectors in the Second World War and gay men in an intolerant age. Alden's production, the second revival since its premiere in 2009, shifts the time from the early 1800s of Crabbe's poem to 1945, the year of the opera's premiere. The dull colours of the post-war era predominate, especially the opening scene, set in a fishery. One can practically smell the fish and the sea. Paul Steinberg's massive angular set, textured in greys and blues, is at its most effective in the second act, capturing the mode of a sunlit seafront, where Ellen Orford (sympathetically played by Elizabeth Llewellyn) has taken Peter's newest apprentice. Ellen and the sea captain Balstorde (Simon Bailey, in fine form) are the opera's moral centre, fighting the hypocrisy of the town and Peter's unstoppable self-destruction. Yet the quirkiness of the town's denizens is exaggerated – sometimes distractingly so. The two nieces (Cleo Lee-McGowan and Ava Dodd, perfectly cast) look like a disturbing Diane Arbus photo come to life as they synchronise their jerky motions. Their Auntie is splendidly portrayed by Christine Rice, wearing a massive fur coat and looking on wryly at the antics of her fellow citizens. The town's leading busybody,

Mrs Sedley (Anne-Marie Owens) has a twisted relationship with her laudanum supplier, the "quack" Ned Keene (great comic flair from Alex Otterburn). As Grimes, Jones is a formidable actor, ranging from cruel and paranoid to anguished and dreamy. He even looks the part, with baggy, rough clothes and unkempt hair. The ocean is a character, too – a powerful, unpredictable god that can drown a man or flood a city and cannot be placated. The line sung by the townspeople: "O tide that waits for no man / spare our coasts", carries a resonance in our age. The return of this work to ENO, a company strongly associated with Britten, should be welcomed despite this production's shortcomings. Given the ENO's precarious existence, it is fitting and touching that conductor Martyn Brabbins brings the entire orchestra on stage to take a bow at the evening's end.

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

ENO

****AKHNATEN by PHILIP GLASS director PHELIM MCDERMOTT conductor KAREN KAMENSEK décor/projections TOM PYE costume KEVIN POLLARD lights BRUNO POET revival lights GARY JAMES choreographer SEAN GANDINI assistant conductor OLIVIA CLARKE, MURRAY HIPKIN, PETER RELTON with ANTHONY ROTH CONSTANZO akhnaten, CHRYSTAL E. WILLIAMS nefertiti, BENSON WILSON horemhab, JOLYON LOY aye, ZACHARY JAMES scribe, HAEGEE LEE queen tye, PAUL CURIEVICI high priest of amon, ELLIE NEATE daughter 1, ISABELLE PETERS dayghter 2, ELLA TAYLOR daughter 3, FELICITY BUCKLAND daughter 4, AMY HOLYLAND daughter 5, LAUREN YOUNG daughter 6

Blanche Marvin Critique
Magic that has been reproduced again at the ENO. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

Evening Standard (****) Written by Nick Kimberley
One of the strangest manifestations of Western culture's fascination with Ancient Egypt is Philip Glass's 1984 opera Akhnaten. Its subject – sort of – is the pharaoh who, in the 14th century BCE, forced his subjects to abandon their multiple gods in favour of one, Aten, of which, surprise, surprise, he was the earthly representative. The opera doesn't exactly invite the audience in, as it's sung in a variety of mostly biblical and pre-biblical languages, with no translations provided, but with a cumbersome English narration that offers little enlightenment. Yet in Phelim McDermott's English National Opera production, first seen in 2016, Akhnaten becomes an eccentric kind of performance art, an ever-changing sequence of stage pictures, simultaneously gaudy and glamorous, mysterious and nonsensical. They have a hallucinatory quality that matches the giddying undulations and shifting pulses of Glass's music, expertly shaped by conductor Karen Kamensek. The designs (sets by Tom Pye, costumes by Kevin Pollard, lighting by Bruno Poet) create their own world, less Ancient Egypt, perhaps, more Planet Zog: this is not a documentary opera, although there are visual references to Akhnaten's supposed hermaphroditism. It opens with the death of Akhnaten's father, followed by Akhnaten's coronation (he's carried in naked: I hope we'll see no such scene in our own imminent coronation). We meet the new pharaoh's mother, Queen Tye, and his wife, Nefertiti; then things fall apart, gradually. Akhnaten's son – none other than Tutankhamun – takes on his father's role and then, in a somewhat superfluous coda, we find ourselves in the modern world. Plot details matter less, though, than the combination of music and stage spectacle, including jugglers, whose activities help the action through the more sedate passages: repeated use of slo-mo movement creates a sense of arcane ritual that is somewhat overdone. Counter-tenor Anthony Roth Costanza has the slightly disdainful charisma to carry the title role even if his falsetto has a tough edge to it. Vocally he's well-matched, sometimes outshone by the lustrous tones of Chrystal E Williams' as Nefertiti and the brighter timbre of Haegee Lee's Queen Tye. The imposing figure of Zachary James clearly enjoys wrapping his sonorous voice around the "May the force be with you" narration:is it meant to be helpful, or is it simply another enigma? The ENO chorus, meanwhile, is on blistering form. The whole show is a reminder of the kind of bold production that ENO at its best is capable of delivering. If the company has a future at the Coliseum, it would be wonderful to see what it could do with the first and most enigmatic of Glass's early, "portrait" operas, Einstein on the Beach. Just a dream? Let's hope not. 25 Mar-5 Apr 2023

The Guardian (****) Written by Martin Kettle
Few operas can cast such a spell as Philip Glass's Akhnaten. Glass's music insinuates itself into the ear and stays there. The unfolding of a visionary Egyptian pharaoh's rise and fall lodges in the mind's eye. Akhnaten has almost achieved classic status now, but it still delivers the haunting impact that made its British premiere, 34 years ago, one of English National Opera's most memorable nights. Phelim McDermott's 2016 production, now in its first revival, lives up to that company inheritance. His staging captures the attention from the start, as the shadows of Egyptian wall paintings come gradually alive on Tom Pye's multitiered set. The production's discipline – essential to the work's aesthetic – rarely falters as the funerary and coronation rituals take human, but expressionless, shape and the pharaoh becomes transported by his new, monotheistic sun-god worship. Stage pictures are painted with balletic poise. Act two is especially memorable, as the red robes of the pharaoh and his queen intertwine in their act two duet and Akhnaten makes his rapt ascent across the backdrop of the sun. The central role in the staging of the jugglers from the Gandini Juggling Company is a brilliantly inventive counterpoint, visually and symbolically, to the general stateliness. The jugglers' routines echo the insinuating lines of Glass's score and provide an energised visual contrast to the opera's declamations. In the title role, the countertenor Anthony Roth Costanzo acts with fabulous control and sings with an otherworldly bareness of tone that captures the pharaoh's increasing remoteness from his warring nation. Katie Stevenson as Akhnaten's wife Nefertiti and

Rebecca Bottone as his mother Queen Tye weave richer vocal textures that convey the growing unease around the cult of Aten. Keel Watson stands out vocally as an earthy and human Aye, who seems to have strayed into upper Egypt from a New Orleans mardi gras. Chorus and orchestra under Karen Kamensek are unflagging. Glass will always have his detractors, but in the end it is the poignancy that makes Akhnaten a special opera. It may depict a long-vanished world, but Glass's obsessive evocation of a self-destructive civilisation seems very contemporary.

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

AMBASSADORS

****PRIVATE LIVES by NOËL COWARD director CHRISTOPHER LUSCOMBE décorSIMON HIGLETT lights MARK JONATHAN music supervisor NIGEL HESS sound JEREMY DUNN assistant director IMY WYATT CORNER fight director KEV McCURDY choreographer JENNY ARNOLD with NATALIE WALTER sibyl, NIGEL HAVERS elyot, DUGALD BRUCE-LOCKHART victor, PATRICIA HODGE amanda, GEORGIA GOODMAN louise

Blanche Marvin Critique
There have been so many productions of Private Lives that retelling has to be of the highest quality which this production has achieved. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

Evening Standard (****) Written by Nick Curtis
Sometimes at the theatre all you want is to see a couple of consummate pros take a classic out for a spin. Here, Patricia Hodge and Nigel Havers, both in their 70s, bring an autumnal tinge to Noel Coward's 1930 comedy about a frivolous, stylish, waspish couple, who can't live together or apart. Christopher Luscombe's production, brought in to London after a regional tour, looks on the outside like a solid rendition that will draw in the coach parties and won't frighten the horses. But with older leads there is an urgency to the way Amanda and Elyot – having accidentally booked adjoining rooms in Deauville for honeymoons with their second, much-younger spouses – run off together to seize a last chance at mutual happiness. Little of this subtext impinges on the clipped aphorisms and the witty cut and thrust of Coward's dialogue, except perhaps when the couple contemplate mortality: "Kiss me, my darling, before your body rots." Otherwise the clipped quips and acid put-downs sing out reassuringly. Debonaire in a dinner jacket or a dressing gown, Havers can do this stuff in his sleep. Indeed, at times I thought he clicked into autopilot: but if ever an actor could coast on easy charm, he can. Hodge meanwhile is terrific, with a hooded gaze that could wither leylandii at 200 paces. She always seems absolutely alive and in the moment, even when Amanda is at her most superficial, and she makes the most familiar lines – "very flat, Norfolk" – sound fresh. Since Coward himself originally played Elyot I used to assume he was the focus: but this revival and the recent, stark Donmar version with Stephen Mangan and Rachael Stirling make clear the focus is Amanda. Her disdain for interwar social conventions is more bold, her anger more bracing. Coward was considered passé for decades but he was always radical. Veiled in comedy, the play discusses religion, morality and mortality. Amanda thinks death will be "a rather gloomy merging with everything". Elyot, always more of a drama queen, envisages "a glorious oblivion". It's often easy to dismiss the main characters' second spouses as mere stooges, but here one's forced to think about why dull Victor (Dugald Bruce-Lockhart) and silly Sybil (Natalie Walter) hitched themselves to these difficult, self-obsessed old showoffs. For the first act, designer Simon Higlett provides a robustly dull hotel façade and two balconies with a linking gate: clearly, no one is going to vault or clamber over railings here. In the second, he unveils a gorgeous, art deco Parisian apartment complete with a baby grand piano. Elyot picks out the couple's signature tune, Someday I'll Find You on it. Later on, Amanda bounces his face off the keys. The couple's physical confrontations are understandably softened but their verbal sparring also flags a bit. There's a definite lull midway through the second half. The reappearance of Victor and Sybil injects new pace, he with his thwarted male pomposity and she with a new cattiness. As they, too, start to violently disagree, Hodge and Havers slip into synchronized spectator mode, as if they're at Wimbledon, before slipping silently, complicitly, out of the door. It's a meticulous piece of dumbshow. Like I said, consummate pros.

London Theatre (***) Written by Julia Rank
Fans of Miranda Hart's self-titled sitcom might recall that many of the stories told by overbearing mum Penny, played by the fabulous Patricia Hodge, involve Nigel Havers and details that her daughter would rather not know about. Hodge and Havers, who have been friends for decades, first gave their septuagenarian takes on the lead characters in Noël Coward's 1930 classic Private Lives in 2021 and now step into their velvet slippers again for a run in the ideal West End venue – the intimate, enchantingly pretty and freshly refurbished Ambassadors Theatre.It's unusual to have two West End productions of the same play within months. Michael Longhurst's production at the Donmar Warehouse emphasised the darkness of the dysfunctional central relationship and featured horror film-style touches. In contrast, Christopher Luscombe's winsome staging is a frothily amusing star vehicle that aims to please (the perfect production is probably somewhere in the middle). Simon Higlett's cream-and-pink hotel façade is a perfect dolls' house that ought to be ideal for a romantic honeymoon. The roles of sparring exes Elyot and Amanda, who divorced after a highly turbulent marriage and find themselves honeymooning with their new spouses on neighbouring balconies, were created by Coward himself and his lifelong friend Gertrude Lawrence when they were in their thirties. Hodge and Havers are about four decades older than the roles as usually cast, but it's played straight without an explanatory framing device and it actually works very effectively. Being 70 in 2023 isn't what it was 1930 when life expectancy was barely 60, but the ageing up lends additional poignancy to the prevailing sense of nostalgia and the fact that age isn't necessarily accompanied by dignity or wisdom. Changing bodies also provide comedy – Amanda isn't keen on an afternoon tryst on the sofa so soon after eating and Elyot's demand "Kiss me before your body rots" feels particularly ungallant and morbid. Much of second act in Amanda's Paris flat is spent elegantly pottering about in pyjamas, suggesting a sweeter, gentler kind of interlude – until the problematic violence, of course. Havers, better known to my generation as a

celebrity than an actor, still seems to be a heartthrob; his first appearance and his re-emergence in evening dress were met with audible sighs at the final preview. His Elyot has plenty of twinkly charm and seems to have never outgrown his petulant and self-dramatising man-child tendencies. The regal Hodge, who was Olivier-nominated for her performance in Sheridan Morley's biographical revue Noël and Gertie in 1990, is a goddess of high comedy with her perfect posture and beautifully modulated voice. Amanda, who has been "jagged with sophistication" from birth, loses her composure with an expression of sheer horror at spotting her ex-husband through her compact mirror. The character will never feel remorse for her behaviour but Hodge shows that she does have the maturity to be aware that her actions have implications for other people's lives. Dugald Bruce-Lockhart has the thankless role of the stolidly masculine Victor (originated by Laurence Olivier) but Natalie Walter shows that the schoolgirlish Sibyl (who gets the best frock of the show) is just as volatile as Amanda in her way. Excerpts of Coward's songs are performed in a manner that acknowledges Hodge and Havers' vocal limitations and shows how much pleasure can be found dabbling in "the potency of cheap music". It's probably heresy to suggest that this play might not always be quite as witty as it thinks it is. To paraphrase, too much flippancy can be annoying, but stuffiness is worse. For Amanda and Elyot, at their age, life is too short to take things seriously. Privates Lives is at the Ambassadors Theatre through 25 November. Book Private Lives tickets on London Theatre.

Time Out (***) Anya Ryan
Patricia Hodge and Nigel Havers star in this breezily enjoyable production of Coward's timeless comedy. Pour yourself a cocktail, darling, and get ready for an almost totally unchallenging revival of Noël Coward's most pristine comedy. But Christopher Luscombe's production of 'Private Lives' – which had its first outing at the Theatre Royal Bath in 2021 – is as pleasurable as it is safe. Stuffed full of dinner jackets, ball gowns and childlike quarrels, there's no attempt to reinvent Coward's classic comedy of manners. Still, this tale of a couple equally drawn to and repelled by one another, gets the laughs rolling in thick and fast. Perhaps it all feels slightly safe coming hot off the heels of the Donmar's darker, more aggressive version, which starred Stephen Mangan and Rachael Stirling. Whilst Michael Longhurst's production uncharacteristically cranked up the domestic violence of Coward's play, this one embraces its traditionalism in all its glory. Beginning on a doll house balcony set, we meet former married couple Elyot (Nigel Havers) and Amanda (Patricia Hodge) on their respective second honeymoons. Driven by Coward's own glorious music, they wander off from their airhead neew partners and fall back into each other's arms. With such chemistry, they can't resist a second stab at making their exhilarating, dangerous love story work. If there's one stroke of real originality here, then it is the older ages of the two leads. Both Havers and Hodge are in their seventies, but both still look supple as they flail about the stage, bickering, flirting and roaring at each other with real glee. The duo have their roles down to a tee; Havers is suave, quick-witted and gloriously good fun, while Hodge leans into Amanda's citrus sarcasm and omnipresent eye rolling. Amanda and Elyot's mutual attraction is brittle and explosive, but with these two actors at the helm it makes as much sense as is possible. With more senior actors, the urgency of the script and the need for quick decisions is accelerated. Could this be their last shot at lifelong bliss and mutual adoration? Maybe? But the possibility makes the lines sting with a newfound punch; when Elyot teases with the line, 'Kiss me, my darling, before your body rots' the potential of mortality bangs with a thud. Following the pink-tinged set of the giddy act one, we step into the inky, spherical red walls of Amanda's Paris flat. The design, by Simon Higlett, marks a sharp change in tone, and here the couple's resurgent lust should curdle into vicious cruelty. Luscombe's production, though, never quite digs into the fury hidden within Coward's humour, and instead the couple's physical confrontation at the end of act two is met with sniggers rather than shock from the audience. But if it's a pleasant, giggle-fueled evening at the theatre you're after, then Havers and Hodge have got you covered. There might not be anything truly novel in here, but it is hard to knock time spent with such delightfully exuberant actors. Written by Anya RyanThursday 14 September 2023

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

SOHOPLACE

****THE LITTLE BIG THINGS based on the memoir by HENRY FRASER music NICK BUTCHER lyrics NICK BUTCHER, TOM LING book JOE WHITE orchestral management SYLVIA ADDISON musical director LAURA BANGAY video LUKE HALLS lights HOWARD HUDSON sound PAUL GATEHOUSE costume FAY FULLERTON décor COLIN RICHMOND choreographer MARK SMITH director LUKE SHEPPARD with JONNY AMIES henry fraser, JORDAN BENJAMIN dom fraser, REBECCA BOWDEN surgeon, JAMIE CHATTERTON tom fraser, STEPHEN JOHN DAVIS company, ALASDAIR HARVEY andrew fraser, LINZI HATELEY fran fraser, ED LARKIN henry fraser, GRACIE McGONIGAL katie, TOM OLIVER marco, MALINDA PARRIS dr graham, ELENA PITSIAELI company, GEORGE SALMON company, CLEVE SEPTEMBER will fraser, AMY TRIGG agnes, AMY WEST company, JOSEPH WOLFF company

Blanche Marvin Critique
An exuberant production that is heartwarming in the telling of a true story. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

Evening Standard (****) Written by Nick Curtis
The Little Big Things at @sohoplace review: one of the most uplifting, heart-swelling shows in ages. Based on the bestselling memoir of Henry Fraser this is exuberant, inclusive and raucous. This exuberant, inclusive musical tells the true story of teenage rugby star Henry Fraser, who was paralysed from the shoulders down in a holiday swimming accident in 2009 but went on to become a successful painter. It's a hymn to the human spirit, the medical profession and the complicated dynamics of a loving, middle-class family. Though its raucous good

humour sometimes dissolves into sentiment, it's one of the most uplifting, heart-swelling shows I've seen in ages. No, I'm not crying: you're crying. The poppy score and cheerfully sweary script are built around a dialogue between post-accident Henry (Ed Larkin, who uses a wheelchair), and the able-bodied younger self (Jonny Amies) he needs to forgive and then let go. A version of this dynamic – involving guilt, regret and resentment – also plays out between Henry's parents (Linzi Hateley) and Alasdair Harvey) and his three blokey, rugger-bugger brothers. It's a neat expression of the psychological as well as the physical cost of sudden disability. Henry's overworked but tireless doctor (Malinda Parris) suggests he thinks of it as ending up in a disappointing holiday destination, like Belgium. It's down to ribald, no-nonsense physiotherapist Agnes (played with knockout charisma by wheelchair-user Amy Trigg) to get his forward momentum going again. Oh, and his childhood sweetheart Katie (Gracie McGonigal) who, on seeing the pictures Henry has created with a stylus gripped in his teeth, remarks: "You're better with your mouth than you ever were with your hands." The story of the show's creation is almost as extraordinary as Henry's rehabilitation (he left hospital 11 months early) and his reinvention as an artist. Pop-song composer Nick Butcher and his co-lyricist Tom Ling had connections to the Fraser family and the rugby world and asked emerging playwright Joe White to help them adapt Henry's 2017 autobiography. None of them had written a musical before, much less one that required a wheelchair-friendly stage: but as they worked on it under lockdown, producer Nica Burns was building the perfect theatre. he creators' experience in crafting three-minute hits and their relative ignorance of musical theatre convention prove liberating. Several numbers, particularly those involving the bros, sound like superior boyband ballads: I mean that as a compliment. There are party tunes as Henry goes out drinking both pre- and post-accident. OK, it's a little obvious to give Parris, the only black woman in a lead role, a gospel-inflected tune: but the lyrics communicate both the stress and the passion of a doctor's life. Hateley, a musical stalwart, wows with the clever One to Seventeen, about mothering boys. Harvey, as her weekend-sailor husband, leads the soaring Miles and Miles, which works on several levels; the boat as a metaphor for the family; the sea representing both potential and danger. The voices are strong, the swelling climax of the big numbers devastating. There's little set, so director Luke Sheppard uses colour washes by lighting designer Howard Hudson to evoke place and mood. Choreographer Mark Smith seamlessly integrates the able and disabled cast in his joyful choreography and uses the full height of the theatre: you'll believe a man in a wheelchair can fly. At the end of opening night the audience were on their feet long before Henry himself came on stage. Now if you'll excuse me, I seem to have something in my eye… @sohoplace, to November 25 Nov;

Time Out (****) Written by Anya Ryan
Beautifully big-hearted pop musical based on Henry Fraser's inspirational memoir. 'It's a terrible idea for a show' says the actor playing Henry Fraser in the early moments of new musical 'The Big Little Things'. But don't believe him. This story, based on the memoir of the same name written by the real-life Henry Fraser about the 2009 holiday accident that changed his life forever and left him paralysed from the neck down tingles with tenderness, defiance and spirit. The show, adapted by Joe White, tracks Henry's life from a carefree, rugby-obsessed 17-year-old through the traumas of his sudden disability, up to the beginnings of his successful career as a painter. Each chapter is rich with surprise as well as sadness and new adventure. Centred around a conversation between Henry pre-accident (Jonny Amies) and post-accident (Ed Larkin), the show relays his battle to come to terms with his new life and let go of the one that came before. Both Henrys give performances mighty enough to tear your soul. Amies has a voice so ripe, it makes any song he sings sound effortless. Together they are two halves of one whole – much of the musical's humour comes from the moments when they jointly chorus about their teenage crush or cringe at the other's behaviour. The supporting cast is perfectly pitched too. Henry's Dad is played so exquisitely by Alasdair Harvey, with all the pent-up feeling of a man unable to properly express himself, that my eyes begin to water nearly every time he opens his mouth. The punch of this heart-soaring production is that it clings onto the light within the darkness – and there's giggles aplenty. Amy Trigg, who is perhaps the hidden gem within this wildly talented company, has one cracking one-liner after another as wheelchair-using physiotherapist Agnes. Henry's underwritten playground sweetheart, Katie (a gloriously gooey Gracie McGonigal) does get one great line: after looking at one of his paintings she declares that he is 'better with [his] mouth than [he] ever was with his hands. The almost bare stage glows with paint splatters of colour to show different emotions. Directed by Luke Shepherd, each scene is christened with life and creativity. It's not flawless, mind you. The poppy songs written by Nick Butcher and Tom Ling are jolly enough when performed in the theatre, but I couldn't hum a single one back to you now. Every so often the narrative tips too heavily into schmaltz and sentiment. But, you'd have to be totally cold-hearted to not be taken in by this extraordinary tale of fight. Conceivably it might not be fully ready, but it feels genuinely groundbreaking to see this show on a West End stage. Pass me the tissues, I'll need a box full.

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

SOHOPLACE

****MEDEA by EURIPIDES adaptor ROBINSON JEFFERS director DOMINIC COOKE décor VICKI MORTIMER lights NEIL AUSTIN sound GARETH FRY movement director LUCY CULLINGFORD with SOPHIE OKONEDO medea, BEN DANIELS jason/tutor/creon/aegeus+, MARION BAILEY nurse, PENNY LAYDEN 3rd woman of corinth, JO MCINNES 1st woman of corinth, AMY TRIGG 2nd woman of Corinth

Blanche Marvin Critique

One of the most magnificent productions of this play that I have ever seen. The forcefulness of the drama reaches its peak in this magnificent production. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

The Guardian (****) Written by Arifa Akbar
Medea review – Sophie Okonedo is magnificent as ancient Greece's preeminent rebel woman. Medea is as much victim as villain in Dominic Cooke's psychologically subtle and subversive production, and Ben Daniels is superb playing all the puffed up men in her life. Medea sits high up in the ancient Greek pantheon of rebel women: a murderous mother and conniving sorceress who exacts revenge by killing her own children. What is remarkable in this production is that Sophie Okonedo's spurned wife is never an outright monster but rather a deeply wounded, highly strategic, stateswomanly figure; a formidable opponent to unfaithful husband, Jason, and almost upstanding in her anger. It is a magnificent performance. So is Ben Daniels' as Creon, Jason and Aegeus, to whom she runs for safety in Athens. Daniels is superb in each role but the final scene, depicting Jason's grief, is immense and abject. What seems like a formal, declamatory interpretation of the play at first becomes psychological and subtly subversive in Dominic Cooke's hands. Robinson Jeffers's celebrated adaptation has an epic quality but is more Shakespearean than Euripidean in its pace and poetry; the show runs over 90 minutes but is meditative rather than fevered. There is no high concept behind the production, only ancient drama in modern dress. Vicki Mortimer's set is an illuminated circle outside which are the women of Corinth (Jo McInnes, Amy Trigg and Penny Layden). They are witnesses to the violence, seated among us and unable to stop the rumble of fate. But they are also voyeurs, looking on at a woman's dramatised pain, to which Medea refers at the start. "You've come, let me suppose... to peer at my sorrow," she tells them and us. Gareth Fry's sound cranks up the tension with drums, rattles, alarms and helicopters overhead, while the violence is all the more horrific for remaining unseen. A staircase leading down to a basement allows us to hear the children's screams as they are murdered without seeing them, just as the death of Jason's new wife – poisoned by Medea – is delivered in a report of eye-watering brutality. The children (Oscar Coleman and Eiden-River Coleman on the final night in preview) are angelic, running on to stage doe-like and silent. Meanwhile, Daniels' characters circle the stage, chests out and muscular, as if showcasing heroic masculinity in motion, though they are also men circling their female prey. And Medea is as much victim as villain here; a foreigner in this land who talks about the immense sacrifices she has made for Jason – leaving her home, turning against her father and brother, aiding Jason's search for the Golden Fleece. He returns her words with a coloniser's arrogance. He, the unfaithful husband who has effectively left her facing exile, says he took her out of savagery from Colchis and brought her to civilisation in Greece. His new wife, Creon's daughter, is repeatedly referred to for her golden hair and implicit is a sense that he has left Medea, the exotic other, to make a "proper" white marriage. Medea begins the play on her knees in supplication to the men. The drama ends in reverse, Jason brought down in the final, terrible scene. February 10 – April 22

Evening Standard (****) Written by Nick Curtis
It's not your typical West End entertainment but this staging of Euripides' Greek tragedy grips with a cold, bleak force. Sophie Okonedo is riveting in her first stage role for four years, dredging up vast reserves of emotion to play Medea, a woman who gave up everything for Jason, the hero she loved, and for their two young sons. And who does the unthinkable when he leaves her for the younger, more politically advantageous daughter of King Creon. Okonedo has an excellent foil in her old friend Ben Daniels, who circles the almost-bare stage in menacing slow motion before stepping in to play Jason and all the other male parts. There's something wonderful about finding Dominic Cooke's uncompromising, brutally human 90-minute production amid the video-spattered architectural kaleidoscope of the redeveloped Tottenham Court Road. In an era when sexed-up reworkings are de rigueur, Cooke opts for an admirably simple 1946 adaptation by American poet Robinson Jeffers. The men and the all-female chorus refer to Medea, wrongly, as a creature of stone. She refers to the men, rightly, as dogs, who will bite until their teeth are broken. She's an outsider even before she becomes an outcast, regarded as a "barbarian" and a "witch" by the "reasonable and civilized elite" of Colchis that we, the audience, represent. At first, we only hear her, from the staircase curving up into Vicki Mortimer's tiled courtyard set, as if she's already in exile, or in the grave. When she appears, she is a vision of grief. Deep lines of anguish and hurt rake Okonedo's face, but her voice is determined. "I will show you my naked heart," she promises. The women sympathise with her, Creon threatens and patronises her, and Jason mansplains that he is acting in their sons' interest: the text doesn't really need updating, does it? Medea swaps her peasanty blouse and skirt for a funereal black dress when she stops pleading and starts plotting revenge. As she watches Jason horsing around with their boys, you can actually see her stricken chagrin harden into something more awful. Daniels has a more playful time of it, shrugging jackets on and off as he switches roles. He juxtaposes an adamantine Creon and a chilling Jason with a startlingly camp turn as the Athenian king Aegeus. It works, as do the inoffensively modern costumes and the simple set. The production sits sweetly in this in-the-round venue inspired by the great theatre at Epidaurus (a town namechecked in the play). I'm not sure we need the burst of twangly soft rock at the start, though, or the equally clichéd onstage downpour at the end. Above all, it's great to see Okonedo back on the London stage. She must spend her periods away charging her batteries in order to release another skinless, vivid, wrenching performance. Her last theatre role, as Cleopatra at the National in 2018/19, won her the Evening Standard's Natasha Richardson Award for Best Actress, and this blazing Medea surely propels her onto this year's shortlist.

SOHOPLACE

****BROKEBACK MOUNTAIN by ASHLEY ROBINSON short story ANNIE PROULX songs DAN GILLESPIE SELLS director JONATHAN BUTTERELL décor/costume TOM PYE lights DAVID FINN sound CHRISTOPHER SHUTT musical director SEAN GREEN with MIKE FAIST jack, LUCAS HEDGES ennis, EDDI READER balladeer, EMILY FAIRN alma, PAUL HICKEY older ennis, MARTIN MARQUEZ joe/bill/jack's father, SOPHIE REID laureen/waitress/backing vocals/baladeer/jack's mother

Blanche Marvin Critique
Moving and disturbing telling of a tale that recreates the mood of this fascinating piece. Supported by music in explaining the storyline. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

Time Out (***) Written by Andrzej Lukowski
Though impressively atmospheric, this stage version of Annie Proulx's queer love story is totally overshadowed by the classic Ang Lee film. How do you make 'Brokeback Mountain' without an actual mountain? That's kind of the problem with this stage adaptation of Annie Proulx's 1997 gay romance. In both the original short story and Ang Lee's hugely successful 2005 movie version, the vast empty spaces of Wyoming form a brooding backdrop to the tortured love affair between Jack and Ennis, two farm hands who fall into each other's arms as young men, and spend the next 20 years failing to quit each other. You can't do vast empty spaces in a mid-sized theatre. And even if you could, that's not the route Jonathan Butterell's intimate production of Ashley Robinson's adaptation has taken. Although there's a good stab at the great outdoors in Tom Pye's set - fake snow, a real campfire – the USP here is the presence of '80s pop star and Americana enthusiast Eddi Reader with her live band. The songs are by 'Everybody's Talking About Jamie' man Dan Gillespie Sells, but it's definitely not a musical, and the lyrics wilfully avoid direct comment on the action. And yet the reverb-heavy vocals and instrumentation beautifully convey the sense of America's vast expanses, particularly the contributions from pedal steel legend BJ Cole, whose live presence will probably get a small subset of music nerds hotter under the collar than any cowboy on cowboy action. If Jack Gyllenhaal and Heath Ledger's film versions of Jack and Ennis inevitably feel definitive, then young US actors Mike Faist and Lucas Hedges make decent fists of the roles. Faist, who beguiled in Spielberg's 'West Side Story', is particularly magnetic as Jack, playing him as a free spirit who drifts through life fecklessly, but blissfully unbound by the prejudices and repressions of those around him. Hedges hits his marks as the more tortured Ennis, whose emotional inarticulacy and difficulty in imagining a future with Jack essentially dooms them. And there's nice work from Emily Fairn as Ennis's wife Alma, who is as much a victim of Ennis's inability to own up to who he is as either of the men. What it sorely lacks is a sense of a world beyond the men's encounters. They seem to exist in a timeless, Americana-tinged no place, with little sense of either man ageing or of time passing between their encounters. Paul Hickey is cast as an older Ennis, but the role feels almost entirely wasted as he doesn't have anything to do beyond look on sadly. There's also little real sense of anyone's inner life – we understand something of Ennis's torment by watching his marriage break down, but essentially Robinson's text provides us 90 minutes of men failing to talk about their feelings. The same could be said of the film, except it's 45 minutes longer, and has that magnificently brooding cinematography to both reflect the men's emotional state and also root their story in a time and place. The music here is a lovely touch, but really it's an atmospheric flourish rather than the heart and soul of the production, which really amounts to an efficient retelling of Proulx's story. If there had been a lot more music it might have felt more daring and opened up new ways into the characters. But ultimately it isn't enough to help the play step out of the film's all-encompassing shadow.

Guardian (****) Written by Arifa Akbar
Where Ang Lee transformed Annie Proulx's 35-page short story about two gay cowboys into a feature film in 2005, Ashley Robinson's stage adaptation, all of 90 minutes long, returns it to a distilled purity. The dialogue, especially at the start, is minimal, and skates on the surface of deeper felt emotions between Ennis (Lucas Hedges) and Jack (Mike Faist), the Wyoming sheepherders who meet, aged 19, and become furtive lovers for the next 20 years. Nica Burns's new theatre is proving itself as a space in which acoustics are central to the action and Dan Gillespie Sells' country and western songs, led by Eddi Reader's beautiful vocals, build the atmosphere and charge. In Jonathan Butterell's production, the music becomes its own language, even between the lovers who connect through song. Although there is a conspicuous yee-haa twang to it all, with Tom Pye's set made of scrubland, tent and glowing campfire and his costumes featuring suede, spurs and Stetsons, it manages not to sink into cliche. The story begins in 1963 in a state so homophobic it was life-threatening to be openly gay. Hedges and Faist take some time to warm up: they have the look of Abercrombie & Fitch models, topless in denims and suede boots, and the sexual interest is initially delivered in coy, cursory glances. The passion never really burns up the stage but their chemistry comes alive as boyish romance, with play fighting and suddenly grabbing ardour. It retains an innocence and tenderness all the way through, even in spite of the unspoken dissatisfaction they come to feel, and both actors are compelling, Faist especially so as the ebullient Jack, while Hedges is more melancholic as Ennis, too scared to risk a fuller life with Jack, and full of regret for it. Staged as a memory play, it features an older Ennis (Paul Hickey), as grizzled as he is at the start of Proulx's story. This is the play's only dud note, the older figure is too evidently a device and spare part. Then there is Ennis's wife, Alma (Emily Fairn), who captures the impact of closeted male homosexuality on the women caught within its doubleness. "I'm not no queer," says Ennis, Jack quickly echoing him, and we see how the denials are necessary for survival, in their time. Yet still we cannot consign their story to the past at a moment in America in which the "don't say gay" bill is gaining traction.

The play's ending is stark, leaving our sobs stuck, dry, in our throats. The men's unlived lives, their unspent passions, are desolately evoked. At @sohoplace, London, until 12 August

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

CHARING CROSS

***GEORGE TAKEI'S ALLEGIANCE book MARC ACITO, JAY KUO, LORENZO THIONE music/lyrics JAY KUO original orchestration/arrangements LYNNE SHANKEL director/choreographer TARA OVERFIELD WILKINSON musical supervision/orchestrations ANDREW HILTON, CHARLIE INGLES décor/costume MAYOU TRIKERIOTI lights NIC FARMAN sound CHRIS WHYBROW musical director BETH JEREM with GEORGE TAKEI, TELLY LEUNG, AYNRAND FERRER, MASASHI FUJIMOTO, MARK ANDERSON, IVERSON YABUT, PATRICK MUNDAY, MEGAN GARDINER, IROY ABESAMIS, RAIKO GOHARA, EU JIN HWANG, HANA ICHIJO, MISA KOIDE, RACHEL JAYNE PICAR, SARIO SOLOMON, JOY TAN

Blanche Marvin Critique
This is a traditional touring show giving the background of what happened to the Japanese during the American war against Japan. They were actually moved from their homes on the West Coast into campsites that were set up for the removal of the Japanese population from the West Coast to the Midwest for so called safety sake. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

Guardian (**) Written by Arifa Akbar
The Star Trek actor appears in an epic story of Japanese Americans interned after Pearl Harbor but there is never enough emotional force. This musical, inspired by George Takei's early life, tells of how approximately 120,000 Japanese Americans – men, women and children – were forced into internment camps in 1941, following the attack on Pearl Harbor. The Kimura family, comprising father Tatsuo (Masashi Fujimoto) and his California-born children, Sammy (Telly Leung) and Kei (Aynrand Ferrer), along with their grandfather (Takei), are taken to a camp in Wyoming. They become ideologically split after being forced to prove allegiance to their country although as Sammy says: "We are Americans." Given the importance of this appalling moment in US history and its resonance with the debates on immigration, identity and nationhood today, this production should carry enormous weight. That it does not is frustrating. Potent ideas are touched on: Sammy demonstrates his passionate patriotism by enlisting while others in the camp like Frankie (Patrick Munday, very good), refuse to fight for a country that has defined them as "enemy aliens" and inflicted harm on their families. Takei's character grows vegetables and gives the surplus to the army: patriotism clearly comes in different forms. But none of this carries the emotional force it should. Transferring from New York, the show bills itself as an "uplifting Broadway musical" and therein lies the problem, perhaps. Directed by Tara Overfield Wilkinson, with a book by Marc Acito, Jay Kuo and Lorenzo Thione, it feels long at almost two and a half hours but its scenes move too fast and breezily, telegraphing the camp's horror but also containing heavy helpings of schmaltz. Love stories bloom while some die and their ghosts return to watch their loved ones, and sing. Takei is charming in his part but these characters do not become individual or full-bodied enough. The show throws out song after song (music and lyrics by Kuo) and too many of them are unmemorable. The music is rousing, sometimes with a distantly martial beat, but at other times oddly bouncy. The performances are uniformly strong though, as well as the singing, especially from Ferrer whose voice is both powerful and delicate. But we end up simply not feeling strongly enough for a story that should appal and outrage us. 7 January – 8 April

Time Out (**) Written by Anya Ryan
'Star Trek' legend Takei stars in this sadly underpowered musical inspired by his own childhood experiences of a Japanese internment camp. George Takei was only five years old when the US government forced him, his family, and 120,000 other Japanese Americans into internment. His wartime experiences are the inspiration for what he calls his 'legacy project', the 2015 musical 'Allegiance', by Marc Acito, Jay Kuo, and Lorenzo Thione. It is a dark and tragic story that needs teaching. But this overlong UK premiere production is limp and lacking in heart. We meet the Kimura family – son Sammy, his older sister Kei, their father Tatsuo and grandfather Ojii-Chan – as they live a broadly happy life on a farm, just as the Second World War is brewing. When the Japanese attack Pearl Harbour, their lives are capsized and the family is forcefully thrown into a 'relocation centre' in Heart Mountain. Here, the cracks between them begin to show, as they become bitterly divided on where their allegiance should lie. Sammy is prepared to risk his life to fight for his country, while Kei falls in love with the authority-hating Frankie Suzuki in the camp. Cue the big issues of generational and cultural difference, mixed in with all the elements of a big Broadway show. There's some powerful moments. But in the show's effort to pander to a showtunes-loving crowd, the story loses force. Unremarkable songs are reeled out one after another. A schmaltzy love story between Sammy and a white nurse (Megan Gardiner) at the campsite adds little but a dash of white saviourism to the narrative. Horrific historical moments – notably Hiroshima – come and go without the needed quiet and space to breathe. Helmed by the Broadway star Telly Leung as Sam, the cast is left to carry a half-baked book. Aynrand Ferrer as Kei has a singing voice so seismic she manages to suffuse feeling into her underwritten role. Her performance of 'Higher' is probably the evening's melodic high point. For 'Star Trek' fans and non-'Star Trek' fans alike, George Takei's sporadic presence is almost magical. With gentle shoe tapping, bright eyes and genuine likability, it is impossible not to take to him as the family's grandfather. His dynamic performance reminds

us that this tale was once his reality. Some bright spots, but in its current form 'Allegiance' just isn't remarkable theatre. Directed by Tara Overfield Wilkson, the atmosphere of the camp is smoothed out by sandy lighting and stylized movement. What we want instead is tension and more dramatic drive. In the programme notes Takei writes of his hope that the message of 'Allegiance' can be carried past the 'theatre walls'. And it should be. But perhaps, his musical is not the best way to spread it.

CURRENT **London Theareviews**

CHARING CROSS

**REBECCA by MICHAEL KUNZE, SYLVESTER LEVAY book/lyrics MICHAEL KUNZE music/orchestrations SYLVESTER LEVAY english book adaptation CHRISTOPHER HAMPTON english lyrics CHRISTOPHER HAMPTON, MICHAEL KUNZE based on novel by DAPHNE DU MAURIER original production VEREINIGTE BÜHNEN WIEN director ALEJANDRO BONATTO choreographer RON HOWELL musical director/supervisor ROBERT SCOTT orchestrations SYLVESTER LEVAY décor NICKY SHAW lights DAVID SELDS sound ANDREW JOHNSON projections MATT POWELL with EMILY APPS clarice, PIERS BATE frank cawley, DAVID BREEDS ben, MELANIE BRIGHT alternate for mrs. danvers/ensemble, RICHARD CARSON maxim de winter, NIGEL-JOSEPH FRANCIS frith/ensemble, ROSIE GLOSSOP ensemble, SARAH HARLINGTON beatrice, ALEX JAMES-WARDS jack favell, SHIRLEY JAMESON mrs. van hopper/ensemble, LAUREN JONES i, KARA LANE mrs. danvers, NICHOLAS LUMLEY colonel julyan/ensemble, GAIL MACKINNON ensemble, JAMES MATEO-SALT ensemble, SCOTT McCLURE ensemble, NEIL MOORS giles, TARISHA ROMMICK ensemble, ELLIOT SWANN ensemble

Blanche Marvin Critique
This is a sad tale that a physical production ruined an entire show. The reviews all negated this production, there is little to add except that it deserved a better chance at succeeding. It's sad that the actual physical lacking could affect a production to such a point. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

Guardian (***) Written by Arifa Akbar
Among polished performances, Kara Lane's creepily obsessed housekeeper proves a powerful force. This musical adaptation of Daphne du Maurier's novel became a mammoth success in Austria where it was first staged in 2006. The gothic tale of marriage between a naive young woman (Emily Apps) and a rich widower, Maxim de Winter (Richard Carson), who appears to be haunted by his devastatingly beautiful late wife, Rebecca, incorporates 22 songs by German-language composers Michael Kunze and Sylvester Levay. They are translated into English here by Kunze and Christopher Hampton. It is hard to cast aside Alfred Hitchcock's 1940 film (even with Ben Wheatley's recent Netflix version in the mix) but, visually, this musical makes its mark. Shadow play and watery surges around De Winter's Cornish estate, Manderley, are captured beautifully through Matt Powell's projections. Together with Nicky Shaw's quickly re-forming set design, bedrooms morph into moonlit trees or cauldron-like ocean waves. The songs add to the atmosphere and the duets between the central couple, such as Help Me Face the Night, are sweet although there is really only one ballad that sticks, Rebecca, sung by lugubrious housekeeper, Mrs Danvers (Kara Lane). Under the direction of Alejandro Bonatto, the performances are polished – a feat given the recent spate of cancellations due to sickness in the company. Apps takes over from Lauren Jones as the young wife and brings a lovely lilting voice to her role. There is not always enough body to her character's vulnerabilities though; she is played simply, blandly, as an innocent, and her assertion over Danvers comes a little late in the song Mrs De Winter Is Me. Carson, meanwhile, is a cardboard figure as Maxim, barely known and given flimsy lines in Kunze's book, adapted by Hampton. The first half takes us through the story briskly, the central romance too quickly handled and functional to the plot. But intrigue sets in after that and the twist is delivered well. The standout is Lane who makes Danvers a powerful force, creepily obsessed with her former mistress. Her relationship with the callow second Mrs De Winter and the morbid triad between the women, including the absent Rebecca, contains enough grip and tension for its own potential spin-off. 4 September-18 November 2023

Variety: Written by David Benedict
"What a terrible tragedy." Indeed. That's the lyric cried out as, in theory, the famously magnificent Cornish home at the heart of the story burns to the ground at the climax of the musical of "Rebecca." Or, rather, when smoke is pumped into the auditorium, the frontcloth glows red and cast members race around to startlingly little dramatic effect. Daphne du Maurier's beloved, near-Gothic romance centers on a mystery – but the chief mystery here is what anyone thought they were doing entrusting a large-scale property (once famously destined for Broadway) to a 265-seat off-West End house with a creative team and production budget so woefully underfunded. The premiere of an English language version of Germany's runaway musical hit (by bookwriter and lyricist Michael Kunze and composer Sylvester Levay) comes at a considerable production cost, immediately made plain by the 19-strong cast and the 18-piece band. But anyone expecting the new production to be an automatic hit needs to think again: The multi-location plot, running from extravagant Monte Carlo hotel to washed-up Cornish beach hut via multiple grand interiors including a courtroom and a plot-crucial staircase, requires a level of investment and invention that are painfully missing from director Alejandro Bonatto's production, which is eye-widening in all the wrong ways. In so small a theater with almost no wing space, activating the audience's imagination with more

abstract visuals could have yielded results. But production designer Nicky Shaw opts instead for a thuddingly literal approach. Despite the libretto describing "priceless antiques and possessions," locations are clumsily established via single items of furniture and large, poorly lit flats. The necessity of set changes leaves an abundance of scenes played against a white curtain on which video footage — the sea lapping the shore, giant geraniums blooming to indicate love growing — are projected. As a result, the element almost wholly absent throughout the long evening is atmosphere. The belief must be that the atmosphere would be supplied by the score, with 39 listed songs. Beyond the yards of sung dialogue with moody underscoring, Levay's actual songs are mainly in the key of Lloyd Webber-esque romance, complete with multiple repetitions. But there's a problem when the song you emerge humming is something from "Phantom of the Opera" rather than the show in question. Levay and his notably strong-voiced cast know how to handle a vocal climax, but most of the songs are so shapeless that the high points arrive suddenly out of plot necessity, rather than any musical logic. With a band of this size there are felicities in the orchestration, not least in the elegant writing for woodwinds, but even those are smudged by a poor sound design that runs the gamut from loud to much louder. Everything sounds flattened, and all the vocal power sounds as if it comes from loudspeakers rather than the actors. Matters are not helped by the English translation by, of all people, Christopher Hampton, whose plays (including "Les Liaisons Dangereuses" and translations of works by Yasmina Reza) are so deliciously deft. All too often his meandering lyrics makes the lead character the mistress of mis-stress. Take the song in which the famously frightened and unnamed central character finds her voice, "Mrs. deWinter Is Me!" Rounding on her nemsis Mrs. Danvers, who is handling a plant belonging to the dead title character, Lauren Jones sings, "Orchids never were my style/ Azaleas are far more versa-tile." Warming to her theme, she adds, "Empty those flower pots/ On the compost pile." All this manages to suggest is that there's more to writing a lyric than making dialogue rhyme. As for the servants in the all-important household, the lumpily choreographed scenes among the under-characterized yet over-acted staff make "Downton Abbey" look as if it were made by the realist Ken Loach. The house's staff are, of course, all in thrall to Mrs. Danvers. Stern of manner, dressed in black and glued, whenever possible, on the staircase of the overwhelmingly brown house, Kara Lane never misses an opportunity to do fierce Wicked Lesbian Acting. As her boss, Maxim, Richard Carson sings well but the book scenes are so schematic that he is left with nothing to do but look handsome and deliver extremes of emotion. Engaging motivation is entirely missing. The one person who emerges with dignity utterly intact is Jones as the central character. Never less than vocally confident while maintaining, until the last moments, the necessarily mouse-like manner, she clearly deserves a production and, crucially, a director who could allow her to shine. In the 85 years since its publication, du Maurier's novel has never been out of print and Hitchcock's 1940 movie is the rare case of a work that equals its original source. But as Ben Wheatley's misguided 2020 Netflix movie version proved, the material is far from fail-safe. Reading the novel or revisiting Hitchcock is a far better bet than witnessing this sorry, truly astonishing attempt at re-invention.

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

DONMAR WAREHOUSE

***WATCH ON THE RHINE by LILLIAN HELLMAN director ELLEN MCDOUGALL décor BASIA BIŃKOWSKA lights AZUSA ONO sound TINGYING DONG musical director JOSH MIDDLETON fight director CRISTIAN CARDENAS video SARAH READMAN with BILLY BYERS, BERTIE CAPLAN, KATE DUCHÊNE, CAITLIN FITZGERALD, FINLEY GLASGOW, PATRICIA HODGE, HENRY HUNT, TAMAR LANIADO, JOHN LIGHT, CARLYSS PEER, CHLOE RAPHAEL, GEOFFREY STREATFEILD, MARK WASCHKE, DAVID WEBBER, LUCY BROMILOW, ANDREW FRANCIS, RICHARD KEIGHTLEY, JANE LAMBERT

Blanche Marvin Critique
This was a fine production of a classical play that succeeded in its original production and bears the truth even today. The reviews were all fair and kind to this production. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

Guardian (****) Written by Arifa Akbar
Patricia Hodge stars in Hellman's play about a liberal American family confronted by war in Europe and the dangers of inaction. Lillian Hellman's 1941 play looks like the silver screen come to life. It is framed as if inside an old-style cinema, with a rolling prologue in period typeface, the back wall flickering intermittently – a reminder that her plays were numerously made into Hollywood films. Despite these dated effects, this quietly incandescent play about Nazi tyranny in Europe – and the US's inertia in the face of it – feels current in the ethical questions it raises. We meet the Farrelly family in their refined Washington DC home as matriarch Fanny (Patricia Hodge) waits to welcome back, after a 20-year absence, her daughter Sara (Caitlin FitzGerald) who has a German husband Kurt (Mark Waschke) and three children in tow. Impeccably directed by Ellen McDougall, with an inspired design by Basia Bińkowska, what seems like a potential comedy of manners or family friction drama becomes charged with bigger world politics and violence. Sara and Kurt are anti-fascist fugitives who bring the war in Europe to the door of this ostensibly liberal household, albeit with a Black butler who answers Fanny with "yes'm". Kurt describes how he was compelled to fight against nazism after watching 27 people killed in the street (the word "Jew" is rarely uttered in this play but lies just beneath its surface). "I could not stand by and watch," he

says. That message might have been written as a wake-up call to the US which had still not entered the second world war at the time of the play's Broadway premiere in 1941 – but it is also instructive for us in light of the Ukraine war. The play's politics are immaculately couched in story; Hellman's dialogue zings with wit and thunders with eloquent conviction. The performances are polished, too. Hodge channels Bette Davis to fantastic effect (Davis played Sara in the 1943 film) and is matched by every other cast member, including the three children (Billy Byers, Chloe Raphael and Bertie Caplan, the last making a very charming stage debut). As the play enters dangerous waters it is Waschke who steals this show with the earnest heroism of a man compelled to act – the antithesis of David Tennant's SS officer in Good, recently staged in the West End. While its plot has the feel of a twisty crime thriller and a textbook villain in the dastardly count who holds the house to ransom, we are so engaged by what it asks of us and its tension that the melodrama does not jar. Last year the Donmar became a victim of Arts Council England's funding cuts. This must-watch show more than proves its worth. December 16/2022 – January 4/2023

Whats On Stage (****) Written by Sarah Crompton
Lillian Hellman's 1941 call to arms Watch on the Rhine hasn't been seen in London for 40 years. It is a fascinating play but a profoundly problematic one and it is to the Donmar's enormous credit that it has brought it back into the light, in all its knotty difficulty. Its plot is relatively simple. Sara (Caitlin Fitzgerald), the daughter of a wealthy Washington family, returns home from Germany after 20 years away. She brings with her a German husband Kurt (Mark Waschke), and three preternaturally sophisticated children. While her mother Fanny (played with anxious hauteur by Patricia Hodge) and brother David (Geoffrey Streatfeild) greet her with wary affection, another refugee in the house, a Romanian count Teck (John Light) down on his luck encounters them with suspicion. While his wife (Carylss Peer) is confessing her love for David, Teck is playing poker with fascist sympathisers and keeping an eye on the main chance. He quickly sees a way of improving his fortunes by passing on information on Kurt, an anti-fascist who is deeply involved in the German resistance to Hitler. What unfolds is both a physical and a moral conflict about the need to take a stand – a clear metaphor for America's reluctance to involve itself in the Second World War. Black and white slides at the beginning and end of the production make the play's significance chillingly clear. The date it is set is crucial: the action takes place in July 1940 and the US only enters the war in December 1941. All of this makes Watch on the Rhine pertinent historical viewing. It is riveting to see Hellman without the benefit of hindsight, making her plea for her country to fight against fascism and to choose good over evil, via Kurt's noble stance and his heroic commitment to put his own life and family in the balance. "My children are not the only children in the world," he says. The play still feels urgent, but its difficulties arise because of its form and the way Hellman chose to handle the subject matter. She was both Jewish and Communist, yet the only time Jewishness is mentioned in her play is to explicitly explain that Kurt is not Jewish. He has somehow to stand for all the resistance to Hitler without ever mentioning a prime reason to fight. This too springs from the circumstances of the writing – Hellman did not want to be accused of special pleading, especially since a strong strand of antisemitism was part of the reason that America was holding its neutral position. But it surrounds the play with a whiff of untruth, which subtly undermines its powerful warnings about the dangers of unopposed extremism. It's also written very much as a drawing room comedy which gradually morphs from a family drama about a homecoming after a period of estrangement – full of witty lines from the all-knowing servant Anise (an excellent Kate Duchêne) and fractious squabbling between mother and son – into a more melodramatic and tragic struggle. Director Ellen McDougall doesn't quite resolve the tension; there are moments when you sense her struggle in matching her commitment to the play's subject matter with its inert, traditional form. Basia Bińkowska's setting almost makes the issue concrete, combining an elegant drawing room, covered with a wallpaper view of the Rhine, with a more stylised frame. But there are excellent performances from Streatfeild as the unhappy son, and from Waschke, bringing shafts of realism to the heavily metaphorical Kurt. Fitzgerald too as Sara has to be unrealistically self-sacrificing and self-possessed which she does with some conviction while David Webber weaves something out of absolutely nothing as the black butler Joseph. For all its oddity, and over-writing, the play grips. It's rare to feel you are watching a plea from the frontline of history. This alone makes Watch on the Rhine worth reviving. It may not come back for another 40 years, but it feels like an important piece in the history of theatre.

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

HAROLD PINTER

***LEMONS LEMONS LEMONS LEMONS LEMONS by SAM STEINER director JOSIE ROURKE décor ROBERT JONES lights AIDEEN MALONE sound GEORGE DENNIS movement ANNIE-LUNNETTE DEAKIN-FOSTER with JENNA COLEMAN bernadette and AIDAN TURNER oliver

Blanche Marvin Critique
Lemons Lemons Lemons was an unusual title for an original concept where the reviews actually cover the quality of the production. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

Guardian (***) Written by Arifa Akbar
Does a revival of Sam Steiner's 2015 fringe sensation about a state-imposed "hush law" which limits our spoken word count resonate differently today, and on a West End stage? For some in our age of 24/7 online over-sharing, more quietude might sound like a utopia rather than the dystopia it is here, although the play is as much about

resistance as it is about language. This brave new world of 140 daily spoken words, at most, is refracted through a couple navigating love and intimacy and Josie Rourke's production is driven by a starry duo in Jenna Coleman and Aidan Turner. She is Bernadette, a divorce lawyer with a working-class chip; he is Oliver, a musician with family privilege and a fragile ego. With a play that rose from the fringe circuit, Rourke's great accomplishment here is that it looks fit for a West End stage, despite being a prop-free two-hander, while retaining its breezy minimalism. The narrative is non-linear with flashbacks or forwards in the pair's relationship, rather like several other recently revived dramas, such as Constellations and Lungs. Oliver is the activist, Bernadette the pragmatist, and we see our contemporary concerns in their discussions on the necessity of public protest. Coleman and Turner are endearing together, although they remain cutesy for too long, repeating riffs on their first meeting in a pet cemetery. The script repeats its ideas on protest too but has deft scenes that show how words can conceal and also how apparent banalities can carry value and meaning. There is good use of silence as the couple hit the buffers of wordlessness, and their relationship gathers power when the actors drop their romcom routine and become more real and tender, albeit rather late in the day. Robert Jones's stage design is a backdrop of compartmentalised items, the set curving around the couple like a forced hug. But as they begin to use language in liberating ways, it opens up to more space and greater abstraction. There are a few lovely late scenes when the couple use words not for their literal meanings but underlying effects, singing and creating a non-verbal, embodied language between them. If words are rationed or banned, this play suggests, we will find other ways to express our love. Lemons Lemons Lemons Lemons Lemons is at the Harold Pinter theatre, London, until 18 March.

Time Out (***) Written by Andrzej Lukowski

Not to be all 'I saw the Pistols in '76', but I did see Sam Steiner's debut play 'Lemons Lemons Lemons Lemons Lemons' in its original incarnation as a lo-fi word-of-mouth hit at the 2015 Edinburgh Festival Fringe. I remember it as a reasonably whimsical affair: political, yes, but at its heart a fizzing, inventive romcom set in a Britain in which language has become strictly limited to 140 words per person, per day. It's a limit that protagonist couple Oliver and Bernadette adhere to with a deadly seriousness that Steiner smartly refuses to get into: it's as if physics has been changed by decree. But Josie Rourke's surprise West End revival, starring telly faves Jenna Coleman and Aidan Turner is a disarmingly bleak affair, or certainly in comparison to eight years ago. You can probably blame Brexit for some of this. The late Cameron years from which 'Lemons' emerged weren't exactly idyllic, but I don't think 'the hush law' – as staunch opponent of the word limitation act Oliver calls it – felt based on anything specific back in 2015. Now, however, it totally feels like a comment on the loss of freedoms that came with Brexit, not to mention the general rise of global authoritarianism in recent years. The fracture between Oliver's activism and Bernadette's apolitical uncertainty feels deeper and more pointed, a parable about creeping fascism. Which is absolutely reasonable and in many ways shows that the play is ageing well (it's also been somewhat rewritten by Steiner). But the feeling that the language limit is now a slightly heavy-handed allegory maybe robs 'Lemons x 5' of some of its former lightness of touch. This dourness is underscored by Coleman and Turner's frosty, unforgiving takes on Bernadette and Oliver. They have a good meet cute: randomly, at a cat's funeral. But their relationship rarely feels functional outside these scenes, despite the plot spanning a full seven years. Coleman is cold and brittle as lawyer Bernadette, who is insecure and irritated that her musician boyfriend takes a dim view of her profession and seeks out the company of his more political friends, including his ex. And Oliver – while admirably socially engaged – is just a bit of a self-absorbed prick. We never really get to enjoy their relationship at any point: it's always tense. Not that the play is one note, and it's fascinating how the pair change after the hush law is enforced: before they probably yakked away too much, endlessly dancing around their actual feelings; after they're stressed and miserable, unhappy with their brutally limited means of expressing themselves. I'm probably making it sound like a chore, and it's not. Steiner's writing is smart and pithy, and Coleman and Turner give very raw, very human performances that feel deeply personal. If they're miscast in any way it's that they're digging a bit too deep for what maybe worked better as a fizzy, cerebral play of ideas in which the actors played second fiddle to the writing. There's a lovely set design from Robert Jones, a big wall laden with the ephemera of daily living, junk and clutter that stands in contrast to Bernadette and Oliver's increasingly pared-down lives. It's beautifully lit by Aideen Malone, especially the move to washed-out lighting in the post-hush act sections. 'Lemons Lemons Lemons Lemons Lemons' is still good after its richly deserved West End glow-up, it's just that it's gone a little sour.

*sub*SIDISED

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

RSC

**THE EMPRESS by TANIKA GUPTA director POOJA GHAI décor ROSA MAGGIORA lights MATT HASKINS music/sound BEN RINGHAM, MAX RINGHAM movement WAYNE PARSONS fights and intimacy RACHEL BROWN-WILLIAMS, RUTH COOPER-BROWN msic director HINAL PATTANI with RAJ BAJAJ abdul karim, MIRIAM GRACE EDWARDS charlotte/georgina, FRANCESCA FARIDANY lady sarah, ALEXANDRA GILBREATH queen victoria, AARON GILL hari, ANYEBE GODWIN serang/lascar, OLIVER HEMBROUGH lord john oakham/william/painter, AVITA JAY firoza, TANYA KATYAL rani das, TOM MILLIGAN freddie/ensemble, SARAH MOYLE mary/susan matthews, CHRIS

NAYAK jinnah/singh, LAUREN PATEL ruby/asha, SIMON RIVERS dadabhai naoroji, ANISH ROY gandhi/lascar, NICOLA STEPHENSON lascar sally, PREMI TAMANG lascar/ayah, JOE USHER lascar

Blanche Marvin Critique
The reviews speak for the embarrassment of a production that failed so badly at the RSC. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

Guardian (****) Written by Nick Ahad
Resonant survival tales of Victorian Britain. Tanika Gupta's historical drama has only got more relevant since 2013, but there's an awful lot of migration stories to get through in three hours. The benefit of period pieces is that they are resistant, if not entirely immune, to the vagaries of fashion. They also might take on the politics and conversations of the day, providing a new prism through which to view the world. It is a decade since the premiere of Tanika Gupta's The Empress, a story stretching over a 13-year-period from Queen Victoria's jubilee year of 1887, following a group of travellers arriving in Britain from India. A tale of people travelling across oceans to build a new life in the UK, only to be met with hostility and exploitation, has surely grown more relevant in the intervening decade. Pooja Ghai's busy new production, opening as the original did at the Swan theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon, eventually settles down. It doesn't overemphasise the contemporary resonances, instead leaving the audience to do the work when we see a desperate young woman bereft in a port, abandoned and with enough money to buy passage only as far as France (she wants to leave England and return home, so hostile was the welcome she received). Gupta, a skilled storyteller, weaves the fates of a lascar (sailor) and an ayah (nursemaid) from India, together with the relationship between Abdul Karim and Queen Victoria (more widely known these days thanks to the Judi Dench turn in the film Victoria & Abdul) and the remarkable Dadabhai Naoroji, the first Indian MP. Even with Gupta's skill, and a three-hour running time, there is only so much justice you can do to three stories. Rani, the ayah, is pregnant in one scene, has a baby in the next and not long after, the child is an 11-year-old. The interweaving of the stories feels a little hastily executed at the end. But the cast are uniformly outstanding. As Rani, Tanya Katyal has an exact combination of vulnerability and defiance; Raj Bajaj's Abdul is as supercilious as he is obsequious; and Alexandra Gilbreath steals every scene she is in as a hugely entertaining Queen Victoria. The biggest issue might be that, even at three hours, audiences might actually crave more story. At the Swan theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, until 18 November with a run at the Lyric Hammersmith, London, 4-28 October

WhatsOnStage (***) Written by Michael Davies
Tanika Gupta's is revived in the Swan, before transferring to the Lyric Hammersmith. It's ten years since the Royal Shakespeare Company gave Tanika Gupta's sprawling epic its debut outing in the Swan, revealing the then little-known story of Queen Victoria's Indian 'munshi' (teacher), Abdul Karim, and the chaos he wrought in court circles through his controversial closeness to the monarch in her final years. In the intervening decade, a major film has told the same story, with no less a personage than Judi Dench doing her turn as the titular empress, which means that the shock value of the previously buried narrative has been considerably lessened. However, director Pooja Ghai is undaunted both by the movie retelling and by Emma Rice's previous handling of Gupta's play, and delivers this important story in a competent, handsome production. In fact, there are two empresses in the show: running alongside the royal tale is a love story between two lowly immigrants, a nanny and a sailor – or ayah and lascar, to give them their Indian appellations. Rana and Hari meet on the boat over from the subcontinent and she becomes his 'empress', only to be separated from him on their arrival in London, with complicated and disturbing consequences. Gupta's script is a rapid-fire succession of scenes divided between the two narratives, but it barely brings them together and even when it does it seems to serve little dramatic purpose. The parallels between them are flimsy at best, except to emphasise the appalling behaviour of the colonialist British. Some clarity – and some much-needed editing – could have been achieved by streamlining one or both of the threads. In the same way, Rosa Maggiora's design seems to be constantly fighting against the thrust stage space of the Swan rather than working with it. As a result, some scenes are squeezed into a cramped box while others are lost as upstage action is obscured by downstage scenery or people. But the ambition is evident – play out the sweeping saga on multiple levels, with a compass-like circle of light girdling the action – and Matt Haskins' lighting does much to create atmosphere and scale. Among the performances, there's a touching romance between Tanya Katyal and Aaron Gill as Rani and Hari, even if their reunion lacks some credibility, while Raj Bajaj and Francesca Faridany spar energetically as Karim and the snooty courtier Lady Sarah. RSC stalwart Alexandra Gilbreath, meanwhile, relishes every moment of her imperious and impish Queen Victoria. There's some evocative music from Ben and Max Ringham and the company works tightly as a whole to push the story on, with fine supporting performances from Nicola Stephenson as a kindly London landlady, Simon Rivers as Dadabhai Naoroji, the first Indian MP in the House of Commons, and Miriam Grace Edwards in a couple of doubled-up roles. The storytelling may well sharpen up over the course of its run both here and at the Lyric, Hammersmith, later in the year, and fingers crossed that it does: it's a story worth the telling.

The Stage (**) Written by Anya Ryan
More dryly explanatory than fiercely revelatory. An important historical retelling that lacks an emotional core. If scale makes good drama, then Tanika Gupta's 2013 play spanning 13 years across the 'golden years' of the empire, should feel cataclysmic. The Empress begins as a ship from India approaches the London Docks, and follows several Indian immigrants as they take their first steps off the boat and begin to settle in Victorian Britain. The "strange, intoxicated island" they now call home is a vicious one: the climate is chilling and they are subjected to vile racism and hostility daily. But even with a habitat so rich in emotional potential, Gupta's writing is undercharged and manages to dissociate us from the heart of these people's stories. Gupta has taken on a tricky task. The histories of Indian people, who lived in Britain in the late 19th century are rarely spoken of now, so her

writing must attempt to straddle being informative with being dramatic. Sadly, the outcome is more dryly explanatory than revelatory or fierce. Instead of closing in on one narrative, the script bounces from one pocket of Britain to the next. We peer into the country's palaces to find Abdul Karim, the ageing Queen Victoria's Hindi teacher, yet, just as their scenes start to slip into more profound territory – with discussions of Britain's role in worldwide wars and famine – the play abandons momentum and pushes, unnaturally, forwards. Similarly, among side tales of Indian sailors, the most central narrative is that of Rani Das – a 16-year-old Ayah who was cruelly dumped by her white, middle-class employers just as the boat pulls into land. But though she is played with wide-eyed enthusiasm by Tanya Katyal, and we are forced to watch her suffer at the hands of a white man who grew up in India and promises to treat her well as his children's governess, we never quite get into the realms of experiencing her sorrow. Under the lyrical direction of Pooja Ghai, the play does find its feet – if only for a passing second. The Indian actors turn their accents up and down in the presence of white people, making their difference stark on stage. In one moment where the magic of India comes alive before our eyes, the stage sings as a maelstrom of colour, life, song and dance. It is just a shame that this luminous sense of vigour is so sparse. The significance and need for plays such as this should not be overlooked. But Gupta needs to hone in her focus if this one is ever to fly. It is an essential historical retelling, but for theatre to work, we need to feel connected.

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

ALMEIDA

****COLD WAR book CONOR MCPHERSON music ELVIS COSTELLO film PAWEŁ PAWLIKOWSKI director RUPERT GOOLD music supervisor/orchestrations/arrangements SIMON HALE choreographer ELLEN KANE décor JON BAUSOR costume EVIE GURNEY lights PAULE CONSTABLE sound SINÉAD DISKIN musical director JO CICHONSKA orchestral manager DAVID GALLAGHER with ANYA CHALOTRA zula, ALI GOLDSMITH dance captain/ensemble, RYAN GOSCINSKI ensemble, ELLIOT HARPER vice consul, ELLIOT LEVEY kaczmarek, EDIZ MAHMUT ensemble, ANASTASIA MARTIN juliette/ania, ALŽBETA MATYŠÁKOVÁ ensemble, JORDAN METCALFE michel/minister, KATARINA NOVKOVIC aimee/ensemble, LUKE THALLON wiktor, SOPHIE MARIA WOJNA ensemble, ALEX YOUNG irena

Blanche Marvin Critique
The actual reaction to this political play is of great strength and the reviews are very important in the coverage of the actual story and the performances. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

The Standard (****) Written by Nick Curtis
Cold War at Almeida Theatre review: Pawel Pawlikowski's doomed love story, brilliantly translated to the stage. Mulled wine and festive cheer? Forget about it, and see this bleak postwar love story unfold instead. here's cold weather, alcohol and fights, but that's about as Christmassy as this exquisitely sad love story between two Poles adrift in postwar Europe gets. It's been adapted sensitively by Conor McPherson from Pawel Pawlikowski's award-winning 2018 film, the folk music of the original augmented with new and existing songs by Elvis Costello. But to call it a musical would somehow denigrate the atmospheric mournfulness of Rupert Goold's production, strongly led by Anya Chalotra and Luke Thallon. It begins with composer-conductor Wiktor (Thallon) and his choreographer partner Irena (Alex Young) tabulating folksongs and dances in rural Poland. They, along with coarse Kaczmarek (Elliot Levey) are producing a touring show to preserve national pride in a country invaded by Nazis and now under Soviet sway. Then Wiktor clocks sultry, sullen, powerfully melodious Zula (Chalotra). The heat of this new passion cools when the orchestra is pressed to perform new songs in praise of Stalin and agricultural machinery across the Warsaw Pact countries, and a mood of paranoia deepens. On a visit to Berlin, Wiktor defects but Zula is prevented by the watchful and adoring Kaczmarek. When the couple reunite in Paris years later and try to restart their romance and their shared musical ambitions, they realise they can't live in or out of Poland, or each other's company. After the lusty burst at the start we hear snippets of the folk tunes Wiktor has adapted for Zula in Paris alongside Costello's simple, plaintive compositions. The songs punctuate rather than dominate, accentuating emotion rather than carrying it. McPherson sometimes makes explicit what's implied in Pawlikowski's film, particularly regarding Wiktor's wartime shame, but the script has the understated pathos that characterizes much of his finest works. Goold makes us feel the years of degradation behind the doomed love story. Levey plays Kaczmarek as a faux-ebullient cockney fixer, while Chalotra's character is all Midlands-accented anger – Zula once stabbed her abusive dad – except when deploying a lovely, crystalline singing voice. Thallon gets to sing less, but his modulated bourgeois diffidence is perfectly suited to Warsaw boy Wiktor's apathetic self-loathing. Sometimes, here, you want to shake the character. Zula is full of active energy, Wiktor mostly passive. Goold's production is vividly designed, embracing bright peasant garb and left-bank boho chic, Iron Curtain apparatchik offices and smoky, spotlit clubs. Choreographer Ellen Kane gives us windmilling rural dances, a spiritedly drunken jive to Rock Around the Clock, and a take on the famous Madison routine from Jean-Luc Godard's Band a part. I didn't have any of this on my dance card for theatre in December, but Cold War is a brilliantly bitter antidote to standard Christmas fare. Almeida Theatre, to January 27; almeida.co.uk

Time Out (****) Written by Andrzej Lukowski
Anya Chalotra and Luke Thallon are magnificent in this swooning adaptation of the hit Polish indie film. As a semi-authentic Pole I joined some of my countryfolk in raising an eyebrow when the Almeida's 'Cold War' was announced. That's because it's a rare example of a recent Polish story being told on an English stage – an adaptation of Paweł Pawlikowski's 2018 indie flick – that is distinctly light on the involvement of Polish talent. It's not that Irish playwright Conor McPherson is unqualified to adapt, Almeida boss Rupert Goold to direct, or New Wave legend Elvis Costello to write the songs. It's just that this country's enormous Polish population has little visibility in popular culture, and I feel there was an opportunity missed to do more here. With that said, I'm going

to declare glasnost, because frankly 'Cold War' is beautiful. As the story begins, wry, reserved pianist and composer Wiktor (Luke Thallon), his high-minded partner Irena (Alex Young) and their grifter manager Kaczmarek (Elliot Levey) are touring the countryside of postwar Communist Poland, trying to hoover up traditional folk songs for recording. Their little group is soon rocked to the core. First by a government minister, who wonders if they might rearrange these traditional tunes into patriotic pro-Soviet anthems, prompting the exit of the high-minded Irena. And then by Anya Chalotra's impetuous peasant girl Zula, who blows into Wiktor's life like a hurricane, fierce, questioning, irreverent and passionate. The core of the production is the extraordinary chemistry between Thallon's gloriously arid Wiktor – he's a bit like Hugh Grant on downers – and Chalotra's force of nature Zula, her Black Country accent alive and crackling. He's reserved, she rages; they go together like a beautiful fire in a hearth made of ice: gorgeous, but doomed. Or doomed eventually: it's a bit like a slowcore 'Romeo & Juliet' – their relationship unfolds between the '40s and the '60s in fits and starts, but their final destination never feels in doubt, despite the intensity of their love. Although the story is initially located in Iron Curtain Poland, it's not long until Wiktor makes his escape to France. The smart thing about Pawlikowski's title is that 'Cold War' doesn't necessarily refer to the geopolitical conflict but rather Wiktor and Zula's relationship and their deep, at first almost invisible, trauma. McPherson's text and Thallon's performance are all the more powerful for the fact that it's not initially obvious that Wiktor is struggling at all – it's only as decades of story pass by that we finally understand him. Goold directs the whole thing like a sad, smokey late-night cabaret performance in a faded old bar: there's a glamour to it but it's intimate, warm and nocturnal. There are some clever tableaux and scene transitions with moments of clever stylisation but nothing too flashy – aesthetically it's defined by the constant chugging of stage cigarettes. Costello has dabbled with a bewildering number of musical styles from across the world during his lengthy career, and provides credible English language Eastern European-style folk songs, mixed in with a few of the Polish language songs from the film. Aside from a pre-recorded song that plays after the curtain call, you'd be unlikely to guess it was him if you didn't know already, and I sort of feel this might have been the opening for a musician with a Polish background. But he undoubtedly gets bums on seats, and the variety of consultants drafted in give the folkier moments the tang of authenticity without fetishising them – particular credit to language coach Edyta Nowosielska for getting respectable Polish singing performances out of her largely English cast. Again, I kind of feel like a pub bore bringing all this up, because it really is a lovely show, and appreciably different to the film: the plot is identical, but McPherson's dialogue is funnier, and it runs around an hour longer, with a gorgeously weary nocturnal quality replacing the crisp black and white cinematography. You'll get a little more out of it if you have a vague understanding of the Iron Curtain, but you certainly don't need in-depth knowledge. Ultimately it's a radiantly sad story about two people whose love is not enough to cure the wounds they suffered before we even met them. As beautiful as only doomed romances could be, with lead performances to die for.

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

In a cold church hall, a group of shivering villagers in too-thin clothes are gathered together to sing the folk songs of their region. A mournful plaint about suffering is rudely interrupted by a brash, bouncy man, wrapped in a mustard coat. "Too crude, too crude," he breezes. "That's the mountain style." The Almeida is a tiny theatre in north London but more than any other venue it has the ability to transport you to different places. In Jon Bausor's evocative design of brick arches and slab floors, and in Rupert Goold's exceptional fluid direction, an entire world is conjured. You feel the cold, sense the texture of the clothes (wonderful design by Evie Gurney) and the hunger. You know you are in Cold War Poland where traditional music is being gathered to build a folk ensemble performing "the music of victory" featuring the "cream of our young talent." A sense of time and place is vitally important to Conor McPherson's clever adaptation of Pawel Pawlikowski's Oscar-nominated film. The doomed love story between composer Wiktor (Luke Thallon) and the defiant performer Zula (Anya Chalotra) who sees her place in the folk ensemble as a way out of a miserable, violent existence, is shaped and distorted by the circumstances of their lives. Later, he chooses to defect and she to remain, but neither can either survive with or without the other, and with or without their homeland. All this is wonderfully conjured by the production, punctuated by songs by Elvis Costello, which sweeps from the red-costumed stomps and swirls of the traditionally-costumed dances in the first act (all bright red skirts and floral headdresses) to khaki-clothed songs for Stalin, to the Paris of the 1960s with Jean Luc-Godard's Madison routine and wild rock 'n' roll, and back to the seedy clubs of Soviet-ruled Poland, where the gold dress Zula wears looks just a bit tackier than its Parisian equivalent. The choreography by Ellen Kane is superb, and the music, with songs often repeated in different styles and different settings, is gloriously melancholic, filling the smoky air (superbly lit by Paule Constable) with an almost tangible sense of pain and half-concealed emotion. "Songs about love and devils" is how Wiktor characterises the melodies he is collecting – and both heaven and hell, the agonies of love and the contrasting tugs of home and freedom are all on display here. Goold's direction is extraordinarily sensitive and supple; scenes seem to morph into one another rather than simply arriving. The themes emerge in a similar way. The play sees music is both as an escape and a tool, always capable of being perverted by a regime that sees a reshaped tradition as a means of building a glorious future, but equally always a force for true expression. A 90-minute film has become a 2 hour and 40 minute show, and arguably the action – particularly in the second act – loses some momentum. But it is powered by utterly engrossing performances, first and foremost from an ensemble that sing and dance with passion and sweet harmony. As Wiktor, a man with secrets and a terrible sense of his own lack of worth, Thallon seems to button himself up in front of your eyes. He is all suppressed feeling and terrible regret, his arms constantly folded across himself, his terrible yearning tamped down. In contrast, Chalotra seems to feel too much, chasing away her unhappiness with a desperate lust for life, for movement, for the songs that she produces in the purest of voices, until time and circumstance wear her down to a husk of her former self. Between them, Elliot Levey as the born-survivor impresario Kaczmarek, bounces like an irrepressible force, constantly wary, always with an eye to the main chance, but with an essential humanity peeping through. It's an unusual and original show, one that haunts you long after you leave the theatre, its essential sadness sweetened by tinges of hope and a deep humanity.

ALMEIDA

***A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE by TENNESSEE WILLIAMS director REBECCA FRECKNALL décor MADELEINE GIRLING costume MERLE HENSEL lights LEE CURRAN sound PETER RICE composer ANGUS MACRAE with PAUL MESCAL stanley kowalski, PATSY FERRAN blanche dubois, EDUARDO ACKERMAN pablo, RALPH DAVIS steve, JANET ETUK eunice, GABRIELA GARCÍA flower vendor/matron, TOM PENN doctor/drummer, JABEZ SYKES young collector, ANJANA VASAN stella kowalski , DWANE WALCOTT harold, FRANCESCA KNIGHT understudy stella kowalski/blanche dubois

Blanche Marvin Critique
I found this a very disappointing analysis of a play that has been so brilliantly captured by several actresses. The essence of it being Southern in the USA is a deeply rooted point of a portrait which was not fully realized in this production. The play's strength carries its own merit. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

Guardian (****) Written by Arifa Akbar
One of the year's most hyped shows delivers with powerful performances from the Normal People star Paul Mescal, Patsy Ferran and Anjana Vasan. Two weeks into 2023 and we have already arrived at one of the year's hottest, most hyped shows. The excitement around this production of Tennessee Williams's 1947 drama of desire, delusion and mental illness has been both over its casting of screen star Paul Mescal and its director, Rebecca Frecknall, whose revival of Cabaret won copious honours last year. A Streetcar Named Desire warrants the hype, although at first it looks as if Frecknall's directorial vision is driven by a rampant theatricality which might eclipse Mescal's performance (and every other) and drain the play of its emotional power. There is slow motion movement and a sudden downpour of rain around the stage while the cast carry on props and take them away again to highlight the fact that they are each playing the role of actor as well as character. In its spirit it resembles the startlingly reworked Oklahoma! staged last year, although that production's stylistic innovations felt edgier. At times it seems as if we are watching rather than sinking into the play's world, especially in the first half, although it never stops being arresting in its effects. But gradually it gains purchase. Actors off stage sit by the sidelines and stare or circle the almost empty set, designed by Madeleine Girling, as the action takes place. Their prowling presence builds a physical kind of claustrophobia and alarm in the tiny New Orleans apartment in which Blanche DuBois (Patsy Ferran) is crammed alongside her sister, Stella (Anjana Vasan), and Stella's husband, Stanley Kowalski (Mescal). Stanley undresses to reveal the brute threat of his musclebound form; Blanche does the same to leave her vulnerabilities exposed. It is strongest in its use of sound (designed by Peter Rice) and music (composed by Angus MacRae). Mescal's sudden shouts land like punches and some words turn into animal yelps. Lines from songs repeat and echo, as if Blanche is trapped in a hallucinatory loop. Most of all, drums beat and thrum while cymbals crash, creating their own aural violence (both the singer Gabriela García and drummer Tom Penn are excellent). Where Benedict Andrews' 2014 production, starring Gillian Anderson, brought a destabilising giddiness to the drama through a constant stage revolve, it is sound that creates the discombobulating churn here. The second half retains all the theatrical tics but they come into full force, bringing dread and danger. Mescal appears as natural on stage as on screen. He has a blank-eyed disdain for Blanche and her imperious judgments of him but we see his jealous insecurity through his rages, and that the real fight between Stanley and Blanche is for Stella's heart. In his assault of Blanche he becomes the "animal" that she has accused him of being – predatory, menacing, sprawled on all fours. Although this scene is choreographed as a kind of group dance, it contains a keen sense of violation. Mescal's performance is matched by his two accompanying leads. Ferran, who stepped in to play Blanche last month when Lydia Wilson withdrew due to an injury, is a butterfly in diaphanous dresses whose nerves are quickly jangled but who maintains a steely front in her power battles with Stanley. Vasan's Stella, meanwhile, has soft, sensuous chemistry with Mescal and a more bristling relationship with her sister. For all its clever artifice and non-naturalism, it is the power of these performances that gives this production its fierce and dangerous energy. 17 Dec 2022 – 4 Feb 2023

Evening Standard (****) Written by Nick Curtis
This wrenchingly sad, stark staging of Tennessee Williams's play is the stuff theatrical myths are made of, and the first great London show of 2023. Starring Paul Mescal as the toxically masculine Stanley Kowalski, in his first stage role since Normal People propelled him to nice-guy TV stardom, it was delayed and recast when lead actress Lydia Wilson withdrew due to an injury. The sublime Patsy Ferran stepped into the role of Blanche DuBois, the ageing southern belle whose gentility masks mental illness and sexual desperation, as if born to it. She, Mescal and Anjana Vasan as Stella, Blanche's sister and Stanley's wife, provide the core of emotional truth to Rebecca Frecknall's production. All three act with their whole bodies. The Kowalskis' cramped New Orleans apartment is represented by a central dais, like a gladiatorial arena. The rest of the cast loom on the fringes, stonily observing, introducing props as if they were weapons. There is something ritualistic here about the way rancorous opposites Blanche and Stanley collide, with pregnant Stella caught in the middle. For decades Streetcar lived under the long shadow of the 1951 Marlon Brando/Vivien Leigh film, but that influence has now faded. Even so, it has become almost traditional in the past 20 years for stage directors to be radical with this well-known work. Frecknall, fresh from her seismic reinvention of Kander and Ebb's Cabaret, goes further than most. She strips away the Louisiana sweatiness of Williams's play to make it harsher and colder. The costumes are bright approximations of postwar

American fashion and the set amounts to two chairs and a suitcase. There are dance/mime intrusions from ghosts of the past. A rock drummer in the gallery signals scene changes and emotional flashpoints with thumping crescendos, and designer Madeleine Girling introduces sudden downpours of rain onstage: both these things have become theatrical cliches recently but are undeniably effective here. It could still seem tricksy if the central performances weren't so riveting. Ferran picks her way subtly through every agonising downward step of Blanche's self-deceiving, self-destructive path. Vasan imbues Stella with both sisterly heartache and forceful passion for her husband. It's a delight to see the two actresses reunited, having co-starred in Frecknall's revelatory production of Williams's Summer and Smoke at this theatre back in 2018. And Mescal? He's horribly good: an insinuating, cat-like Kowalski with a wicked smirk and an incipient mullet, the violence in him barely battened down. The chemistry between the three leads is toxic but potent. A word, too, for Dwane Walcott, whose performance as Blanche's suitor Mitch is beautifully understated and gentle. Tennessee Williams doesn't do happy endings but this production represents a triumph over disaster. Frecknall proves herself again to be a director of great vision and invention. And the performance that Ferran has pulled out of a hat, and the way she's seamlessly integrated it with those of her impressive co-stars, is frankly astonishing.

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

ALMEIDA

***A MIRROR by SAM HOLCROFT director JEREMY HERRIN décor/costume MAX JONES lights AZUSA ONO composer/sound designer NICK POWELL fight director JONATHAN HOLBY intimacy director CLARE FOSTER with SARA HOUGHTON wedding guest, JONNY LEE MILLER čelik, AARON NEIL senior officer, TANYA REYNOLDS mei, GEOFFREY STREATFEILD bax, MIRIAM WAKELING musician, MICHAEL WARD adem

Blanche Marvin Critique
Please follow the reviews which give in detail the essence of this piece which makes the original play of Six Characters in Search of An Author more contemporary. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

Guardian (****) Written by Mark Lawson
Extending the long tail of works influenced by Luigi Pirandello's box of theatrical tricks, Six Characters in Search of An Author, Sam Holcroft's A Mirror features an author and performers hoping they won't be searched for. Denied a permit by the minister of culture in an unnamed dictatorship, they have licensed a venue for a wedding, at which Almeida ticket-holders are guests in the flower-bowered auditorium. Following an ominous siren or knock on the door, the actors must quick-change to become nuptial participants while we are ordered to behave like a congregation. Initially, each main actor has two identities. The registrar becomes, in the play within the wedding, state censor Čelik, both men for some reason black-gloved. The marrying couple jump in and out of bridal dress and groom suit to portray Mei, a junior at the culture ministry, and Adem, a young writer whose script is under scrutiny. The fake best man plays Bax, a pampered state-approved dramatist. But the Pirandellian pleasure comes from our awareness that there must be a third person underneath each doubling. A tiny moment when someone is revealed to have the same name on and off stage hints at what may be happening. Samizdat theatrics are the basis of two notable one-act dramas – Tom Stoppard's Cahoot's Macbeth (1979), featuring a version of Shakespeare's regime-change play that toured dissident living rooms in communist Czechoslovakia, and a play by the Japanese dramatist Kōki Mitani, anglicised by Richard Harris as The Last Laugh (2007), about a state censor with a secret love of theatre, which may also be a weakness of Čelik. Full length (two hours) gives Holcroft space to explore not only censorship, but auto-fiction, appropriation and propaganda. Her National Theatre success, Rules for Living (2015), about a catastrophic family gathering, made expert use of the frame-breaking ambushes, but A Mirror has the levels of a multi-storey car park with a locked-off basement. At one moment, by my maths, we are watching a play within a play within a play within a fake wedding. A Mirror adds to a run of shows that play tricks on the audience, including Lucy Kirkwood's Rapture and Danny Robins's 2:22 – A Ghost Story. Recent prominent politicians are the most likely explanation for this fascination with false narrative. My one regret is that A Mirror does not directly address the curiosity in Britain of a form of censorship, on grounds of sensitivity, that is not imposed by the state (indeed, opposed by it) but willingly carried out by many creatives. A work that teases the audience with repeated false realities faces its greatest test when it must reveal the underlying truth, but, in a final scene where the gloves come off in more than one sense, Holcroft achieves a series of satisfying surprises. Jeremy Herrin's typically meticulous production observes the crime fiction rules that, while a story can confuse or mislead, it should not wilfully withhold or falsify information. Shaven-headed and with a startling stare, Jonny Lee Miller mesmerises as Čelik and his variations, while Tanya Reynolds's Mei shows an extraordinary range from meek to commanding and delivers a single line from Macbeth in a manner that draws applause. Micheal Ward's Adem and Geoffrey Streatfeild's Bax offer visions of idealistic young and cynical old writers that have relevance in democracies as well as dictatorships. 15 August-23 September

Evening Standard (**) Written by Nick Curtis
A Mirror at the Almeida Theatre review: thrilling and infuriating in equal measure. Clever, thoughtful and tricksy, Sam Holcroft's work about a playwright in an authoritarian regime is also exasperating. Rarely have I been simultaneously so thrilled and infuriated by a play. Sam Holcroft's arch comedy about a playwright navigating an authoritarian regime is a beautifully crafted, mind-bending piece of work. Jeremy Herrin's production features a

rivetingly OTT central turn from Jonny Lee Miller that burns his past heartthrob image to the ground, and fine, subtle performances from Sex Education's Tanya Reynolds and rising star Micheal Ward, making a quietly charismatic stage debut. But A Mirror is also a tiresomely metatheatrical paean to the writer as hero and martyr, and a disquisition on the nature of truth and authenticity. For much of the uninterrupted two-hour running time I absolutely hated it. Initially we're ushered in as guests to the cheap 'n' cheesy wedding of Leyla (Reynolds) and Joel (Ward), with a sweaty, leather-gloved Miller officiating. An alarm is raised, the set cleared, and we are suddenly in the culture ministry of a hazily sketched autocracy. Former soldier Adem (Ward) has been summoned to discuss the moral failings of his verbatim play about life in his crappy housing block with bureaucrat Čelik (Miller). Bullet-headed and physically contorted with power fantasies and sexual longing, Čelik compels his embarrassed young assistant Mei (Reynolds) and Adem to act the play out with him, then offers to mentor Adem through the maze of government censorship. Adem responds by writing a perfect transcription of this encounter. He's a truth-teller, you see, whose hyper-realist scripts exposes the hypocrisies of Čelik and his friend, the nation's neutered star playwright Bax (Geoffrey Streatfield). He will, it is implied, eventually defeat totalitarianism, even if his hands are smashed and his life extinguished. The wedding scenario periodically reappears, there's a jagged live cello accompaniment and more play-within-a-play layers are added to wrong-foot us, including a finale that gives actor Aaron Neil 10 minutes of stage time. I hope he gets a full wage. Holcroft wrote this after visiting North Korea then meeting genuinely oppressed playwrights at a conference in Beirut, and it's clearly a sincere work. But there's nothing more boring than a writer writing about how important writers are. Except when that writer is assembling lazy tropes of tyranny (spurious military victories, place names like "Unity Square", Shakespeare's plays banned etc) in a society that's still relatively free, while also musing chin-strokingly about truth and storytelling. This remains a cleverly wrought, thoughtful piece, its tricksiness well-served by Herrin. Miller, Reynolds and the slow-smouldering Ward are excellent. It made me want to pull my own head off in exasperation, though. If the Almeida is dedicated to truth and authenticity, they can put that on a poster.

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

ALMEIDA

**ROMEO AND JULIET by WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE director REBECCA FRECKNALL décor CHLOE LAMFORD costume DEBBIE DURU lights LEE CURRAN sound GARETH FRY music SERGEI PROKOFIEV'S ROMEO AND JULIET fight director JONATHAN HOLBY with RAPHAEL AKUWUDIKE balthazar, JAMIE BALLARD capulet, MILES BARROW benvolio, AMANDA BRIGHT lady capulet, LUKE CINQUE-WHITE servant/gregory/dance captain, JAMES COONEY paris, ISIS HAINSWORTH juliet, PAUL HIGGINS friar lawrence, JYUDDAH JAYMES tybalt, KIERON JECCHINIS prince, TOHEEB JIMOH romeo, JO MCINNES nurse, DANIEL PHUNG apothecary/sampson/fight captain, JACK RIDDIFORD mercutio, GIDEON TURNER montague

Blanche Marvin Critique
This particular production has gotten rave notices, but my reaction was that it concentrated on the interpretation of the director and not the play that Shakespeare wrote which is demonstrated by the ending where we don't even see Romeo's dead body in the tomb. Although it received rave notices this director is not a particular favourite of mine, and I object to her projecting herself in her direction rather than what the author has written Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

Time Out (****) Written by Andrzej Lukowski
Rebecca Frecknall's kinetic, romantic take on Shakespeare's tragedy has terrific performances from Toheeb Jimoh and Isis Hainsworth. The Almeida's in-house directing wunderkind Rebecca Frecknall tackles the Bard for the first time with a galloping production of 'Romeo and Juliet' that doesn't try and do anything too iconoclastic with the romantic tragedy, but nonetheless makes it feel fresh and thrilling. Frecknall's most fun innovation is to mash up Shakespeare's 'Romeo and Juliet' with Prokofiev's 'Romeo and Juliet'. Okay, it's mostly Shakespeare, but there's something powerfully atmospheric and delightfully basic about the sequences where the immortal string-and-horn interplay of 'Montagues and Capulets' kicks in and the youthful cast burst into taut, kinetic dance sequences. Running at two hours with no interval, and with not much of a set to speak of, it's a rare production that successfully conveys the play's fairly wild timeline - the titular starcross'd lovers meet and marry in under 24 hours, and have taken their own lives just a couple of days later. Okay, their love lasts more than the length of a play, but Frecknall's production really conveys the sense of their relationship as an out-of-control rollercoaster that neither is capable of leaving. At heart, though, it's just a darn good 'Romeo and Juliet' that hinges on two fine lead performances. Toheeb Jimoh is great as a smoothie Romeo, taking the piss and generally looking like he's having a wonderful time as he drifts through Verona falling for one girl after another. If he affects worldly wisdom, then Isis Hainsworth's loveable Juliet is almost the polar opposite. Gauche and unworldly with her huge eyes goggling in alarm as her parents talk about her marrying and having kids, she is entirely believable as a sheltered teen whose life would almost certainly have turned out a lot more happily if she'd been allowed to be a child a bit longer. That doesn't happen, but Romeo is clearly the better option than her parents' uninspiring, cold fish preference Paris (James Cooney). When the two meet for the first time at the Capulet ball, they're literally stunned by each other: the 'two pilgrims' speech is spoken almost in a daze, Romeo dropping the slick lover boy act, Juliet thunderstruck rather than flirty. Frecknall's hallmark as a director is intense empathy with her characters, an approach that goes down a treat with 'Romeo and Juliet', which is essentially a story about good people fucking up cataclysmically. It maybe feels like a stretch for Jimoh's affable Romeo to gun down Jyuddah Jaymes's sinister Tybalt – the only real wrong 'un here – as revenge for killing his shit-stirring best pal Mercutio (Jack Riddiford). But it's a powerful scene, the only fight that isn't actually a fight as a shaking Romeo pulls a gun on Tybalt and proceeds to doom

them both. (By the by, Frecknall has cut the bit near the end where Romeo fairly randomly kills Paris – possibly just to declutter the plot, but certainly it has the effect of making Romeo come across as a nicer chap). There's a tendency to go for a darker 'Romeo and Juliet' these days: the RSC did a very knife crime-centric one a few years back, and the Globe's recent production really foregrounded it as a story of teenage suicide. That's totally fair, but it detracts from the romance. Frecknall's take isn't a barrel of laughs, but it gives Romeo and Juliet's love its due – they throw their lives away, but in some ways they checked out of this world when they met each other, not so much infatuation as revelation. Perhaps they could have been happy if the Italian postal system had worked better, but we're left in no doubt that they love a lifetime in the hours they have.

Guardian (****) Written by Arifa Akbar
This innovative, fast-paced production of Shakespeare's tragedy, starring Toheeb Jimoh and Isis Hainsworth, has a beguiling intensity. ebecca Frecknall is fast becoming the director with a consummate gift for turning old into new. She does so with Shakespeare's tragedy of love across warring factions, which follows her audacious productions of A Streetcar Named Desire and Cabaret. This is not as radical a reconceptualisation but has its own stylistic inventions and brings a beguiling intensity in its faithfulness. Played in modern, trendy dress that gives the opposing houses of Montague and Capulet the look of street gangs when they pull out their knives, it is a dance to the death, with some of the movement set to excerpts of Prokofiev's Romeo and Juliet. This looks mannered at first: the opening fight scene turns suddenly into dance and bears an overly self-conscious resemblance to West Side Story. But Frecknall's choreography has its own premonitory logic, with actors from one scene falling to the floor and remaining prone while the next scene commences, as if foreshadowing the suicide and slaughter to come. The idea of star-crossed lovers is also cleverly bound up in this movement, through a literal crossing: Juliet's (Isis Hainsworth) scenes take place while Romeo (Toheeb Jimoh) is present and on stage, and vice versa. Other characters remain inert and zombie-like, which has a sinister effect – as if they are automata, governed by the play's inescapable forces of fate. Juliet sits on the side of the stage during Mercutio's "Queen Mab" speech, which acquires a ghoulish quality as Mercutio (Jack Riddiford) grabs her hair while speaking of men held in the grip of love. Romeo speaks hopefully of seeing Juliet with Balthazar (Raphael Akuwudike) at the end while sitting on her tomb, and the idea of their badly twisted fate is wrapped up in these proximities. Other key scenes are given a twist, such as the meeting on Juliet's balcony: it starts with Romeo on a ladder, but they both climb down to meet each other, which feels modern and democratic. Jimoh aims for breezy naturalism and speeds through some lines too quickly, but there is a sweet, innocent dynamic between him and Hainsworth. For her part, she gives Juliet a convincing teen rashness, shouting her lines like an angry child at times. Mercutio really is the "saucy merchant" the nurse brands him to be: clownish, louche, cool, he is a dazzling presence, and almost upstages the leads. Not much is made of the latent homoeroticism between him and Romeo; there is just a brief, comic flash without any charge. The production comes fully alive in its violence, and each death feels visceral. Less is more in Chloe Lamford's stage design; the set is eerily empty yet swarming with gothic effects through Lee Curran's astonishing lighting. It fills the front of the stage with shadows or glaring floodlights and the back is often swallowed up by blackness. Performed at exactly the "two hours traffic" promised in the prologue, without an interval, it hurtles towards the end. The nurse (Jo McInnes) does not find Juliet in bed, presumed dead – we fast-forward to her parents in mourning – and Paris's death is also cut. But there is power in this pace: the dead lovers remain alone and undiscovered, which makes the end starker and more shocking, somehow.

Evening Standard (****) Written by Nick Curtis
Relentless retelling makes us see this familiar story with fresh eyes
Ted Lasso's Toheeb Jimoh as Romeo and Isis Hainsworth as Juliet suggest the characters share a fascination that goes beyond carnal passion. Performed in two hours without an interval, Rebecca Frecknall's hectic, stripped-down production makes sense of the recklessness with which young people fight and fall in love in Shakespeare's play. Smooth, cocksure Romeo (Ted Lasso's Toheeb Jimoh) and impulsive, girlish Juliet (Isis Hainsworth) barely have time to think as they are swept away by emotion and events. Scenes overlap as if the characters are seeing premonitions of bad news they are yet to receive. There's a kind of derangement to the Verona on display here, and a thundering inevitability to the final tragedy. True, the relentless pace means some scenes are rushed through at a gabble. This show doesn't have the singular vision and flair of Frecknall's most recent hits, Cabaret at the Kit Kat Club and A Streetcar Named Desire – but that's an impossibly high bar she's set herself. This staging feels, by contrast, like an attempt to get back to basics, notably in the convincing youthfulness of the protagonists. (The fact that Jimoh is black and Hainsworth white is irrelevant by the way, as the production is cast colourblind.) At first, a vast concrete wall on which Shakespeare's prologue is projected seems to hint at conceptual hijinks: then it's pushed over to reveal a bare stage. The dynamics are very clear here, and it's obvious the older characters have no idea what the younger ones are up to. All the young men are armed with blades and an excess of testosterone: Jack Riddiford's Mercutio seems almost maddened by sexual visions. Romeo is the most suave and urbane of them until knocked sideways by Juliet and then by loss. He brings a gun to his knife fight with Jyuddah Jaymes's commanding Tybalt. The deaths here are properly horrible. The way Shakespeare uses violent terms to describe love comes across loud and clear. Hainsworth's Juliet sounds like a West Country lass, though neither parent shares her accent. She captures the volatility of a teenager: fidgety and awkward one minute, self-possessed the next, and capable of sudden, incandescent rage. Her relationship with Jo McInnes's dignified Nurse is a rich and believable one and she speaks the poetry with feeling and candour. She and Jimoh suggest the characters share a fascination with each other that includes but goes beyond carnal passion. There are moments of quiet, when the madness is suspended. Juliet, stirring to find the fugitive Romeo creeping into his clothes, utters an arch: "Wilt though be gone?" At the end, she cradles his corpse and tenderly touches his hand. The show's very last image is one of great simplicity and power. Other aesthetic decisions are more regrettable, such as the bursts of music from Prokofiev's ballet, accompanied by fighty dance moves. And, oh my God, the costumes… Juliet is in a brocade doublet, culottes and pop socks. Her dad's suit jacket has been usurped by a

python disguised as a sash. Romeo and all the young men seem to be wearing trousers made for shorter men, and possibly wearing them backwards. Never mind. Frecknall still makes us see a familiar story with fresh eyes. Something this intriguing director is very, very good at. Almeida Theatre, to July 29

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

ALMEIDA

**WOMEN, BEWARE THE DEVIL by LULU RACZKA director RUPERT GOOLD décor MIRIAM BUETHER costume EVIE GURNEY lights TIM LUTKIN sound/composer ADAM CORK movement/intimacy IMOGEN KNIGHT fight JONATHAN HOLBY with NATHAN ARMARKWEI-LARYEA, LEO BILL, CARLY-SOPHIA DAVIES, AURORA DAWSON-HUNTE, IOANNA KIMBOOK, LYDIA LEONARD, ALISON OLIVER, LOLA SHALAM

Blanche Marvin Critique
There aren't any original thoughts as to what is already demonstrated in the reviews so I would suggest that the reviews carry this particular production which was interesting but not fulfilling. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

Guardian (**) Written by Arifa Akbar
Lulu Raczka's new play, directed by Rupert Goold, is beautifully designed but the plot – and the point – is puzzling. Maybe the joke's on us? This confounding play is nothing if not unique. It is partly about devilry. That much is clear because the devil turns up in the first scene to address us directly. Then, a 17th-century stablehand, Agnes (Alison Oliver), rumoured to have dark powers, makes a Faustian pact with the lady of the house, Elizabeth (Lydia Leonard). Agnes travels though the household, rising in status but never losing her reputation as a witch. What begins as a spin on The Crucible, with Puritan hysteria and hearsay along with rumblings of the civil war of 1642, goes off in strange directions. The plot bends and twists from bedroom kink to incestuous assault and pregnancy. Directed by Rupert Goold, it comes with his characteristically clean, televisual glamour: Evie Gurney's period costumes are stunning. Miriam Buether's set has a gorgeous black gothic canvas at the back and with scenes of such sumptuousness at the front the mise-en-scène resembles a Dutch painting. The performances are superb, from Oliver's conniving Agnes to Leonard's dastardly Lady Elizabeth, and Leo Bill as her profligate brother Edward who keeps demanding beef at the dinner table in one of his many riffs about cows. But the characters themselves appear like a collection of extras from The Rocky Horror Picture Show or The Addams Family. Story and dialogue defy conventional logic. Characters behave in bizarre ways. The plot is abstruse. It could be comedy or horror. It looks at times like Bridgerton on acid. It might be a pastiche of the period drama itself, or one big metaphor (but for what?). It wobbles somewhere between a surreal episode of Blackadder, a Peter Greenaway film and a Monty Python sketch. As we sit puzzling it out, there is the passing thought that the joke is on us. Yet, in spite of it all, there is something exhilarating about its disruptions, which seem deliberate. The devil (Nathan Armarkwei-Laryea) tells us at the start that this play is "pretty long but don't worry it's enjoyable". He's not all wrong. Raczka is a bold and brilliant playwright whose previous work shows risk-taking. Maybe this is a risk too far. If it is a failure, it is a heroic one, performing the rare feat of leaving this critic impressed, exasperated but temporarily speechless. What just happened? 11 Feb – 25 Mar

Evening Standard (***) Written by Nick Curtis
Well, I didn't have a folk-horror tale about witchcraft and the English Civil War on my bingo card for London theatre in 2023, but here we are. Lulu Raczka's ferociously bold, deliberately anachronistic play brings the devil on stage, horns and all (and reading an Evening Standard on his first appearance). It uses events and attitudes from the 1640s to throw light on modern-day inequalities in wealth and gender, and on how revolutions devour themselves. At least, I think it does. The show – in a wry and raucous production by Rupert Goold, featuring a fine central performance from Lydia Leonard - is as baffling as it is intriguing. Those who like nice, neat theatre should give this a swerve. I was bewitched, though I'm not entirely sure why. Leonard plays Elizabeth de Clare, who stands to lose her ancestral home if her bratty brother Edward (Leo Bill) doesn't produce an heir. For her, this issue overshadows the looming national conflict. So she turns to Agnes (Alison Oliver), a servant accused of witchcraft, for occult help. Magic happens, though not in the way anyone plans. Agnes's material wishes supersede her pious hopes. There are blood offerings, body swaps and menaces made towards unborn children. The upending of hierarchies in the great house prefigures Oliver Cromwell's victory over Charles I. The speech is a mix of pastiche-historic and modern, the body language defiantly contemporary. Characters sometimes sardonically address the audience. There are period-style folk songs and a foreshortened set of a grand hall on which designer Miriam Buether stages painterly tableaux. A tiny but vertically elongated four-poster bed pops up and down like a periscope. I think – pretension klaxon! – that the chequered floor may be a reference to the chess motif in John Middleton's Jacobean tragedy Women Beware Women to which this play owes an obvious debt. And Elizabeth's house stands for England in the same way a garden did in Mike Bartlett's 2017 play Albion at this theatre. But I detest shows that require or reward this sort of foreknowledge. I kind of detest myself for mentioning it. Raczka's first play Nothing won the Sunday Times Playwriting Award in 2014: she tackles nothing less than ideas of good and evil here. Agnes is forced into wickedness: the Devil may be Elizabeth, rather than the chap with horns; and maybe it's we humans who are evil and Satan is just a facilitator. But the script is too slippery to accommodate a firm moral template. Though the aristocrats are utterly degenerate, the puritans at the gate also seem to be in the Devil's thrall. The shape-shifting audacity of the play makes it exciting to watch, if ultimately confounding. Leonard

holds queenly sway with a mixture of casual amorality and gritted-teeth exasperation. Bill too is very funny as the lascivious, incestuous and fundamentally cowardly Edward: a man who's cavalier in the worst possible sense. Oliver, a relative newcomer, is impressive, though seems at times boggled by her role. This is a wild ride with the Devil. And if anyone can conjure up a theory that explains it all, I'd love to hear it.

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

BRISTOL OLD VIC

***DRIVE YOUR PLOW OVER THE BONES OF THE DEAD by COMPLICITÉ novel OLGA TOKARCZUK translator ANTONIA LLOYD-JONES director SIMON MCBURNEY décor/costume RAE SMITH lights PALE CONSTABLE sound CHRISTOPHER SHUTT video DICK STRAKER dramaturgy SIAN EJIWUMI-LE BERRE, LAURENCE COOK original composition RICHARD SKELTON movement director TOBY SEDGWICK with THOMAS ARNOLD, JOHANNES FLASCHBERGER, TAMZIN GRIFFIN, AMANDA HADINGUE, KATHRYN HUNTER, KIREN KEBAILI-DWYER, WERONIKA MARIA, TIM MCMULLAN, CÉSAR SARACHU, SOPHIE STEER, ALEXANDER UZOKA

Blanche Marvin Critique
This is an abstract piece of theatre which follows the murder in a small village somewhere in Poland. It is an interesting work to be remembered and given a historical category. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

Bristol 365 (****) Written by Naomi Weeks
Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead runs at Bristol Old Vic until 11 February 2023. Naomi Weeks gives her take on the performance below. As lead actress Kathryn Hunter makes her way across the stage dressed in purple joggers with plastic bag in hand, you'd be forgiven for thinking that Drive Your Plow over the Bones of the Dead starts with an informal message from a cast member about not using your phone during the production. Indeed, the stage lights not yet dimmed, the assumption I felt when the play began was just that - and it took a moment for me to settle in fully to the immersive atmosphere as Hunter begins the first of her many epic monologues. But stay with me - what is about to take place on the stage of the Bristol Old Vic is pure mastery; a gripping, visceral interpretation of Olga Tokarczuk's novel which will stay with you long after the curtain has fallen. Set in the Polish mountainside near the Czech-Polish border, the play begins with a perplexing death, which local resident Janina Duszejiko (Kathryn Hunter) finds herself dragged into. As the play progresses, more men from the local hunting club are found dead in mysterious circumstances, with one curious element linking all the crime scenes: the local animals. Quite specifically, the animals they hunted for sport, or reared for fur, or dismissed as 'without soul' and therefore without consequence when they are cruelly picked off from the 'hunting pulpits' for recreation. Is it purely coincidence that these hunters are being killed off without mercy or guilt just as they once hunted the local wildlife, or is there something larger, darker and unimaginable at play here? Janina certainly seems to think so and sets out to convince her community that it was the animals, the deer, the foxes, the local beetles - that committed these crimes as punishment for humanity breaking its harmony with nature. After all, what is the difference between killing a human and killing an animal? Is our place in the ecosystem as far removed as we would like to think? As Janina attempts to persuade her neighbours, friends and the local police round to her realisation, the underlying narrative becomes a melting pot for the questions that arise when speaking about humanity's relationship with animals and nature. Why is animal butchery not a crime, if murder is? Why can't animals have 'souls'? Why is treating your domesticated dogs as your children dismissed as madness and why do we simply not care that our harmony with nature is lost? Paired with stark, striking set design and a formidable cast, Drive Your Plow over the Bones of the Dead is truly a force to be reckoned with, asking hard questions and forcing us to think about our answers, whether we're proud of what they'd be or not. 19 January – 11 February

Bristol 24/7: Written by Sarski Anderson
What would animals say if they could speak? "They have no voice in parliament," laments Janina Duszejko (Kathryn Hunter), the fearless and funny protagonist with a fierce devotion to the environment and a passion for the early romantic era poetry of William Blake. Blake was fascinated by the beauty and fragility of nature, and the coexistence of light and dark; good and evil. Adapted from the English translation of the mysterious ecological whodunnit novel by Nobel Prize-winning author Olga Tokarczuk, the new Complicité production at Bristol Old Vic, Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead, is peppered with the poet's words. Sometimes they are projected onto the backcloth, and then they are pored over, spoken aloud and repeated by Janina, who, like Blake, is utterly preoccupied with the ways in which humanity and morality are aligned, or otherwise fractured. From The Marriage of Heaven and Hell: The Argument, she recites his words: "Once meek, and in a perilous path, / The just man kept his course along / The Vale of Death". Janina admits to being someone who does not believe in perpetual light. "I prefer dusk," she reflects. Thus the central question of what it is that allows us as a society to judge animals and humans so differently is an anathema to her. A self-styled "solitary she wolf", she does not, and cannot, differentiate between them, calling her dead dogs her "little girls" whose death sent her into the blackest despair. And on seeing a group of mask-clad children preparing to put on a show, she talks of seeing them as a new species, "half human, half animal". This is a story in which Janina becomes convinced that the animals of the plateau on which she lives – killed in great numbers by hunters from the safety of their towers – must seize the agenda, and exact their vengeance. It might seem to her rural community like the furious screaming into the abyss of one isolated "mad old biddy", but Janina uses her perceived invisibility as "a tool" to act in the name of others, albeit, she reflects, not entirely consciously. It is as if she is possessed by "the vast underground nerves under the earth" – interestingly, in his programme notes, Complicité artistic director Simon McBurney cites mycelium as a recurrent image arising in the rehearsal process. But as the local catholic priest repeatedly professes, "animals have no soul", and will therefore get no salvation. Tokarczuk's novel was written in 2009, nine years before Antonia Lloyd-Jones translated it into English. In the intervening years, the climate emergency has

deepened, and become ever more fixed in the public consciousness – just as the movement towards veganism as a key means of helping to tackle the crisis has gained momentum. McBurney ends his programme biography by urging the audience to support the international Stop Ecocide campaign. And Amber Massie-Blomfield, executive director of Complicité, writes: "Witnessing Janina's story, we might think of ourselves not simply as an audience, but a solidarity. Imagine the power in that." Certainly, the production is an explosive unravelling of the hypocrisy of societal norms, and the idea of action being moral, even when it is 'lawful'; asking why the killing of animals is deemed sport, while that of humans is murder. Janina is a huge unbounded presence, displaying a strength of mind and body belied by her bird-like frame. In fact, she is dominated in stature by the entire ensemble, who tower over her in their black hooded coats, like the slow encroachment of death. And Hunter is masterful in the role – delivering Joycian cadences in her deliciously gravelly timbre, she's a thrilling presence. It's also worth saying that it is an all too rare and unmitigated pleasure to see a woman in her mid 60s taking centre stage. Spot-lit and at the microphone for much of the play, the effect is to place the audience inside her internal monologue, giving us the onus to act in our own lives. Added to which, a reflective backdrop literally forces us to hold a mirror up to ourselves (and a little distractingly, the autocue, too), and the double standards within which we seem content to exist. Complicité productions are renowned for their virtuoso creative collaboration, and the staging is nothing short of sensational here. The interplay between Paule Constable's lighting, with its monochromatic spots, strobes and sudden flushes of colour, Rae Smith's deceptively simple set and elegant costume design, and Dick Straker's gorgeous projections – from fire to forests, maps to ghosts, and birds in flight to the cosmos – is exceptional. It's a seamless blurring of boundaries that is apposite for a narrative emphasising the interconnectedness of us all. The ensemble, who often have their black-coated backs to the audience, themselves become part of the world from which Janina stands out in stark relief, aware of the urgency that propels her forward. The cast are universally strong, through since it is entirely Janina's voice and vision through which we experience the story, the characters we meet along the way are necessarily caricatures, known only by the names she has given them: Bigfoot, Oddball, Good News and the like. It's funny, too. Janina's profound self-awareness and natural levity punctuates what might otherwise risk being too didactic. It will undoubtedly come across as a hymn to veganism to some, and conflates eating meat with killing animals for sport – but then again, many would say that the two are, and should be, considered one and the same. There are elements – the Catholicism subplot amongst them – that do not translate so strongly, and, at three hours, it's undeniably long. But there is beauty and depth that will sit with me for far longer. Will it succeed in its goal of propelling its audience into activism? In its unique way, the narrative unfolds into an elegiac and menacing whodunnit that points the finger, ultimately, at all of us. The closing line "we've got so much time" – made even more emotive in light of the recent death of Hunter's husband and Complicité co-founder, Marcello Magni – is a neat distillation of the status quo which Janina has fought to change: a world characterised by human complacency, hypocrisy inactivity and ignorance.

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

ROYAL COURT

***CUCKOO by MICHAEL WYNNE director VICKY FEATHERSTONE décor PETER MCKINTOSH lights JAI MORJARIA sound designer/composer NICK POWELL movement JONNIE RIORDAN with MICHELLE BUTTERLY carmel, EMMA HARRISON megyn, SUE JENKINS doreen, JODIE MCNEE sarah

Blanche Marvin Critique

This is not an exciting production and the story itself doesn't carry great weight but the concept is bigger than the actual making. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

Evening Standard (**) Written by Nick Curtis

Cuckoo at the Royal Court Theatre review: amusing but aimless play fails to take flight. Well acted and fluently directed but ultimately it's all a bit baffling. Baffling. That's the only word to describe Michael Wynne's play, an amusing but aimless Liverpudlian sitcom featuring three generations of women, laced with hints of existential or supernatural dread that come to nothing. It's well acted, and fluently directed – as part of her valedictory season as boss of the Royal Court – by Vicky Featherstone. She must have seen something profound in it. Me, I kept waiting for something to happen. But hardly anything does. In a modest Birkenhead living room where the carpets, curtains and wallpaper are in violent disagreement, genially bustling widow Doreen (Sue Jenkins) sits down to a chippy tea with daughters Carmel and Sarah, and Carmel's teenage daughter Megyn. Doreen is addicted to flogging her possessions on e-commerce sites, Carmel works in Boots and Sarah at a primary school. Megyn, having flunked her exams, is doing… well, nothing. Not even really speaking. Although the older women exchange gently spiky Scouse banter, all four of them are mostly hypnotized by their phones: auction updates, sexts, news of terrorist atrocities, memes. After a dispute about the seriousness of the climate crisis – Doreen complains that even David Attenborough is "a bit of a miz-bag now" – Megyn bolts upstairs and locks herself in Doreen's bedroom. And that's where she stays till near the end of the play, texting grandma to leave processed snacks outside the door and posting weird passive aggressive stuff about her mum and her absent dad on social media. Grumbling, the older women nonetheless adapt. Is Megyn the cuckoo of the title? Or is it the mobile phone, devouring the family's attention (a concept so obvious it's fatuous)? Maybe the women are all cuckoos, revealed to be strangers to each other when not-very-shocking family secrets dribble out. Or maybe *humans* are the cuckoo, sucking the planet dry… Who knows? Who cares? hough this matriarchy has internal problems, external threats also surface and vanish. Climate change is most frequently mentioned, but violence is next, largely expressed through Sarah's comically horrible stories about six-year-olds bringing meat cleavers to assembly, and dads brandishing crossbows in the car park. The sisters wonder vaguely but inconsequentially if Megyn has been assaulted or trolled. Men are offstage bastards: even Doreen's beloved husband is revealed to have been a controller who wouldn't let her work or have "coleslaw in the house". Carmel is close to penury, facing a zero-hours contract and borrowing money from her mum. More potent but equally inconclusive is the sense that

something spooky is going on. Carmel has formless night terrors and there are spectral shufflings overhead. Rain pours as a haunting version of folk song The Cuckoo plays, and framing bars of light flicker and glitch around Peter McKintosh's broadly realist set. But again, the scalp-prickling moments collapse and sink back into the soup of Wynne's always humorous, never hilarious dialogue. You can't really fault the all-Scouse cast. Jenkins is quietly wonderful as the warm, chuntering, unwittingly funny granny keeping her sex life hidden from her daughters. Michelle Butterly and Jodie McNee ably fulfil their respective requirements to be comically sardonic and earnest as Carmel and Sarah. Recent graduate Emma Harrison makes her professional debut as Megyn and she's fine in a truly awful part which keeps her offstage for most of the action, gives her hardly any dialogue, and requires her to act out three pages of wilfully mysterious stage directions. Wynne is an established writer with many estimable stage and screen credits: he won an Evening Standard film award in 2012 for the script of My Summer of Love, which launched the career of Emily Blunt. But I've no idea why this play has been put on. Contemporary concerns are imperfectly bolted onto a set of jokey family relationships that wouldn't look out of place in a 1980s ITV series. Like I say: baffling. Royal Court Theatre, to 19 Aug;

Guardian (***) Written by Arifa Akbar
Cuckoo review – springy dialogue lifts slow study of a modern family. Three generations of women in a Merseyside house banter, bicker and disappear into their smartphones in this nuanced play from Michael Wynne. uckoo is a delicately arranged play that basks in inaction. We watch the gentle flow of life from inside the front room of a multi-generational Merseyside family of women as they chat, laugh and row. Even when sulky teenager Megyn (Emma Harrison) goes upstairs and inexplicably locks herself in the bedroom of grandmother Doreen (Sue Jenkins), only then talking through her smartphone, nothing really happens. Produced in partnership with Liverpool Everyman and Playhouse, the play is driven by springy dialogue. Michael Wynne, who launched his career at the Royal Court with The Knocky in 1994, typically writes in a comic register and Cuckoo's humour – sometimes ebullient, other times mordant – fires the drama. There are times, though, when the play, directed by Vicky Featherstone, wavers and is in danger of coming to a standstill. As in Clean Break's recent Dixon and Daughters, this house (designed by Peter McKintosh) is cosy in its ordinariness though some dread lies within it. Ostensibly domestic, the play lays out state-of-the-nation explorations of a modern, uncertain world filled with warnings of climate emergency, economic crises and acts of global terror. The opening scene could be the definitive tableau of our times: characters sit around a dining table, eating a fish supper in near silence, welded to their smartphones. We hear the ping of notifications throughout the show and the women swap messages, memes and videos within the same house, and even the same room. Wynne captures an everyday realism with unshowy and entertaining flair, while the performances are always engaging. These women seem like characters from a TV sitcom, rattling off funny one-liners, yet we believe in them, from Carmel (Michelle Butterly), who is a struggling, quietly anguished mother, to bossy schoolteacher Sarah (Jodie McNee), who thinks she has found "the one" on a dating app and insists on taking the others, very amusingly, through every online cough and spit. Megyn is the only one who feels flatly symbolic. Unlike Ali Smith's dinner party guest in There but for the, she does not barricade herself in the room as a form of protest, or the politically infused act of "disruption" that Sarah preaches in her lectures on climate activism. Her self-imposed seclusion seems like an indictment of her generation, carrying the suggestion that her preferred form of communication is through a dishonest medium: she posts pictures of her mother, Carmel, glossing over their prickly relationship, and curates her life virtually rather than taking part in the real thing. Megyn seems fearful of the world above all else though nothing is explained or answered. Is her gesture a stand against her mother, against life itself or an expression of severe depression? We never get to the bottom of it because Megyn barely speaks, and questions linger with a final scene that is thoughtfully open-ended but feels a little too anticlimactic. At the Royal Court theatre, London, until 19 August. Then at the Everyman, Liverpool, 6-23 September.

The Stage (**) Written by Sam Marlowe
"Fatally flimsy" Royal Court favourite Michael Wynne (The Knocky, The Priory) is back with new work, Cuckoo, a state of the nation play dressed as a family drama. Three generations of Scouse women gather in the home of their matriarch Doreen (Sue Jenkins, perfectly engrossing). They're glued to their phones, and through the pings of notifications, the worries of contemporary Britain are aired. It's who cares about what that speaks volumes about generational divides. Teenager Megyn (a fittingly glum Emma Harrison, making her professional debut) is worried about the climate emergency, while her mum Carmel (a gruff and show-stealing Michelle Butterly) is more concerned about the gradual death of the high street that's led to her shop floor job placing her on a zero hours contract. Sarah (an uptight but fragile Jodie McNee) is being swept into left-wing politics at the school where she teaches, but she's not ready to give up little luxuries like her car. Meanwhile Doreen, mum to Carmel and Sarah, is addicted to selling second-hand goods online and, recently widowed, is enjoying her own money after 45 years with a husband who controlled her finances. Each woman is isolated in her own digital universe; only relatable memes and shock news flashes about terrible world events unite them on the same virtual planet. Through the constant presence of their phones, Wynne makes the wry point that we're forever on high alert for a notification to make our lives more interesting. When uncomfortable topics arise around the dinner table over a teatime treat of fish and chips, Megyn barricades herself in her grandma's bedroom, where she stays for the majority of the play. As the women work around their new unconventional set up, with Doreen sleeping on the sofa and playing servant to her granddaughter, the previously masked warmth between them glows. Under the direction of Vicky Featherstone, this Cuckoo sings. It's the little details that flesh out the picture: as we're told Sarah is on her way, the appearance of vinegar, salt and pepper on the table tells us fish and chips are coming with her. And as Carmel returns to Doreen's house following a scene change, her instant glance up the stairs informs us Megyn is still holed up in her grandma's bedroom.It plays out in designer Peter McKintoch's vision of Doreen's front room: a dated space with floral wallpaper and a kitchen visible through a serving hatch. It's wholly naturalistic: when they sit down for a chippy dinner, they eat chips chased by cans of fizzy pop. When tea, biscuits and crisps are called for,

they sip and eat those too. How the four cast members will feel about the nightly junk food towards the end of the six-week run, only time will tell. But you'd imagine they'll avoid the chip shop for some time. Still, it makes the whole thing more vivid Just the rain on stage, so overused its downpours have become yawn-worthy, sits at odds with the rest of the design. And with only one shower here, could this budget not have been better spent elsewhere? Cuckoos are famous for settling in other birds' nests, and it's the sense of safety the women associate with Doreen's bed that gives the play its title. Through the personal worries of just one family, Wynne's new play delivers a rundown of the chief concerns facing contemporary Britain. With so much uncertainty in front of us, who can blame Megyn for burying her head?

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

ROYAL COURT

***GRACELAND by AVA WONG DAVIES director ANNA HIMALI HOWARD décor MYDD PHARO lights JAI MORJARIA composer/sound designer ANNA CLOCK with SABRINA WU

Blanche Marvin Critique
The story of Elvis Presley is always a moving one but I was not particularly enthused over this production. However, it's important to read the reviews of others since they were superior in their choice of phrase. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

Guardian (***) Written by Arifa Akbar
Ava Wong Davies's monologue takes us through the small, slow steps that lead her central character into peril. his slow but searing monologue begins as a girl-meets-boy romance which might be a meet cute if the tone were not so sombre. He is a poet, aloof and intriguing, she is a receptionist, instantly drawn to him. "I don't believe in love at first sight but I feel like I'm falling …" Written by Ava Wong Davies and performed by Sabrina Wu as Nina, it is delivered as a direct address to the absent other and also a kind of interrogation which builds to expose abuse at the heart of this relationship. Directed by Anna Himali Howard with Izzy Rabey, it progresses in small, slow, steps, from first meeting into only half expressed control and violence as a way of revealing how microaggressions accrete to something far bigger and darker. "Can you report him?" asks her friend when Nina tells her about it. "And say what?" she thinks, which lies at the crux of such coercive control. Conceptually, it is a clever idea to structure the play this way – as a slow reveal – but the gradual buildup and many ellipses hold back the drama and pace. The script trawls across seemingly small details and observations which make much greater sense in hindsight but leave the momentum wavering. As an anatomy of intimacy, there are a few too many poised descriptions of the couple stroking each other. These lead to scenes of conflict but because they are only half spoken we do not feel the full impact. Wu's delivery is powerful and she holds us gripped but there is little movement on stage other than a circling of the room, sitting down here or there. Mydd Pharo's set is an attic bedroom with skylight and bed, expressionistic around its edges with mounds of muddy earth. There is a chilling moment when the bed comes to look like a fresh grave but on the whole it stays as little more than a visual pun – of the filth of a relationship hidden in its corner. British Chinese identity is touched upon as well as class disparity: he is rich and the play shows, vividly, how money becomes a manipulative tool in his control disguised as generosity. The script sounds almost novelistic in its language, beautiful at times. It is clear that Wong Davies is a delicate and thoughtful writer and there is daring in telling this explosive story so quietly. 9 February – 11 March

Evening Standard (****) Written by Nick Curtis
A young British-Chinese woman falls in love with a wealthier white boy and the relationship goes wrong, gradually and then suddenly, in this assured 75-minute monologue, written by Ava Wong Davies and compellingly performed by Sabrina Wu. It has echoes of Kristen Roupenian's viral New Yorker story Cat Person but explores issues beyond gaslighting and toxic masculinity. Underneath, it's a story about privilege. Nina grew up in her parents' Chinese restaurant, switching between English and Cantonese, chewing her cuticles and apparently desperate to escape. When we meet her she's in a grotty flatshare in Haringey, working as a receptionist for a handsy boss, possibly drinking and smoking a bit much (but weren't we all, at her age?). The man she meets has a writing career and a lifestyle bankrolled by his dad's property empire (this is the first time I've heard a character in a play described as a 'poet' without it being screamingly embarrassing). Davies is very good on the way social and financial security breeds entitlement, and how the confident can manipulate the precarious. I was enthralled from beginning to end. It helps that Wong Davies breaks up the potential monotony inherent in a monologue by alternating between the first and second person: Nina recounts the arc of the relationship to us and to her ex. The use of "you", affectionate or accusatory, brings him – and the increasingly horrified friends and strangers observing from the outside – more sharply into focus. Monologues can also be wafty and unrooted but Wong Davies convincingly evokes place and sensation: the heat of a first sexual encounter on a flatmate's bed; the off-balance shame of being drunk at a wedding; the quickening alarm of being in a car driven too fast. I particularly liked Nina's reference to feeling "hangover-sticky". Wu's performance is finely modulated and very subtle, slowly stoking a sense of disquiet. Dressed in schlumpy loungewear, she roams Mydd Pharo's set of a bed on a dais surrounded by banks of mud, getting steadily dirtier. The set is one of the weaker elements here – I've also got no idea what the title means – but Jai Morjaria's lighting is excellent. That the show felt so polished on opening night is all the more remarkable given the problems it faced. Director Anna Himali Howard had to leave the production in week three of rehearsals and Izzy Rabey stepped in to work alongside associate director Jasmine Teo. For the

last two preview performances this week Wu was indisposed, and Wong Davies had to read the play from the stage. The author is a former theatre critic, and withdrew from the judging panel of the Evening Standard's 2022 Theatre Awards when this play was accepted by the Royal Court. I can say with a clear conscience that our loss is definitely the stage's gain.

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

NATIONAL

***THE MOTIVE AND THE CUE by JACK THORNE director SAM MENDES décor ES DEVLIN costume KATRINA LINDSAY lights JON CLARK composer BENJAMIN KWASI BURRELL sound PAUL ARDITTI with MARK GATISS sir john gielgud, JOHNNY FLYNN richard burton, TUPPENCE MIDDLETON elizabeth taylor, AARON ANTHONY dillon evans, TOM BABBAGE mick burrows, ALLAN CORDUNER hume cronyn, JANIE DEE eileen herlie, ELENA DELIA susannah mason, RYAN ELLSWORTH george voskovec, PHOEBE HORN linda marsh, AYSHA KALA jessica levy, LUKE NORRIS william redfield, HUW PARMENTER frederick young, DAVID RICARDO-PEARCE clement fowler, DAVID TARKENTER alfred drake, KATE TYDMAN christine cooper, LAURENCE UBONG WILLIAMS hugh mchaffie, MICHAEL WALTERS robert milli

Blanche Marvin Critique
I found reviews exaggerated in their praise and the actual character of Hamlet could have been better described and produced. As far as I'm concerned, it was a disappointment. The play itself was less adequate than described by the others. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

Guardian (***) Written by Arifa Akbar
Mark Gatiss and Johnny Flynn star in Jack Thorne's play about the prickly pair's 1960s Broadway production of Hamlet. In 1964, John Gielgud directed a stripped-back Broadway production of Hamlet, performed as if it was a final rehearsal, with nothing to distract the audience from the play's celebrity casting of Richard Burton. In Jack Thorne's dramatisation of the pair's encounter, Mark Gatiss plays Gielgud, whose star is fading, and Johnny Flynn plays Burton, whose star wattage has shot off the scale after his recent marriage to Elizabeth Taylor (Tuppence Middleton). It is Taylor who speaks of the potential for fireworks in this prickly partnership between a "classicist wanting to be modern, and a modern wanting to be a classicist". Those fireworks take some time to explode in Sam Mendes's attractive but slightly anaemic production, which splices ego-bound battles between the men with scenes from Hamlet, some of which are evocatively staged. But the proxy father-son psychodrama between the two remains undercharged for too long and is then resolved too neatly. Burton and Taylor's relationship does not set the stage alight either. Middleton plays the part too lightly, rather like a turn in a TV sitcom, emanating none of the smouldering charisma of her real-life counterpart. Flynn does an energetic impression of Burton, hitting all the Welsh inflections and tonality of his speech patterns, but it remains an impersonation. Where the play comes alive is in Gielgud's story and Gatiss's performance. He sounds like Gielgud but captures something beyond imitation: the pained spirit of a great actor grappling with the ageing process – the old guard, reluctantly, giving way to the new. Gielgud admits to his envy of Burton and shows his insecurity as a director. We see the fear his homosexuality brings in an era when it was criminalised; a hotel room conversation with a sex worker carries great, subtle power. While Gielgud's inner complications are slowly but searingly explored, much of what surrounds him feels emotionally sterile. It is still a polished production, with what looks like cinematic framing: text appears on a black background which opens up to sets, designed by Es Devlin, filled with flat rich swathes of colour, alongside Katrina Lindsay's costumes, which carefully tend to period detail. There are filmic "Easter eggs" too: Taylor holds a chicken drumstick and speaks of marital boredom when she first appears, presumably referencing an early scene from Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? Pauses between scenes bring stylised whimsy and piano music that sometimes resembles the soundtrack to an early Woody Allen film, other times the old Hamlet cigar adverts. But even with its cinematic elements, this is a rather self-regarding homage to theatre. "Together we share the responsibility of what theatre can be," says Burton. "Theatre is thinking," says Gielgud, and these observations sound close to mawkish cliches on the mythology and magic of the stage. There is a real sense of remove too as we watch actors playing actors who, in turn, are playing characters in Hamlet, or unpicking the meanings of the play, scene by scene. Ultimately, this play-about-the-play leaves us wishing we had been there to see Burton in the real thing. At the Lyttelton theatre, National Theatre, London, until 15 July

Time Out (***) Written by Leonie Cooper
Dazzling performances from Johnny Flynn, Mark Gatiss and Tuppence Middleton power the NT's Sam Mendes-directed Richard Burton drama. Jack Thorne's new drama is the sort of play that gets described by the timelessly wanky epithet 'a love letter to theatre'. Don't let that put you off: you can rarely go wrong with a production directed by Sam frickin' Mendes, and if it's essentially MOR as hell, 'The Motive and the Cue' finds its feet via three excellent lead performances. It is 1964, and Richard Burton (Johnny Flynn) is probably the second-most famous actor in the world – the most famous being his wife, Elizabeth Taylor (Tuppence Middleton). Unlike her, the blunt, boozy Welshman is a creature of the stage. After achieving global celebrity through a prolific but 'mixed' body of film work, he's determined to show the world what he's really made of. He's going to do 'Hamlet' on Broadway. Or

that's the plan. What Burton's doing is arguing with the legendary theatre knight Sir John Gielgud (Mark Gatiss), who is notionally directing him in a high-concept production of Shakespeare's greatest play. Like Burton, Thorne and Mendes started out in theatre and have now largely moved into screen work. And at first 'The Motive and the Cue' feels like a loving tribute to the rehearsal process from a writer and director who are now largely looking back at it nostalgically. Even the liberal doses of 'Hamlet' peppered throughout feel rooted in a certain wistfulness. Its slick docudrama beginnings are interesting, but not riveting. What brings it to life is its cast. Flynn has done a remarkable job of nailing Burton's rough-hewn but mellifluous South Wales accent. His formidable array of rollnecks help, but the work he's done with dialect coach Charmian Hoare feels like a true channelling, electrifying even the most mundane scenes. In a smaller part, Middleton is scene-stealing as Taylor, both radiant and dangerous. She's like a tiger that's content to be caged for now – staying to avoid the paparazzi, she visibly terrifies Burton's American castmates with her wild charisma and crackling halo of fame. When she flirts with mortal men – as she regularly does – they look like they're about to have a panic attack. But unexpectedly, this turns out to be Gatiss's play. At first, it seems like Gielgud is there to be a comic foil, a light figure, amusingly frustrating Burton and the 'Hamlet' cast with his breezy standoffishness. They all want the great stage knight to take them in hand and impart rare acting wisdom. He simply compliments their line reads then makes polite suggestions that infer he thought the line read was terrible. Eventually, it gets too much for Burton, and they clash – unable to find his Hamlet, the star ups his already formidable booze consumption, turning up sloshed and bellicose to rehearsals, belittling Gielgud's career. And Gielgud is upset. Gatiss's Sir John goes from amusing character sketch to a poignant study in genius and ageing, a man who was a superstar in his twenties now facing up to old age, irrelevance and the loneliness of being a queer older man in an unaccepting era. As a member of the legendary sketch troupe The League of Gentlemen, Gatiss was always brilliant at mining poignancy from superficially ludicrous characters; in some ways his Gielgud feels like the logical conclusion of that process. It's entertaining, with a rousing finale, but I wish 'The Motive and the Cue' had more of the grit and weirdness of 'Hamlet', not just borrowed its poetry. The third act of Thorne's play is a fairly pat bit of triumph over adversity. 'The Motive and the Cue' may be a love letter to theatre, but in the end it feels a little too Hollywood.

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

Sam Mendes's elegant production is a love letter to theatre. In this look at Richard Burton and Sir John Gielgud's staging of Hamlet on Broadway, the play is not the thing. In this enjoyable, hugely adroit but distinctly "theatrical" extravaganza, writer Jack Thorne uses Richard Burton's hit Hamlet on Broadway in 1964 to explore the art of acting and the trap of fame. This is a play that thrives on the knowing exploitation of showbiz mythology. But also on the fizz and crackle of opposites: film vs theatre, modernism vs classicism; passion vs dedication. Fiery, working-class Burton is hitting the bed and the booze hard with his sizzling new film star wife Liz Taylor. His director for Hamlet is Sir John Gielgud: theatrical royalty, diffidently homosexual, trading on past glories. A new breed of celebrity photographer is thronging the hotel where Burton keeps Taylor like an imprisoned princess, fearful she might "threaten tumescence" among the cast if she visited rehearsals. All three main characters are jealous of each other, but it's the dynamic between the two men – both famous Hamlets, and sons of disappointing fathers – that dominates. Adding layer upon layer, here we have Thorne (Skins, Harry Potter and the Cursed Child), superstar director Sam Mendes (Lehman Trilogy, Skyfall), plus Johnny Flynn, Mark Gatiss and Tuppence Middleton in the leads, each bringing a different cocktail of stage-and-screen celebrity to the table. Those who get all the references and in-jokes and know Hamlet inside out – hardcore theatre nerds like me – will probably love it. Others may find it overly smug and self-referential. It's elegantly put together and acted. Flynn and Gatiss successfully capture Burton's harsh, growling diction and Gielgud's fluting musicality without stooping to outright impersonation. Physically, the former is driven, arrogant, confrontational, stalking the stage with a restless energy, looking for a fight. The latter is vicarish and withheld, wielding his acid wit like a rapier. There are some great lines. "You shout wonderfully," Gielgud tells Burton, adding a backhanded comparison to his nemesis, Laurence Olivier. Oh God, now I'm doing the smug, I-get-the-in-joke thing… Middleton impresses even though this Liz T is a loose assemblage of cleavage, one-liners and exposition. But again, Thorne cleverly has it both ways. While the boys bang on about art and truth it's the two-dimensional sex bomb who really knows herself and her place in the entertainment universe. Es Devlin's set, too, is clever, sliding panels dilating and contracting to reveal the stark rehearsal room, or the pink suite through which Middleton's Taylor slinks like a sexually-unsatisfied ocelot. To balance the Burton-Taylor pheromone-fest, Thorne writes a delicate, restrained scene between Gielgud and a male escort – a further expression of the duality within Shakespeare's play. To shag, or not to shag, if you like. Almost all theatre-makers prefer the process of creation to the final product. Gielgud's "rehearsal staging" of Hamlet (played as if it's at the final rehearsal, in modern dress) and The Motive and the Cue both attempt to capture the heady exploration and conflict that occurs before an artwork is "finished". Thorne's play does so extremely well but I suspect most people – certainly those outside the hardcore nerd demographic, those that theatres surely want to reach – are more interested in product than process.

Independent (****) Written by Jessie Thompson

Mark Gatiss is superb as Sir John Gielgud in Jack Thorne's affecting play about Hamlet rehearsals with Richard Burton. You'll get goosebumps watching The Motive and the Cue at the National Theatre – it's a side effect of being in the company of ghosts. Jack Thorne's deeply affecting play, directed by Sam Mendes, recreates the rehearsals for John Gielgud's 1964 Broadway production of Hamlet, in which Richard Burton played the Dane. Mark Gatiss and Johnny Flynn, as the two theatrical heroes slugging it out, summon their spirits. This play is about a lot

of things – art, youth and ageing, sexuality, masculinity and celebrity – but perhaps most of all, it's an ode to the idea that there's beauty in the endeavour. History tells us that Gielgud's long-running production broke box-office records, but Burton's Hamlet did not go on to become definitive. Based on two books by members of the company, Thorne's play identifies the anxieties and frailties both men were bearing at the time. At 60, Gielgud felt himself becoming irrelevant, his acting style out of fashion; Burton, having just married Elizabeth Taylor (Tuppence Middleton), is one of the biggest stars in the world, drinking heavily, but craving immortality in art. Hamlet, of course, can never escape from ghosts. He's visited by an apparition of his father (something Daniel Day-Lewis thought he experienced literally at this theatre in 1989, causing him to flee the stage forever), but actors are also haunted by the many greats to have played the role before. Here, Burton happens to be directed by one of them; Gielgud's performance, when he was just 25, became a touchstone. "Don't you dare give me a line reading!" Burton often spits. Despite their various achievements, neither man feels they can escape from the shadow of "Larry" – Laurence Olivier, a statue of whom in the role stands outside the National's building. Your enjoyment of this show may depend on your tolerance for luvvie jokes and Shakespeare references. For theatre lovers, it is manna from heaven. But this is not just a heartfelt plea for the power of theatre, but a moving, often very funny, story about two generations teasing and provoking one another. In Es Devlin's set, an airy, spacious, big-windowed recreation of a rehearsal room, Gielgud begins rehearsals with a big speech. Then Burton does a big speech. Gielgud gives a note. Burton argues against the note. Gielgud knows all the rhythms of Hamlet; Burton can't hum the tune yet. Two big beasts with very different styles, they are locked in a power struggle from the start – and yet wonder why the play isn't working. This is all happening while newlywed Taylor sits in a plush apartment, barred from rehearsals. She's a woman sidelined, even though she and the world know she's too fabulous for that to be a long-term plan. It's a difficult ask, trying to play a legend – Middleton's performance is classy but she lacks the charisma to burst out of these scenes, and she and Flynn have little chemistry. The scenes between Gielgud and Burton, though, really do fly. Funny, explosive badinage, in which Gielgud despairs of Burton's "hunting calls", simmer down into quieter moments of stark vulnerability. Despite their egos, the truth is that the pair are both fanboys, in awe of other legendary performers. Flynn's attempt to do "the voice" at times slips into the dangerous territory of becoming "a voice", but his performance is fascinating: he's playing an actor playing a role he hasn't yet got a reading on. Initially, he's a hammy Hamlet, volatile and shouty, leaning on a caricature of a great actor. Later, he is exposed, weighed down by the pressure of genuinely trying to be great. But it's Gatiss, as Gielgud, who owns this show. He deserves all the superlatives for a performance of restrained, quiet dignity, laced with sharp wit. In the show's most extraordinary scene, after the battering experience of coaching a growling Burton through Hamlet's "Speak the speech, I pray you" monologue, Gielgud sits, alone, and performs it to himself, poised and word perfect. And then, in its final moments, Mendes's graceful production conjures an image that captures why any actor wants to play this role, what they are trying to achieve, and why we want to watch it. It's soft to say theatre is magical, but in this moment it really is: ghosts are truly summoned. National Theatre, until 15 July

The Telegraph (****) Written by Dominic Cavendish

A witty, deft, touching evocation of a fascinating, fraught encounter that captures the mood of those times. A play delving behind the scenes of the 1964 Hamlet that starred Richard Burton, under the direction of John Gielgud? It sounds at once like a safe bet – because these are names to conjure with - and a high risk. That Hamlet was a record-breaking hot-ticket on Broadway back in the day. What with Jack Thorne scripting and Sam Mendes directing, The Motive and the Cue has caused a stampede at the National's box-office too, assisted by beguiling casting: Mark Gatiss and Johnny Flynn as the two acting titans. Even so, the suspicion lingered that the pair's innate appeal - with Tuppence Middleton playing Elizabeth Taylor, Burton's then newly wed wife, adding tantalisation – could only woo our interest. Once won, might we be in for something weary, stale, flat and unprofitable? This reconstructive drama concludes on the 'opening night'; it's not so much the play or the circus of attention around it, as the rehearsal process that's the thing. It's a pleasure to report that the evening is a palpable hit. This is a witty, deft, touching evocation of a fascinating, fraught encounter that captures the mood of those times, the character of those men. Compressing events, Thorne weaves fact with judicious fiction, taking notable liberties including a sweary confrontation. But what he achieves is the truth, or what feels like it – a portrait of two artists at very different points of their illustrious careers. Gatiss is to the manner born as the quietly pained old knight. Gielgud is at the awkward age of 60, his gilded heyday, and own triumphs in the role, a memory; he's in a no man's land as the new generation rise up and cast the old guard aside. A gangly figure, his chin back, as if always aiming his words to the gallery, Gatiss's Sir John mixes regal poise with a bashful air of repression. We can see why, surrounded by Americans, including a sceptical Guildenstern (Luke Norris's William Redfield, who became one of two key documenters of the rehearsals) he was venerable but vulnerable. We are seduced by his erudition but can grasp why Johnny Flynn's Welsh boyo – at first composed and drawling, later drunk and frayed - would resist the headmaster with his profusion of scattershot advice and repeat-after-me line-readings. But, ay, there's the rub. The beauty of the evening is that it shows the mysteries of the rehearsal room, how different chemistries can mix badly but also the alchemy of revelation. Flynn doesn't give us the full rugged incarnation of Burton but his gathering doubt and irritation feels authentic – and in struggling, sardonically and even viciously against his mentor, he unlocks, with him, the filial complexes from his life that can feed the art. Despite its stylish, monumental design (Es Devlin) which affords sundry vignettes, from hotel gatherings to haunting excerpts from Hamlet in performance, the core of this is a very intimate creative tussle - some of the cast seem almost decorative. I'd love to see more of Middleton's Taylor, smart in every sense; funny, shrewd.

Perhaps this love letter to theatre and its fashions now needs the screen treatment to lend it a well-deserved touch of immortality.

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

NATIONAL

***OTHELLO by WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE director CLINT DYER décor CHLOE LAMFORD costume MICHAEL VALE lights JAI MORJARIA sound/composition PETE MALKIN, BENJAMIN GRANT movement director LUCIE PANKHURST fight director KEV MCCURDY with GILES TERERA othello, ROSY MCEWEN desdemona, PAUL HILTON iago, MARTIN MARQUEZ duke of venice, RORY FLECKE BYRNE cassio, KIRSTY J CURTIS bianca, JACK BARDOE roderigo, TANYA FRANKS emilia, etc.

Blanche Marvin Critique
This production was more concerned with the director proving his interpretation that that of Shakepseare. Sadly the production overshadowed the actual characterisation of Othello. A disappointing production as far as I'm concerned. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

Guardian (****) Written by Arifa Akbar
Giles Terera stars in a thrilling production with a radical climax that explores the domestic violence in Shakespeare's play. In 1964, the National Theatre Company staged Othello with Laurence Olivier playing the military commander in blackface. Clint Dyer's new production speaks to the play's murky performance history in its opening optics, perhaps even to the ghost of Olivier's Othello himself. There are posters of old productions projected on to Chloe Lamford's spare, contemporary set and a cleaner scrubs the floor. It sets up a conceptual overhaul – a coming clean, of sorts. But we are wrongfooted in the sense that, for much of its three hours, this Othello plays out as a traditional thriller that occasionally veers into melodrama. A new vision does come though, breathtakingly so, in a radical half-hour at the end when it feels as if Dyer is revealing another play beneath the story we know about jealousy and mistrust in which Othello is a flawed hero who commands our sympathies. This other play is about the tragedy of domestic violence. The women are not reduced to victims here while the men, including Othello, are controlling, toxic abusers. It is an almost obvious interpretation, once we have seen and heard it, yet it makes the play feel utterly new. Never has the speech about wives and husbands ("If wives do fall"), delivered by Desdemona's maid, Emilia (Tanya Franks), made better sense. She is the play's other abused woman alongside Desdemona, visibly shaking in the company of her violent husband, Iago, and wearing a bloodied bruise across one eye. Franks steals the show with the scene and becomes the hero of this production. Rosy McEwen is quietly radical in her role as Desdemona too, never simpering or scared. She appears as Othello's equal, despite her paucity of lines, and while she and Giles Terera's Othello do not have a passionate chemistry, there is tenderness and mutual respect between them, until he turns on her. Terera, for his part, appears a contemporary figure while bearing the legacy of slavery on his body (a patchwork of laceration scars on his back). We watch him unravel but feel disdain when he claims to have loved his wife "too well" after murdering her. Paul Hilton's Iago, meanwhile, is the hammiest character on stage. The opposite of Mark Rylance's cerebral and apparently unassuming Iago, Hilton has an over-egged comic villainy and appears like a cross between a Marvel-style Joker figure and a pantomime baddie who might have mistakenly wandered off the set of the theatre's adjacent show, Hex. The production does not seem entirely joined up in its vision, veering from what resembles Greek tragedy (there is a miming chorus) to modern melodrama. The thriller tropes are effective but overdone, with thunder, rain, jagged sounds, drumbeats, fire embers on a back screen, sudden spotlights and swirls of darkness. The chorus seem to represent inner demons; they bring creepiness, but also mystifying scenes such as one in which they emerge in masks, holding police shields. It remains highly watchable and well-paced with good supporting performances from Rory Fleck Byrne as the earnest Cassio and Jack Bardoe as Roderigo. This is an Othello which feels unlike any other, its central figure a villain not a hero – a cleaning up of the play, indeed. 23 November 2022 – 21 January 2023

Evening Standard (****) Written by Nick Curtis
Giles Terera is a superb and mercurial actor, one of our finest. After galvanizing turns in Hamilton, Death of England and Blues for an Alabama Sky – to name just a recent few in a career covering decades – he brings force, delicacy and dignity to Shakespeare's traduced Moor in this powerful, monochromatic staging. Clint Dyer, the first black man to direct the play at the National, gives its military milieu a fascist spin with blackshirt uniforms and clenched-fist salutes. The army here is a microcosm of a systemically racist society where the powers-that-be will exploit Othello's military talents but won't shake his hand. Desdemona's decision to marry him is therefore an act of strong will, and Rosy McEwen gives the character more spine and vim than I've ever seen before. She defies her father, teases and challenges her husband, and spiritedly defends herself until it's too late. Paul Hilton as Iago, who ignites Othello's sexual jealousy, is brilliantly insidious – Iago was a master of gaslighting before gaslights were invented. He also resembles an etiolated Oswald Mosley. Almost everything here is harsh and stark. Iago mentally and physically abuses his wife Emilia (a bruised, affecting Tanya Franks). Chloe Lamford's set, of steeply raked steps on three sides, suggests a parade ground and a gladiatorial arena. The supporting players who gather to lynch Othello in the opening scene become coldly hostile spectators or emblems of the madness seeded in his mind. No wonder he is so easily deranged by Iago. Called shirtless from his marital bed, we see his scars – apparently lash marks on his back rather than battle wounds. This Othello apparently rose from slavery to a

position and rank that are tenuously held. It's not paranoia if the society you inhabit hates you. But there's softness and mutual passion between Othello and Desdemona. Terera's gentle, fluting voice brings his poetic soul alive and McEwen makes her a poised and spirited foil. The first half of the play accelerates towards mania: the second has an urgently fatalistic pace. The touching scene between Desdemona and Emilia on their last night alive balances the earlier one where Iago worms his doubts into Othello's mind on a martial arts dojo. Desdemona can be a graveyard for the careers of young, slim, blonde, would-be classical actresses. McEwen could be the one who goes beyond it. Some parts of the production are overdone: the glaring lighting changes; the moment Iago activates the dormant spectators like robots from Westworld. But ultimately one can't argue with the subtlety of the three central performances or the brutal logic of Dyer's production. As a teenager he was shocked by images of a blacked-up Laurence Olivier in the NT foyer. Now he's deputy artistic director here, delivering a version of Othello that challenges the idea that we're in a post-racist society (if you don't believe him, look online). Frankly, it's about time.

CURRENT London Theareviews

OLD VIC

***PYGMALION by GEORGE BERNARD SHAW director RICHARD JONES décor/costume STEWART LAING lighting ADAM SILVERMAN sound TONY GAYLE composer/arranger WILL STUART movement SARAH FAHIE with BERTIE CARVEL henry higgins, PATSY FERRAN eliza doolittle, LIZZY CONNOLLY clara eynsford hill, GRACE COOKEY-GAM mrs eynsford hill, STEVEN DYKES ensemble, MICHAEL GOULD colonel pickering, LIZ JADAV ensemble, PENNY LAYDEN mrs pearce, SYLVESTRA LE TOUZEL mrs higgings, JOHN MARQUEZ alfred doolittle, TAHEEN MODAK freddy eynsford hill, CAROLINE MORONEY ensemble, ROHAN RAKHIT ensemble, KIERAN SMITH aristid kaparthy

Blanche Marvin Critique
This was a typical production of this classic which always works no matter who produces or acts in the production. A play that never fails. Read the reviews. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

Guardian (***) Written by Arifa Akbar
This Shaw revival has wonderful moments but there is little spark between Eliza Doolittle and Henry Higgins. In its preface, George Bernard Shaw claimed the success of his 1912 play was proof that all art should be "deliberately didactic". But how do Pygmalion's class commentaries and critiques of mobility and morality speak to us now? It is unclear in this production, directed by Richard Jones, which does not unfold like a period piece exactly, nor a radical reworking, but wavers on the fringes of being a play with something to say to us today. There is fine casting in Patsy Ferran as the cockney flower-seller Eliza Doolittle and in Bertie Carvel as the imperious Henry Higgins, who takes on her transformation from Covent Garden "cabbage leaf" to duchess as if it were a science project (his housekeeper, Mrs Pearce, played by Penny Layden, even comes on in a lab coat). But together they can't quite find Pygmalion's beating heart. Higgins is shown by Shaw to be a bully and mummy's boy, although he is also egalitarian enough to treat a duchess as a flower-girl and vice versa. But in Carvel's hands, he is irredeemably unappealing – an overgrown schoolboy, puerile and pompous, with a serpent-like darting tongue for added creepiness. Ferran plays Eliza with clowning spirit at first (thankfully she does not ham up the cockney accent) and the early scenes are close to farce, with exaggerated physical comedy. This tone is dropped but other stylistic tics bob up, none quite unifying. The modern is placed alongside the historic in Stewart Laing's set design: office tables with Henry's period recording devices, minimalist drawing rooms with huge spotlights and walls covered with trendy geometric designs. Laing's costumes are similar: Eliza seems to be in modern dress at the start while the others are in period clothing. The elisions of time and switches in tone are slickly executed but what are they trying to say? Some of the dissonance is down to the play itself. Written in what the note-taker of the first scene calls an "age of upstarts" – a time of growing social mobility when the newly rich "give themselves away every time they open their mouths" – class and social mobility are no longer as sharply defined by accent alone. The production feels strangely like a museum piece despite its contemporary visual elements. There are some strong moments, nonetheless, including a wonderful scene in which Eliza takes her first, disastrous stride into middle-class society at Henry's mother's house, where she accidentally, and delightfully, creates a "new small talk". Ferran's performance grows in power although there is no real fire between Eliza and Higgins. The play's more ancillary characters are in some ways the most entertaining, especially Eliza's dustman father, Alfred Doolittle (John Marquez), who sends up middle-class morality and sounds like a proto-Marxist. Eliza's besotted suitor, Freddy (Taheen Modak), is entertaining, too, with his gurning smiles and bunches of flowers. Higgins is spotlit alone on stage at the end as Eliza walks away, his laugh hollow and self-mocking rather than the self-satisfied chuckle of Shaw's stage directions. Yet Eliza's assertion of her independence does not carry the force of other such self-defining women, such as Ibsen's Nora. And while there is a certain commercial safety in reviving the most popular of Shaw's plays, therein lies the danger: it seems a little too familiar, a little too safe. Pygmalion is at the Old Vic, London, until 28 October

Time Out (***) Written by Tim Bano
Despite interesting turns from Olivier winners Bertie Carvel and Patsy Ferran, this revival doesn't make much of a case for the Shaw classic George Bernard Shaw's story of Eliza Doolittle – the poor flower girl taught to speak proper by 'eartless professor Henry Higgins – has long felt icky, and yet it never seems to go away. Last year we had its more famous musical version, 'My Fair Lady', returned to the West End in a big, distinctly okay production.

And here's 'Pygmalion' itself, in Richard Jones's productions: also big, also okay. It's got big big character performances from great actors – Bertie Carvel and Patsy Ferran headlining – on a big big set. It's got a slightly too broad, slightly unreal quality, as if it's playing at being a play: which is appropriate for a play that's about performance, how we look and speak and dress. It's like Jones has put 'Pygmalion' under a magnifying glass and we're all examining it. He's not really changed it and he's not casting any particular value judgement, he's just enlarged the whole thing, so that what was once light comedy has become broad farce. There's barrelling, discordant piano music bringing a frantic mood to each scene change, and a cold, not-quite-real set by Stewart Laing of pink pegboard, with doors that open and slam shut with great regularity. Then we've got two amazing actors giving two very different, very detailed performances. The more obviously brilliant one is Bertie Carvel as a nerdy Henry Higgins. Knees cocked, hips thrust forward, it's like his brain is so permanently immersed in thinking about vowel sounds that he barely remembers to hold himself upright. He's completely unpredatory, possibly asexual, but still a nasty bully so dedicated to phonetics that he doesn't notice or care about the people around him. Carvel's eyes gaze at some middle distant spot when he speaks, and he rarely makes eye contact with anyone else. His whining voice is sibilant, almost adenoidal, his brown suit like some '70s lab assistant. It's like the polar opposite of his legendary take on Trunchbull in 'Matilda', but on the same cartoonish track. Ferran has drawn the shorter straw. So magnificent in her previous stage roles, including when she stepped in with two weeks' notice to play Blanche Dubois in 'A Streetcar Named Desire' alongside Paul Mescal, she has a harder time showing off just how good she is here. First half Eliza is all broadness: the loud wailing, the elongated Cockney vowels, and in this magnified production she uses big, scampering movements to create a comic urchin girl who's constantly trying to hold onto her dignity amid the humiliations thrown at her by Higgins. But as the play goes on, she takes on an increasingly dominating quality. In the final scene as she and Higgins battle it out, he remains preposterous and conceited while Ferran seems to figure out Eliza at the same moment as Eliza does, becoming a tower of self-possession. It's an amazing thing to watch. There's a wonderfully level performance from Sylvestra Le Touzel, too, as Higgins's mother – the only vaguely normal human being in the show. Jones has everyone moving constantly around the whole stage, so the production always looks busy, ants under a magnifying glass. But he's doing to 'Pygmalion' what Higgins does to Eliza: treating it like an experiment. We're left with an exercise in 'Pygmalion' which, for all its detail, forgets about the heart, the humour and, crucially, the humanity.

Evening Standard (***) Written by Nick Curtis

I'm slightly baffled as to why Richard Jones chose George Bernard Shaw's 1912 class-system satire for his latest, stylised revival, but it features two extraordinary central performances. It's a joy to see Patsy Ferran bring her exquisite timing and elastic physicality to the role of Eliza Doolittle, the cockney flower girl trained to speak and act like a duchess. Bertie Carvel's transformative turn as her mentor and tormentor Henry Higgins will, I suspect, be a bit more Marmite for audiences. He's an effete, manic demon with a Mr Punch leer and a strangulated (but perfectly enunciated) voice, hips jutting and shoulders slumped like a half-strung marionette. A play that's ostensibly about speech involves an awful lot of body language. Jones's theatre productions are always intriguing but can feel like magic boxes in which the actors perform like automata. Here the artificiality has been dialled back. The sets are rendered in fibreboard like an architect's model, and the action has been kicked forward to a 1930s world of tubular furniture and anglepoise lamps. A hint perhaps, that smug certainties about class and gender are about to be shaken, if not swept away, by war. Maybe Jones thought, too, that Shaw's barbed view on social mobility chimed with our current experience of division and economic disparity. That it's opened when male coercive control of women is headline news is an accident of timing. Higgins' hectoring of Eliza, his obliteration of her self-respect, is uncomfortable to watch. Both Eliza and Higgins seem child-like when they first meet on the steps of Drury Lane. She's an exuberant free spirit, her limbs as uncontrolled as her boomerang vowels and dropped aitches. He's a brat and a bully, in love with his own cleverness. Their early exchanges are tempestuous and very loud indeed. Eliza's grammar and pronunciation are corrected quickly. In the transitional scene where she tells a genteel tea party about a relative who was "done in" Ferran shows us Eliza's spirit and swagger. At her "coming out" at an embassy party, she looks suddenly heartbreakingly frail and vulnerable, and we don't hear her speak. Choppy piano music and stark lighting power the show forward. There are fine supporting performances from John Marquez as Eliza's reprobate dad and Sylvestra Le Touzel as Higgins' exasperated mother. But it's the two stars that dominate. I can't think of another stage actor who changes as radically for each role as Carvel but his tour de force here left me impressed but unmoved. Ferran has a versatility of a different order. She's proved herself a transfixing dramatic actress in recent years but first wowed London audiences as a wobbly maid in Blithe Spirit, stealing the show from Angela Lansbury. This performance reminds us she's got truly funny bones. Old Vic, to October 28; buy tickets her.

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

OLD VIC

***SYLVIA book/lyrics/director/choreographer KATE PRINCE book PRIYA PARMER music JOSH COHEN, DJ WALDE décor/costume BEN STONES lights NATASHA CHIVERS sound TONY GAYLE video, animation ANDRZEJ GOULDING musical director SEAN GREEN music supervisor MARK DICKMAN, LEONN MEADE orchestrator JOSH COHEN, MARK DICKMAN, LEONN MEADEDJ WALDE with BEVERLEY KNIGHT, KELLY AGBOWU, VERITY BLYTH, BRADLEY CHARLES, KIMMY EDWARDS, ALEX GAUMOND, JADE HACKETT, STEVIE HUTCHINSON, KATE IVORY JORDAN, HANNAH

KHEMOH, SINEAD LONG, JAYE MARSHALL, KANDAKE MOORE, ANTOINE MRRAY-STRAUGHAN, RAZAK OSMAN, JAY PERRY, SHARON ROSE, KIRSTIE SKIVINGTON, SWEENEY, ELLENA VINCENT, MALACHI WELCH

Blanche Marvin Critique
No comment since it is a confusing production in which the variation of reaction is ample. Best to read the reviews. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

Guardian (****) Written by Arifa Akbar
Historical characters bust contemporary dance moves while the troubled relationship between Sylvia Pankhurst and her mother Emmeline is laid bare. So many shows seem to want to be the new Hamilton. This witty, high-voltage musical about feminist firebrand Sylvia Pankhurst just might be it. It carries the same revisionism and irrepressible energy, its cast boasting Hamilton alumni too, even if it feels self-consciously fashioned around Lin-Manuel Miranda's concept. Dynamically directed by Kate Prince, it has been long in the making, staged as a work-in-progress in 2018, and its polish shows. History of the women's suffrage movement is set to hip-hop, rap, soul and funk. The music by Josh Cohen and DJ Walde is rousing and adrenalised, the book (by Prince with Priya Parmar) accompanied by its beat and often half sung. Prince, as founder of the ZooNation dance company, creates fun, frothy choreography as well with historical characters busting contemporary dance moves with knowing winks. Its focus is Sylvia (Sharon Rose), daughter of Emmeline Pankhurst, indomitable head of the early 20th century Suffragette movement, with whom she comes to ideological loggerheads. The roots of first-wave feminism are often, rightly, critiqued for their privilege – Emmeline Pankhurst's campaign secured the right of some women to vote. Sylvia's offshoot movement, immersed in Labour party socialism, was founded in equality for all, including working women. She was also a pacifist and was rejected from the Women's Social and Political Union that her mother founded. Emmeline Pankhurst comes out badly here but Beverley Knight brings charisma alongside the cold mothering and is a joint vocal powerhouse alongside Rose. The production brings out rivalries and ideological differences between the Pankhurst siblings too. It is a valuable reminder that feminism has always had inner schisms and that the heated gender debates of today are not an aberration: they follow a long tradition of the right to ideological disagreement. We are taken through some well-worn territory, from Emily Davison's fatal Epsom Derby protest to the hunger strikes and prison force feeding of activists but the thrill of this production is all in the telling. Set against Ben Stones's handsome monochrome set and Natasha Chivers's fantastic lighting, the sheer chutzpah of its vision is phenomenal. There are irreverent comic winks too. Labour leader Keir Hardie (Alex Gaumond) apologises for his "mansplaining"; the entrance of home secretary Winston Churchill's mother Lady Jennie (Jade Hackett, sublime) sets the stage alight with a gravel-voiced jungle number and "brrrap" flashed on a psychedelic back screen. Verity Blyth is subtly subversive as his wife, while Rose herself gives a powerful performance. Diverse casting effectively reclaims the movement from the shadow of "white woman" feminism. One niggle is that well-known activists of colour such as Sophia Duleep Singh do not feature, and working-class characters might have been portrayed in a meatier way. But these are niggles. This is a storm of a show which can easily be re-envisaged for the West End. 27 January – 8 April

Evening Standard (***) Written by Nick Curtis
Though this hip-hop musical about Emmeline and Sylvia Pankhurst's struggles – for female emancipation and with each other – is delivered with verve and panache, Hamilton it most definitely ain't. Written, directed and choreographed by Zoo Nation's Kate Prince, to music by Josh Cohen and DJ Walde, it aims to be larkily tongue-in-cheek but often seems plain silly. Fortunately, it has the magnificent Beverley Knight and the very impressive Sharon Rose in the full-throated lead roles, leading an ensemble of powerful voices and dynamic, well-drilled bodies, doing the kind of punchy, shoulder-rolling moves pioneered by Janet Jackson and Madonna. So you stifle your giggles. Mostly. It's well-nigh impossible to set the name of the Women's Social and Political Union – which Emmeline founded in 1903 with help from her three daughters and son – to music. But Prince tries, setting a precedent for gauche or lumpy rhymes throughout. "I was hoping to be found, but you were being crowned," moans Sylvia, inappropriately, of her married lover, Labour leader Keir Hardie. The score is through-written so almost everything is sung. The bass-driven funk of the early numbers is effective, the sibling chat-song Hey Sis clever and funny and the final anthems Stand Up/Rise Up irresistibly rousing. Kelly Agbowu delivers some slightly harder-edged rap as a suffragette 'General'. But there are too many soupy ballads and too many attempts to hammer political history or suffragette/suffragist schisms into a jaunty chorus. The doo-be-doo love song Sylvia, Silvio, sung to the protagonist and her Italian lover by a chorus of undulating East End matrons is hilarious but utterly derails the narrative. An anti-war number ("it's the POOR who DIE!") is mortifyingly awful. And oh dear, the characterisations. Emmeline advocated violent protest to win wealthy, older, married women the vote: Sylvia wanted universal suffrage for men and women, by peaceful means. Here, their ideological differences have the air of a domestic spat. Knight and Rose (and Ellena Vincent as Christabel) transcend the stilted relationships through sheer charisma and vocal power. But Alex Gaumond's Hardie is a waffly, ageing hipster, Jay Perry's Winston Churchill a simpering boy, arranging the arrest and force-feeding of women in public, henpecked at home by his mother Jennie and wife Clementine. Well, sort of. He refers to Sylvia as "that hideous lunatic Pankhurst girl". Clementine corrects him: "Hideous, lunatic Pankhurst WOMAN." That's the level of sophistication here. I dunno, maybe we need a by-the-numbers musical to remind us of the heroic, flawed pioneers of UK feminism. Prince at least stages the show with huge energy and skill. The dance routines are impeccable, and Ben Stones's set and costumes are strikingly monochrome with flashes of socialist scarlet: literally black and white and red all over. There will doubtless be an audience for this poppy, peppy, pappy piece of work, but the Pankhursts surely deserve

better. And so does Beverley Knight. This is the third major show in a row, after The Drifters Girl and Sister Act, where she's elevated inferior material. She's an absolute star. Can't someone write her a role worthy of her talent?

HAMPSTEAD

***ANTHROPOLOGY by LAUREN GUNDERSON director ANNA LEDWICH décor GEORGIA LOWE lights JAMES WHITESIDE composer/sound designer MAX PAPPENHEIM video DANIEL DENTON movement/intimacy director SARA GREEN with MYANNA BURING merril, YOLANDA KETTLE raquel, DAKOTA BLUE RICHARDS angie, ABIGAIL THAW brin

Blanche Marvin Critique
This production involves a very important issue of AI and comes to some very curious decisions. Read the reviews for his more complex production. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

Guardian (****) Written by Mark Lawson
Lauren Gunderson's smart play finds a software engineer creating a digital version of a sister who has disappeared. While screenwriters strike, partly over the threat from artificial intelligence, playwrights are busy writing about AI. Lauren Gunderson's Anthropology is the second world premiere in a week featuring pseudo-humanity – after Alan Ayckbourn's Constant Companions – and the third such London play in six months, following Jordan Harrison's Marjorie Prime and Andrew Stein's Disruption. (Hermione Lee's biography of Tom Stoppard intriguingly reveals that he began but abandoned an AI play before writing Leopoldstadt.) Gunderson, an American whose I and You was a 2018 Hampstead success, creates Merril, a software engineer, whose sister Angie has been missing for a year after failing to reach home one night. From the phone, laptop and online footprint the young woman left behind, Merril sculpts a virtual Angie. The early scenes are a Merril duologue with a disembodied voice, like a digital Krapp's Last Tape, but Gunderson and director Anna Ledwich sensibly open up this closed circuit so that we see three, or by some counts four, others. All writers of fiction about AI should lay grateful flowers on the grave of Mary Shelley, who effectively anticipated the science and invented the genre in 1818 with Frankenstein. In the early scenes of Anthropology, we begin tensely to expect that "Angie" will become threateningly independent. As in Disruption, the question of whether texts have been sent by a person or algorithm is vital and the play overlaps with Marjorie Prime in exploring whether avatars of the departed are a healing or creepy response to bereavement. Enhancing its commercial potential in theatre and perhaps cinema, anthology, this sharp play about the rewards and risk of science also has a satisfying suspense element, as Merril programmes "Angie" to solve "her" disappearance from the digital trail of the last day. MyAnna Buring, as Merril, viscerally suggests the hope and pain of someone wielding very new technology against ancient human agonies. Dakota Blue Richards, in the trickily divided role of Angie, is alternately all too human and all too not. Abigail Thaw as the women's mother and Yolanda Kettle as Merril's on-off lover, though embodying subplots, achieve a very high impact-to-lines ratio. They represent sceptical and positive responses to the resurrection tech, though it is clear their attitudes are shaped as much by life-experience as objectivity. Crucially, no chatbot could surely ever write anything as original and compelling as a play that makes a powerful case for human writing intelligence. & September – 14 October 2023

Evening Standard (***) Written by Nick Curtis
Twilight Zone-style AI drama is polished, pacey but at times absurd. The story unfolds like a tech-savvy version of The Lovely Bones, where the ghost is in the machine. In Lauren Gunderson's polished, pacey but sporadically absurd play a programmer called Merril constructs an AI model of her younger sister Angie, who went missing and was presumed murdered a year before, using her social media data, messages, purchasing history and so on. No prizes for guessing that the virtual construct soon becomes more than a mere tool of consolation. To say much more about the plot would risk spoilers, but the story unfolds like a tech-savvy version of The Lovely Bones, where the ghost is quite literally in the machine. Are our physical selves more real than our accumulated online data? Might an edited, tweaked computer version of a person be better than the complex, combative human – or at least, "real enough"? On the plus side, Anthropology is up-to-the-minute, grappling with AI and its philosophical implications in a thoroughly engaging way (though my guest, who writes about tech, told me it uses every possible cliché about machine-learning systems). MyAnna Buring brings a brittle, fractured intensity to Merril, almost swamped by her shape-concealing clothes. Dakota Blue Richards is acidly funny as the glitchy, bitchy, algorithmic Angie. On the minus side, it is weirdly insular. The characters seem to have no life outside the sterile room set designed by Georgia Lowe. Inside, they work through their grief and anger in methodical, bite-sized chunks, leavened with wry humour: there's an evolving running gag, underscoring the play's themes of identity, about the way Merril's ex-girlfriend Raquel (Yolanda Kettle) is defined by her homemade lemon curd. But Merril and Angie's mother Brin (Abigail Thaw) is a crude assemblage of tabloid headlines: neglectful, addicted to substances and multiply married, now using Jesus to keep herself off "the drugs". Gunderson has been America's most performed living playwright since 2016 and is also a screenwriter but is little known in British theatre apart from a 2018 production of her play I and You here at Hampstead. Maybe because her writing, on the evidence of

this world premiere, has an easy, televisual facility, slipping neatly from angst to snark and back again like a snappy Netflix comedy drama. This play is economically constructed, and Anna Ledwich's briskly efficient production brings it to berth in 90 minutes flat. I really don't mean to sound too snarky myself because if you can get over the required leaps in credibility – and there's a huge one around the 60-minute mark – this is an enjoyable evening. Anthropology engages with our tech-mediated lives and with speculative futures in a way theatre rarely does. Buring and Richards create an impressively credible intimacy given one of them is mostly just a disembodied voice. More than anything, this strikes me as a sleek, theatrical take on mid-20th century sci-fi short stories, or shows like The Twilight Zone, where everything superfluous to the central, paranoid argument is jettisoned. Taken as such, it works.

*non-sub*SIDISED

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

THE MILL AT SONNING

**HIGH SOCIETY music/lyrics COLE PORTER book ARTHUR KOPIT additional lyrics SUSAN BIRKENHEAD based on THE PHILADELPHIA STORY by PHILLIP BARRY and motion picture HIGH SOCIETY director JOE PITCHER choreographer JAYE ELSTER décor JASON DENVIR costume NATALIE TITCHENER musical arranger/supervisor JEROME VAN DEN BERGHE lights NIC FARMAN, HECTOR MURRAY sound CHRIS WHYBROW musical director TOM NOYES with MATT BLAKER dexter haven, TOSCA FISCHER mavis, SAMUEL HOW edmund/dance captain, HEATHER JACKSON mother lord, JENNIFER JONES alternate tracy lord, MATTHEW JEANS mike connor, KURT KANSLEY uncle willie, KATLO dina lord, BETHANY ROSE LYTHGOE polly, JOE PRESS mario, WILL RICHARDSON george kitteridge, VICTORIA SERRA tracy lord, CALLUM TRAIN chester/resident director, LAURA TYRER liz imbrie, RUSSEL WILCOX seth lord

Blanche Marvin Critique
The director actually ruined this light-hearted musical which is a supposedly sophisticated comedy that lacked humour in this production. Sorry the production doesn't match the inventive charm of the theatre The Mill at Sonning. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

Whats On Stage (****) Written by Alun Hood
What a swell party this is, to quote one of the score of Cole Porter standards that punctuate this breezy, ebullient musical like jewels on a Cartier necklace. The Mill at Sonning's Christmas show this year is an intoxicating antidote to a bleak UK winter, whisking happily satiated audiences (the seasonal buffet meal included in the ticket price is excellent) away to the rarified air of mid-twentieth century Oyster Bay on Long Island where the sun shines, the champagne flows and the millionaires' boats glisten on an azure sea. This is escapism at its most elegant. As tuners go, Arthur Kopit's stage adaptation of the 1956 Bing Crosby, Grace Kelly and Frank Sinatra film which was in turn a musical remake of Philip Barry's society comedy The Philadelphia Story, is something of a Frankenstein's monster. It has double the number of songs of the original movie, plundering Cole Porter's back catalogue to form a collection of finely crafted, jazzy, swingy musical gems that are a source of unalloyed pleasure despite not always fitting seamlessly into this tale of the messy romantic machinations of the rich and clueless in an opulent seaside setting. While "Who Wants To Be A Millionaire", the tartly delightful duet for the undercover journalists sent to observe the madness of the privileged, or the wistful romantic ballad "I Love You, Samantha", spring organically from the action because they were part of the film score, some of the other numbers, though equally gorgeous, comment on, or feel adjunct to, the story and characters. Rather than attempting to gloss over this, director Joe Pitcher and his choreographer Jaye Elster go in the opposite direction, choosing instead to present many of the songs outside the action: there's a change in Nic Farman and Hector Murray's nicely evocative lighting and suddenly, for the duration of a number, the characters are in an upscale night club act, crooning into vintage mics. It's an effective solution, sending a little thrill of showbiz electricity through a play that, for all its wit and sparkle, runs the risk of looking out of touch to the point of tone deafness in these straitened times. Victoria Serra is utter perfection as heiress Tracy Lord, romantically torn between raffish ex-husband Dexter (an ardent, seductively voiced Matt Blakler) and a well meaning but controlling new fiancé (Will Richardson, funny and appropriately idiotic), capturing a brittle melancholy beneath the polished diamond exterior. Equally flawless is Heather Jackson as her not-as-straight-laced-as-she-looks mother, trying desperately to conceal her re-attachment to Tracy's disgraced father (Russell Wilcox) from her opinionated daughter. As tabloid reporter Mike Connor, Matthew Jeans seems at times to be almost channelling the role's screen progenitor, Sinatra, although his athletic smooth moves and boyish charm transcend mere impersonation. There's a touch of Lucille Ball's comic lunacy, and the potency of a dry martini, about Laura Tyrer's tough but tender portrayal of his romantically befuddled sidekick Liz. Kurt Kansley is a barrel of non-PC fun as a permanently plastered uncle and there's an entrancing stage debut from Katlo as Tracy's mouthy younger sister who appears to have a much clearer view of the erotic and emotional entanglements than the majority of the adults. Director Pitcher has a remarkable knack for putting a fresh, inventive spin on a well known piece, while staying true to the spirit of the original, and he's abetted here by a superb team. Elster's dances are exhilaratingly athletic but feel period-appropriate, and the production values, from Jason Denvir's airy, expensive-looking set to Natalie Titchener's divine costumes and Jerome Van Den Berghe's fine musical arrangements, are spiffing. The wigs department deserves a special mention: even at close quarters, their ambitious creations here look totally convincing. Tom Noyes is an unusually charismatic and present musical director, frequently at the centre of the big numbers, such as the blissful mini-Cole Porter revue that kicks off the second half. There are reservations: the dialogue scenes don't always snap and

fizz as much as they should, the milieu and attitudes of the Barry original have dated badly, and I'm not sure a non-musical version of The Philadelphia Story would even play particularly well now. Luckily, High Society has an abundance of musical charm to offset the creaky nature of some of the script. The American accents throughout are excellent. For the second time this year (the first being their triumphant, and now award-winning, Gypsy back in the summer, also helmed by Pitcher), the Mill at Sonning has produced a beloved musical redux that succeeds in feeling bracingly new-minted for a first time audience but hits all the magical notes that senior theatregoers will expect. As a property, High Society isn't in the same league as that Broadway legend, but it's still an enchanting entertainment, full of lovely songs and some laughter. A "swellegant, elegant" treat.

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

THEATRE ROYAL WINDSOR

***FRANK AND PERCY by BEN WEATHERILL director SEAN MATHIAS décor MORGAN LARGE lights NICK RICHINGS sound ANDY GRAHAM costume LEE TASSIE with ROGER ALLAM frank, IAN MCKELLEN percy

Blanche Marvin Critique
This was actually a vehicle for the two actors even though they play specific characters it is the material about the characters they play and it is much more pointed at the actors themselves and their personalities which take over the characters they are playing. Good fun. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

Guardian (**) Written by Ryan Gilbey
McKellen and Allam's banter meanders into romance. Ian McKellen and Roger Allam star in a rambling but unabashed depiction of desire after middle-age. Walking their dogs on Hampstead Heath, the widowed Frank (Roger Allam) and the blithely single Percy (Ian McKellen) hit it off, their pattering small-talk about hip ops and hearing aids getting bigger as they share confidences as well as umbrellas. That's essentially all there is to Ben Weatherill's two-hander, Frank and Percy, an undemanding, over-extended meander through a friendship that blossoms into romance. Each man has something to teach the other. Frank, with his unquestioning liberalism and his dubious statistics gleaned from Facebook, is shown to be more complacent than the proudly XR-loathing Percy. At least the older man has nuance and research on his side, as well as a lifetime's wisdom from the LGBTQ+ struggle, though he is also prone to shutting down. From Frank, he learns openness while their pets supply a soundtrack of offstage barks and yelps. Allam, previously seen with McKellen under Sean Mathias's direction in Aladdin, is sweetly bumbling, though given what we discover about Frank's past, he rather overdoes his initial surprise about Percy's sexuality. McKellen is better when flashing his claws than in, say, a monologue about watermelons that recalls Peter Cook's EL Wisty. A high point is his on-stage, pre-Pride costume change performed with a flourish. Mathias prods the actors vaguely this way and that on Morgan Large's ridged wooden set, which rotates so that its steps and levels can double as the seats in a restaurant where the men bicker over Percy's contentious views. The backdrop is dominated by images of the verdant heath until Nick Richings' lighting transforms the space into a karaoke bar or a hospital waiting room. Not all Weatherill's attempts at topicality pan out: an entire scene is lost to a dead-end digression on no-platforming. But there are instances of genuine pathos, such as when each man reflects on how long he was married: "Too long," for Percy; "Not long enough," for Frank. And it's heartening to find an unembarrassed depiction of desire after middle-age. Even as mortality and ideological differences impinge on the men's happiness, however, the play doesn't build, leaving it with the cosy air of a hug-a-gay event for anyone still on the fence. At Theatre Royal, Windsor, until 22 July

Evening Standard (****) Written by Tim Bano
Ian McKellen and Roger Allam in a radical odd-couple romance. If you want to hear Ian McKellen make jokes about deep-throating a cucumber, this is the show for you. It's roughly ten minutes into this seemingly innocent two-hander about two old blokes who befriend each other on their daily dog walk that Ian McKellen makes a gag about deep-throating a cucumber. It's unexpected, certainly. The Hallmark-style poster and the programme full of slightly mad articles by producers and writers about 'pooches I have known' lead us to believe Ben Weatherill's play will be all dog diets and doctors' appointments. And while there's plenty of that as McKellen and Roger Allam sidle into friendship, there's more too: poppers, Pride and radical, ageless romance. Frank and Percy marks director Sean Mathias's third summer season at the Theatre Royal Windsor, and a return for McKellen who gave his Hamlet here in 2021. Now he's Percy: Whitby-born, owner of Labrador Bruno, proudly gay. Allam's Frank, meanwhile, is from Pontefract, his spaniel is Toffee, he's a widower and a straight Yorkshireman who finds out over the course of several Heath-roaming conversations that actually he might not be that straight after all. It's a formidable duo. Allam is as brilliantly dry as ever, his face all guilelessness and impassivity. When romance emerges, the fact that Percy is a man is rather sweetly unremarkable to him. His buttoned-up naturalism clashes believably with McKellen's camper, more dramatic style, full of flinging arms and his trademark long linger on the end of certain wordssss. The odd couple effect comes through brilliantly: as Percy reminisces about a 28-year-old toyboy he once had a fling with, with reference to his own 'dextrous tongue', Allam's face flickers between surprise, confusion, horror and delight while also barely changing at all. It's certainly not a flawless play: Weatherill, whose previous work has been in fringe theatres, struggles with a larger canvas. Several scenes could be cut and the play would be better for it, especially an unexpected and unexamined digression about climate change, conspiracy theories and cancel culture. And despite an elegantly simple design by Morgan Large - a revolving wooden circle with benches and a woodland backdrop - there's a fussiness in some of the direction that slows the pace down. Too much time is spent in scene changes, accompanied by long blasts of classical music while costumes are donned and props prepared. But those quibbles recede when, in the midst of all the chat about spaniels and statins, we get the sight of two older men, one gay and one bi, properly snogging on stage. What's

abundantly clear is how much fun the duo are having. Behind that is something more profound as McKellen, now in his mid-eighties, still finds new ways to be a fierce activist for LGBTQ rights and representation.

The Stage (***) Written by Dave Fargnoli
Allam and McKellen are wonderfully watchable. Tender performances animate this dramatically inert comedy about queer love in later life. While walking his dog on Hampstead Heath, irrepressible pensioner Percy strikes up a conversation with lonely widower and fellow dog owner Frank. From that first, awkward conversation, they build a tentative friendship that blossoms into a deeply meaningful romance for both men. Like the unhurried relationship at the story's heart, this sweet-natured odd couple comedy – directed by Sean Mathias and featuring warm performances from Roger Allam and Ian McKellen – takes a long time to get going. Focused entirely on sketching out his characters, playwright Ben Weatherill studiously avoids moments of drama. In the first act, we inexplicably skip over the first significant escalation in the two men's burgeoning relationship. In the second, the couple almost has an argument over a serious difference of opinion, but they ultimately agree to disagree. Weatherill's meandering script has some nice moments of humour – though too many punchlines involve fat-shaming Frank's dog. There are plenty of promising themes here too, though none are explored sufficiently. When controversial academic Percy writes a book proposing radical responses to the climate crisis, he is publicly vilified, and his speaking arrangements are abruptly cancelled. Later scenes touch on the overstretched state of the NHS; the two men wait hours for an ambulance and one receives a late diagnosis due to a misplaced biopsy. Allam and McKellen are wonderfully watchable, sharing an easy, believable chemistry and wringing laughs and bittersweet emotion from the intentionally mundane dialogue. McKellen's witty, intellectual Percy is by turns dry and charming, prickly and tender, but prone to lashing out when he feels he's losing control. When his health begins to fail, he crumples, becoming doddery and distracted, almost childlike in his fragility. Allam's Frank is the more reserved of the two, but also the more compassionate. Holding his emotions tightly in check at first, he opens up gradually, and by the end of the play is wearing his heart on his sleeve, freed from either shame or need. Allam makes the journey feel clear and completely plausible. Mathias keeps the slowly paced production on just the right side of sentimentality. Poignant moments are balanced by a handful of fun set pieces – a karaoke sequence is pulled off with particular flair – and the whole production is suffused with a mood of elegiac hopefulness. Morgan Large's pretty set features a circular, multilevel deck of wooden beams. Understated use of a revolve sees a number of wooden plinths slickly realigned into new configurations to suggest various indoor and outdoor locations, while the rear wall splits open to create a window on to a visually striking still image of lush green woodland where Frank and Percy's dogs run and play together, always just out of sight.

WhatsOnStage (***) Written by Mickey Jo Boucher
"Dogs find the people who need them", reads the poster advertising the world premiere of Ben Weatherill's new play Frank and Percy at Windsor's Theatre Royal (the play then transfers to Theatre Royal Bath). It transpires that this is scarcely a play about dogs (here offstage, barking plot devices), but instead depicts the relationship that blooms between their owners, the titular Frank and Percy. And while dogs might find the people who need them, Weatherill is rightfully more interested in what happens when those people unexpectedly find each other. While walking their four-legged friends on Hampstead Heath, Frank and Percy meet, adjust their hearing aids and exchange pleasantries. Their interaction is good-natured but brief as they, being both British and outdoors, discuss the weather, but when Percy returns on a subsequent visit with the gift of a spare umbrella, a connection has already ignited between the two. The lonely gentlemen, one bereaved and one divorced, find comfort in each other's company and arrive at a considerable closeness via a number of meetings on different configurations of Morgan Large's adaptable set. This graduation of a friendship to a romantic relationship is witnessed in believable, if fragmented scenes penned with considerable wit. Very possibly inspired by a mid-pandemic fondness for everyday interactions, Ben Weatherill has united a pair of dog-walking strangers in order to consider how these most mundane of encounters could be entirely transformative. Chiefly among the successes of this script from the talented Weatherill is his depiction of its characters simply as people, with no presumption that that ought to be preceded by the word 'old'. Frank and Percy experience passion, grief, and pride with a satisfying shamelessness – riotously readying themselves for Frank's first Pride parade, suitably rainbow-clad. Then comes a climate change subplot – which feels a little out of place. That two men should be depicted as at odds over a problem that will be experienced more acutely by the next generation in favour of any of the issues that affect the LGBTQ+ community is a puzzling choice. Both opinionated individuals with considerable life experience, it's difficult to believe that this intellectual opposition is the only sticking point in an otherwise serene relationship. The production sees director Sean Mathias reunited with stage titans Ian McKellen and Roger Allam, having previously led the pair in Aladdin at the Old Vic almost two decades ago. Fresh from another pantomime's nationwide tour, McKellen bristles with an endearing stubbornness while Allam's portrait of a man coming to terms with the newly realised dimensions of his sexuality and identity in later life is profoundly moving. After one of the most illustrious careers in acting, it is also hugely rewarding to see McKellen play a character who is not just overtly gay but declaratively and unapologetically so in a play that centres a homosexual relationship. Ultimately, every conceivable drop of charm is squeezed from this good idea of a play, with the end product feeling just a little protracted. While it is a reality of age, the looming drama of various medical emergencies feels manufactured to justify the end of a tensionless first act and any need for a second. But it's an appealingly comfortable watch, written with a gentle sincerity and played with considerable tenderness.

****INFINITY music PHILIP GLASS libretto/producer/co-director ARTURO BÉJAR producer/co-director NIKKI APPINO live sound mix DAN BORA lights/video design JORGE COUSINEAU director ADRIENNE WHITE with TARA HUGO vocalist, LAVINIA MEIJER harp, STEPHEN HIGGINS piano, MARIE SCHREER violin, KAY STEPHEN viola, RAPHAEL LANG cello

Blanche Marvin Critique
A very moving and absorbing evening under the golden hands of Philip Glass. Read the reviews! Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

The Stage (****) Written by Edward Bhesania
Style, grace and humanity. New opera by Philip Glass that reminisces about family life. Now 86, Philip Glass is still known as a minimalist composer, decades after his textbook minimalist pieces of the 1970s and 1980s. But he prefers to be regarded as a theatre composer: he has, after all, written more than 25 operas, not to mention more than 40 film scores. Operatically, Glass is especially known for his triptych of portraits of Einstein, Gandhi and the pharaoh Akhnaten, joined more recently by musings on other figures, including Christopher Columbus and Walt Disney – all staged by prominent opera houses. His new piece, here receiving its European premiere, is on a smaller scale in terms of length, performing forces and subject matter. Scored for a single narrator/singer accompanied by piano, harp and three string players, it's a sentimental, often touching ode to parenting and family life. The musical idiom will be familiar to listeners of Glass' popular piano music (including his 20 Etudes, which continue to attract new interpreters) – calming, slowly shifting bare harmonies, gently animated by rocking alternating notes, curling arpeggios and the rhythmic tension of beats subdivided simultaneously into twos and threes. The pace is meditative, and only once does the volume rise to a climax. This transparency and simplicity resonate with the subject matter. It also means there's nowhere to hide for the musicians, who make the spare material work by playing it as beautifully as possible – with just the occasional awkward fingering in the strings unsettling the surface rippling. This all places the narrator's storytelling firmly in the foreground, a role that falls to Tara Hugo, a diminutive figure with broad artistic shoulders. An established Glass collaborator, she slips seamlessly between speech and singing (nothing as self-conscious as 'song') in recounting tales of family life. The final element is the projection of home-video footage – grainy, jerky and intimate – drawing us into family events and holidays, and focusing particularly on the children. Hugo falters a little when reaching for the highest notes, but any momentary awkwardness quickly passes. What endures is the style, grace and humanity of her performance, the feeling that you're only a coffee table apart from her. As narrator, she recalls her father, who became a medic after his young daughter died while waiting for the doctor to reach their rural location. She reminisces about her upbringing and about being a parent, recounting the time her son asked: "Is infinity odd or even?". To which the answer was: "I don't know, what do you think?". The real question of the opera, it seems, is how do you bring your kids up to be happy, healthy and independent? The equally uncertain answer is that parents, most of the time, just do the best they can. And most of time, that turns out to be good enough.

Guardian (**) Written by Andrew Clements
Strangely insubstantial family drama from Philip Glass. Singer and actor Tara Hugo delivers a series of spoken word reminiscences backed by an underwhelming score in a piece that verges on the self-indulgent and downright sentimental. A deeply moving and personal exploration of the searing complexities of life, parenting and being parented," promised the publicity for Philip Glass's latest work to reach Europe. Infinity has a libretto by the photographer and film-maker Arturo Béjar, who, with Nikki Appino, also co-directs this strangely insubstantial show, which features the singer and actor Tara Hugo, a regular Glass collaborator. Hugo delivers a series of reminiscences in an affectionate, sometimes slightly ironic tone that's not unlike some of David Sedaris's tales. Whether these tangled stories of families and the changing relationships between their generations are real or imagined is never made obvious. Neither is it clear whether the grainy home movies of family parties and holidays that are screened behind the performance "go" with the anecdotes – perhaps depicting the parents and children mentioned in the narration – or whether they just provide some visual element in what otherwise seems a rather long and uneventful 55-minute recitation. The music, played by a tactfully amplified ensemble of piano (Stephen Higgins), harp (Lavinia Meijer) and string trio (members of the United Strings of Europe), is very much a subsidiary element in all this. It provides a gentle, rippling backdrop to Hugo's spoken word in the repeated motifs and lapping arpeggios of Glass's best vamp-till-ready mode, while the songs dotted through the narration flit between chant and fully fledged phrases. But the score never really takes charge; like the flickering images on screen, it's always part of the background. The tone of the piece is bittersweet, and while for some it might evoke feelings of warmth and cosiness, reinforcing their belief in the complex strengths of family life, for others it might well seem indulgent and downright sentimental.

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

CORONET

****DANCE OF DEATH by NATIONAL THEATRE OF NORWAY writer AUGUST STRINDBERG director MARIT MOUM AUNE composer NILS PETTER MOLVÆR décor/costume EVEN BØRSUM lights AGNETHE TELLEFSEN sound BENDIK TOMING translator KJELL ASKILDSEN hair/makeup EVA SHARP with PIA TJELTA wife alice, JON ØIGARDEN husband edgar and THORBJØRN HARR kurt

Blanche Marvin Critique

The international companies that perform at the Coronet are usually very exciting because they bring a view outside of British theatre to classical productions. It was exciting and absorbing to follow this production which was an enlightened experience. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

British Theatre Guide: Written by Vera Liber
Maeterlinckian symbolism and Munch's angst find their way into Strindberg's play, which dissects the everyday hell that is marriage and other people. He wrote Dance of Death in 1900—it feels personal. It is. His existentialist legacy lingers in Huis Clos (1944) and Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf (1962). And many a film and television drama—provide your own allusions… On a fortified island in the Swedish archipelago, where a trip to Copenhagen is a trip to the real world, a couple are marking their 25th wedding anniversary. Celebrating would be the wrong word. Bitter, angry words are spoken, recriminations fly. He is a ranting tyrant, a captain who will never make major because all on the island hate him. She gave up an acting career. Trapped in a cocoon of their own making, children estranged, hatred, a possessive hatred, is what they feed on. Prometheus bound and livers eaten. It is a patriarchal society and Edgar plays that up to the hilt. Alice has her female wiles, which she turns on Kurt, her cousin, who visits them reluctantly. He has business on the island and former history with both of them. Edgar caused his divorce and the loss of Kurt's children in a custody battle. No love lost there, then. Edgar has health issues, a dodgy heart, which he uses to full dramatic controlling effect. Jon Øigarden seems to have stepped out of an absurdist comedy to play him, collapsing in cataleptic pratfalls, shouting in Norwegian and American English. It feels contemporary yet they are in period costumes. Are they for real or playacting? Could be both. The attention is mostly on him. And he's a prodigious liar, winding Kurt up about his son and Alice about his will. Arrogant, too: "I exist, therefore God exists". Kurt and Alice have a sexual encounter, but mild Kurt shocks with his vampiric bite and she turns against him, deciding he's a hypocrite and her husband, whom she hates with a passion, is the real man. Make of that what you will. A metaphor for life: love, hate, it's all the same thing. We are all in hell, in purgatory. Looking around at the state of the world today, Strindberg is not wrong: we are all in A Dance of Death. Performed in Norwegian with English subtitles (translation Kjell Askildsen), The National Theatre of Norway, directed by Marit Moum Aune, in a new trimmed version of about 85 minutes with no interval, ought be tight, but feels epic. There are plenty of laughs of recognition from the audience, but maybe I've had enough of bitterness and hate, for it doesn't rattle my cage. Talking of cages—no birds in cages on the set, but plenty of stuffed wildlife. It needs to be more eviscerating, more savage. Øigarden, shrill in his pathologically manic hatred, tries to evoke pity with his astounding faints. Pia Tjelta's Alice, in period costume, could have stepped out of a Munch painting—and she does step out of the play to address us. Thorbjørn Harr's Kurt is pure Ibsen, conflicted, confused. More John Osborne kitchen sink vitriol is needed. Nils Petter Molvær's musical score ramps up the atmosphere, and Even Børsum's set, lit by Agnethe Tellefsen, is the best thing about the production. A black frame of a house on a patchy ground of seaside grasses and plants, with a back projection of misty blue, it tells you all you need to know. Is it real or surreal? A telegraph machine, their only contact with the outside world, ticks and clicks above their heads. The furniture is sparse: chaise longue, table, chair, drinks side table. It is enough. Kurt swings off the house frame. No walls to bounce off… Portrait of a stale marriage, twenty-five years locked into a symbiotic hatred, it is the fuel that keeps them alive. What misery, that man hands on to man, "it deepens like a coastal shelf". She says she will laugh when he dies; he says he is happy to die. Is it bravado or fear? The cycle of life: the opening scene is the same as the last scene—what's for supper… and on we sail into the abyss. But we are in it already. Are they already dead? Coincidentally, or is it something in the air, Dance of Death, directed by Conor McPherson, is on Radio 3 this Sunday evening. I shall be at a funeral.

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

CORONET

***LOVEFOOL writer/director GINTARE presented by THÉÂTRE NATIONAL DU LUXEMBOURG original lights DANIEL SESTAK london lights ALEX FOREY costume DENISE SCHUMMAN, SHENIA LOUIS, YOLANDE SCHMIT sound/video DAVID GASPAR with KRISTIN WINTERS

Blanche Marvin Critique
A delightful evening where charm is the master. Important to read the reviews. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

Everything Theatre (**) Written by Dave B
The evening opens with a sex education video (designed by David Gaspar), a close enough parody of one that for a moment I assumed it had really come straight from the archives. It sets the tone for some of the satire to come, so close to real that it bites, and it is impossible not to laugh (and perhaps cringe) at the memories it brings back. Lovefool is a one-woman play with Grace (Kristin Winters) looking for love: the kind of love that could easily inspire a chart-topping pop song, with lyrics so catchy that they'd instantly resonate with anyone who hears even a snippet. One evening, masturbating while scrolling through Tinder, Grace swipes right with Oliver, an Icelandic musician. Her multitasking fingers provide good comedy and there are a few laughs with a very candid Grace. Winters brings a lot here – the dry and dark comedy, but also the constant undercurrent of pain and damage. Her relationship with Oliver becomes toxic, with Grace's descriptions clearly showing how little he thinks of her and how much he takes advantage. But this doesn't seem to bother Grace too much. It is what she expects, and she wants to please. She always wants to be in love – but then she always drinks and cuts herself too. The audience is

on the Coronet stage, with close rows of chairs in an arc around a smaller raised platform. This close seating brings us into Grace's therapist's office and into her confessional booth, adding a level of intimacy through the staging. We hear her therapist, her priest and a casting director through a recorded voiceover. The use of 90s anthems like Haddaway's 'What Is Love' initially suggests a lighter moment but bring back Grace's memories of childhood abuse. A discussion with her therapist on songs discloses wider points about the lyrics of so many massive mainstream hits having women being subservient to men or having been written by women about the abuse they have received. Towards the end, Winters steps off the stage and directs questions to the audience as a whole. While the play addresses important themes surrounding abuse, depression, and suicidal ideation, these broader points feel somewhat contrived and disconnected from Grace herself. They don't seamlessly integrate into the flow of the play, making it feel like a forced inclusion rather than a natural progression. Moreover, it feels like a missed opportunity not to acknowledge the likelihood that those who do not raise their hands to indicate a connection with these themes likely do have a connection through friends and family but may simply not be aware of it, or be unwilling to speak. Lovefool has some strange omissions, pieces which seem set up but are then not followed through. One such example is Grace's ability to afford life's necessities, like filling the fridge with booze and paying rent, which seems strangely at odds with her professional challenges as a struggling actor. Early on, her OCD rituals are briefly mentioned twice, hinting at a deeper exploration of her character. However, these rituals are curiously abandoned and never revisited or depicted again throughout the play, leaving a sense of incompleteness. It feels like a missed opportunity to delve into another aspect of Grace's life that could have added layers of complexity, especially when combined with her trauma. The evening is helped by powerful work from Winters, including a striking scene with large flashcards as a very silent Grace displays her trauma, and then a strong ending as Grace's journey brings her some healing and strength, but overall very little felt new or fresh here.

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

MARYLEBONE THEATRE

***GRENFELL: SYSTEM FAILURE editor RICHARD NORTON-TAYLOR, NICOLAS KENT director NICOLAS KENT décor MIKI JABLKOWSKA, MATT ENGLAND lights MATT ENGLAND sound/video ANDY GRAHAM costume CARLY BROWNBRIDGE with SHAHZAD ALI hisam choucair, MADELEINE BOWYER deborah french, NICHOLAS CHAMBERS adrian pargeter, NIGEL BETTS brian martin, RON COOK richard millet qc, HOWARD CROSSLEY eric pickles, SOPHIE DUVAL sarah colwell, DEREK ELROY leslie thomas qc, SALLY GILES kate grange qc, TANVEER GHANI imran khan qc, DAVID MICHAELS andy roe/nick hurd, THOMAS WHEATLEY sir martin moore bick

Blanche Marvin Critique
Verbatim theatre done at its best on the great tragedy that befell London in the making of a tomb from a block of flats of 700 people. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

The Guardian (****) Written by David Jays
Staged a few minutes away from Grenfell Tower, this play drawn from the inquiry into the 2017 inferno that took 72 lives has audience members who experienced the disaster firsthand and have seen accountability avoided for causes and responses. "They've got away with it," a survivor sitting close to me says in the interval. The system, they add, "is not set up for us". That's why the official inquiry – bringing truth to light and due to report later this year – is so crucial. Since 1994, writer Richard Norton-Taylor and director Nicolas Kent have created a series of forensic tribunal plays. Grenfell: Value Engineering (2021) distilled the inquiry's first phase; this follow-up details the endemic responsibility dodging – commercial and regulatory – that nurtured calamity. A civil servant claims "fire safety is a very subjective subject"; petulant Lord Pickles (played by Howard Crossley) huffs at interrogation. Questioning is led by Richard Millett, counsel to the inquiry. Ron Cook, a terrier of an actor, gets his teeth into squirming and stonewalling witnesses, quoting damning group chats ("all we do is lie in here") or insisting that "science was secretly perverted for financial gain". Regulators, research bodies, government – all swerve apology or responsibility until pressed. The play text's afterword quotes Millett's excoriating closing speech about the pervasive buck-passing: "the merry-go-round turns still". Norton-Taylor and Kent choose to let audiences draw their own conclusions, so don't stage this speech. Theirs is an almost anti-theatrical theatre. Its setting is bland wood and grey flooring, its language is sober. Rare striking phrases resound: a barrister declaring that lives "cannot be sacrificed at the altar of austerity" or a fire chief lamenting "an article of public shame". The previous play didn't feature testimony from the bereaved. Here, we hear a feeling account read by Tanveer Ghani about "Saber" Neda, who lost his life after turning back to help his neighbours, and the play is bookended with evidence from Hisam Choucair (Shahzad Ali). He describes how his search for his family was unaided, even obstructed, and is the only witness to suggest racism as a factor. He also questions the missing accountability: "how these crooks are still hiding". Grenfell: System Failure is at the Playground theatre, London, until 25 February; the Tabernacle, London, 27 February-12 March; and Marylebone theatre, London, 14-26 March.

Evening Standard (****) Written by Nick Curtis
Any politician who talks blithely of "deregulation" or a "bonfire" of red tape should be forced to see this powerful piece of verbatim theatre, drawn from the public inquiry into the Grenfell Tower fire. Director Nicolas Kent and adapter Richard Norton-Taylor attribute the 72 deaths in the 2017 conflagration to sharp practice by those who refurbished the building, and official incompetence: but also to the paring back of safety controls and defunding of

the emergency services. It's an evening to fill you with cold rage. This is the ninth verbatim play the two men have created together and the second they have distilled from the official Grenfell record. Like the first, which had the subtitle Value Engineering and appeared in 2021, it's defiantly undramatic. At desks and lecterns, lawyers methodically question those implicated in or devastated by the fire. There are two lighting states: on and off. The script embraces lots of knotty detail about cladding, combustible insulation and "compartmentalization", plus dollops of careful legalese and documentary cross referencing. Some of the actors refer to screens or notes. It doesn't matter. It feels real, and the unvarnished testimony is horrifically compelling. We hear from Hisam Choucair, who lost six relatives in the inferno. He bleakly notes that his employer, TFL, dealt better with four unexpected terrorist bombs at different locations on 7/7 than the entire official apparatus did with a preventable – and predicted - fire in North Kensington. Imran Khan KC tells us about Mohamed Neda, a former Afghan army officer, who jumped to his death, overwhelmed by smoke. His wife and son, who he ushered to safety, stepped on corpses on the way down the building's only emergency stairwell. Officials who were complicit in mismanagement and cost-cutting mostly have the decency to appear ashamed. Apart from irascible former Communities and Local Government Minister Eric (now Lord) Pickles, who is portrayed as being annoyed the inquiry is disrupting his schedule, and gets the number of fatalities wrong. Andrew Roe of the London Fire Brigade describes the atrocity and the mishandled aftermath as "the most appalling example of institutional failure… in recent British history". Nick Hurd, appointed as the minister responsible for the police and fire service two days before the fire, says: "I was part of a system that failed." The lethal, forensic dryness of Ron Cook as chief interrogator Richard Millet QC is tempered by the mildness of Thomas Wheatley as Inquiry Chairman Sir Martin Moore-Bick. But really, it's the job of the actors, the director and the writer/editor to get out of the way and let the shocking material speak for itself. And this quietly devastating show hits in the way that news reports simply can't and in a way that the Inquiry's report, due out later this year, probably won't. Playing in three London theatres, two of them close to the burned-out tower, it's a devastating homage to those who died and a plea for eventual justice. To steal a line from Death of a Salesman: attention must be paid.

*emptyspace*STUDIO

CURRENT **London Theareviews**

WYNDHAM'S THEATRE

***THE OLD MAN & THE POOL writer/performer MIKE BIRBIGLIA director SETH BARRISH décor BEOWULF BORITT costume TONI-LESLIE JAMES lights AARON COPP projections HANA S. KIM sound ROB BETTLE for SOUND QUIET TIME

Blanche Marvin Critique
It's a one man story of a comic chain of events performed by a single actor. This one-man show had its ups and downs but on the whole, was a mediocre production. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

Guardian (****) Written by Brian Logan
Where other midlife male standups splash in the shallows of domesticity, dinner parties and feeling tired, Birbiglia dives right into family, death and the meaning of life. There's no shortage of standup on the depredations of middle age. Transferring from Broadway, Mike Birbiglia's The Old Man and the Pool is a thing apart, and not only because it barely classifies as standup. Birbiglia is a "comic storyteller" by trade, his shows precision-engineered, driven by narrative, and uninterested in the pretence of spontaneity. And, without stinting on the jokes, his sensibility is as poetic as it is comic. Where other midlife male standups splash in the shallows of domesticity, dinner parties and feeling tired, Birbiglia – on a cool blue set tiled to resemble his local swimming pool – plunges into the deep end of mortality, families and the meaning of life. He does so with a featherlight touch, in a show that begins with the Massachusetts man taking a pulmonary test six years ago. "If I was going just by this," says his doctor, "I'd say you're having a heart attack right now." This is not good news for rumpled, fortysomething Mike, whose dad and grandad both had heart attacks aged 56. And so begins his journey – physical and philosophical – into preserving and extending his own life. Encouraged to swim daily, he recalls unlovely childhood memories of trips to the YMCA pool, all 80 gallons of urine and "a jungle of penises" in the changing room. With his wife, he writes a will. With his daughter, he reads bedtime stories. With his parents, he starts treating goodbyes as if they might be his last. The show spans several years of Birbiglia's life, as he returns for further tests, and adds type 2 diabetes to his swelling roster of afflictions. It's never self-pitying: Birbiglia is the hapless everyman butt of his most of his own jokes, like the one about liking pizza so much, "I get excited when I see the word 'plaza'." He does not finally mine the autobiographical material for especially profound conclusions. But The Old Man and the Pool is a lovely restatement of savour-the-moment principles, and you never feel less than carefully held by Birbiglia, whose meticulous, unflustered, wryly self-amused comedy is – well, not to die for, but to live for. 12 September – 7 October 2023

Evening Standard (****) Written by Bruce Dessau
Mike Birbiglia is what I call a straddler. Part stand-up, part storyteller. The Brooklyn-based monologist specialises in autobiographical pieces, putting his whimsical imprint on this distinctive hybrid. And he doesn't shy away from big topics. His latest show, The Old Man & The Pool, tackles mortality and certainly makes a splash. It begins with a breathing test that does not bode well. The doctor worries that Birbiglia is having a heart attack and packs him off to a cardiologist. After more examinations he is urged to change his lifestyle and exercise more. The Old Man... is the tale of how Birbiglia turned his life around. It is also about telling the people you care about that you love them and making connections, as well as being about seeing an elderly gentleman butt naked in the swimming pool changing room. Birbiglia interlaces past and present so deftly it appears effortless. He recalls swimming as a boy in Massachusetts and being horrified by the stench of chlorine. Strong enough, he jokes, to dispose of a corpse in the water. He starts swimming again, even though he is not cut out for it. He doesn't have a swimmer's body, more of a "drowner's body". But he does have motivation. His father and grandfather both had heart attacks at 56. He is in his mid-40s with a young daughter. Birbiglia fans will spot references from past sets, most notably that he sleeps in a sleeping bag to prevent habitual sleepwalking – he once jumped out of a second floor window. He worries that if his heart doesn't kill him nocturnal wandering might get there first. There are other health problems too. Diabetes pitches up to add insult to injury and he has to cut back on his beloved pizza. He has a persuasive way of describing his cravings – healthy food goes to bed early, pizza stays up late – noting that particularly when written in capitals the lettering even look like pizza slices. This might sound morbid, but Birbiglia has a sublime lightness of touch, gliding seamlessly from anecdote to anecdote, subtle physicality adding extra comedy. He performs against a blue backdrop which occasionally alters to illustrate the narrative, lapping waves or cliff-drop graph that confirms exactly how bad his breathing was. At times the show, directed by Seth Barrish, feels a little overscripted, but towards the end it loosens up as Birbiglia engages with the audience. Playful crowdwork ensures that everyone is onside as the narrative builds to an exquisite finish. Dive into this virtuoso performance and enjoy.

Time Out (***) Written by Tim Bano
Skilled storytelling from great American raconteur Birbiglia. If you put the stand-up career and the medical records of Mike Birbiglia side by side they'd match pretty perfectly. The storytelling comedian – more at home in theatres like Wyndham's or the Vivian Beaumont on Broadway than in comedy clubs - has made a living out of almost dying, whether that's his 2008 show 'Sleepwalk with Me', which detailed the sleep disorder that caused him to sleepwalk out of a second storey window, or the bladder cancer he beat when he was just 20. Now 45, as he settles into middle age the medical complaints are perhaps less interesting – diabetes and cardiac concerns – but in 'The Old Man & The Pool', Birbiglia attempts something cleverer than boring us to our own early demises by detailing his every twinge and discharge: he finds a sense of silliness and a sense of profundity and forces them to sit side by side. Skilled storytelling from great American raconteur Birbiglia If you put the stand-up career and the medical records of Mike Birbiglia side by side they'd match pretty perfectly. The storytelling comedian – more at home in theatres like Wyndham's or the Vivian Beaumont on Broadway than in comedy clubs - has made a living out of almost dying, whether that's his 2008 show 'Sleepwalk with Me', which detailed the sleep disorder that caused him to sleepwalk out of a second storey window, or the bladder cancer he beat when he was just 20. Now 45, as he settles into middle age the medical complaints are perhaps less interesting – diabetes and cardiac concerns – but in 'The Old Man & The Pool', Birbiglia attempts something cleverer than boring us to our own early demises by detailing his every twinge and discharge: he finds a sense of silliness and a sense of profundity and forces them to sit side by side.

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

MENIER CHOCOLATE FACTORY

***PACIFIC OVERTURES music/lyrics STEPHEN SONDHEIM book JOHN WEIDMAN additional material HUGH WHEELER director MATTHEW WHITE décor PAUL FARNSWORTH costume AYAKO MAEDA lights PAUL PYANT sound GREGORY CLARKE choreography ASHLEY NOTTINGHAM musical supervision CATHERINE JAYES musical direction PAUL BOGAEV orchestrations JONATHAN TUNICK hair/make-up WAKANA YOSHIHARA video LEO FLINT traditional japanese movement/cultural consultant YOU-RI YAMANAKA with JON CHEW reciter, KANAKO NAKANO tamate, SAORI ODA shogun/madam, TAKURO OHNO kayama, JOAQUIN PEDRO VALDES manjiro, LUORAN DING, MASASHI FUJIMOTO, RACHEL HAYNE PICAR, EU JIN HWANG, ABEL LAW, ETHAN LE PHONG, JOJO MEREDITH, PATRICK MUNDAY, SARIO SOLOMON, JOY TAN, LEE V G and IVERSON YABUT

Blanche Marvin Critique
It was a mixture of invention and exaggeration. The actual physical production had many unique production numbers but the whole does not make up for the individual numbers that were performed. Read the reviews. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

Guardian (****) Written by Arifa Akbar
Co-production with Osaka company brings 1976 study of American imperialism arriving in Japan to subtle, funny life. When Stephen Sondheim's 1976 musical premiered on Broadway, it was staged in grand kabuki style. By

contrast, this Umeda Arts Theater co-production, already mounted in Tokyo and Osaka, goes small – and beautiful. Directed by Matthew White, the story of four 19th-century American warships that appear on the coast of Japan and open it up to westernising forces is performed straight through in under two hours. A snug traverse stage never looks tight, but is rammed with fast, funny theatricality. The music is a pleasure, too, and creates an almost physical immersion in such an intimate space, with hammering drums in moments of high drama. The staging brings great visual wit and wonder, from Ashley Nottingham's attractive choreography to Paul Farnsworth's set design. The warships first appear as paper boats held by actors, and later as a giant triangular sheet, alongside curved steel structures that look like expressionist nods to Hokusai's The Great Wave. Ayako Maeda's costumes are variously witty and exquisite, while Paul Pyant's lighting brings its own delicacy, projecting raindrops and rippling ocean water on to the floorboards. Some scenes sprint, with instant set changes but without feverishness, while there is a meditative pacing to the songs. Welcome to Kanagawa, in which a madam prepares her geishas for the arriving Americans, averts the reductive cliches of Miss Saigon with its tongue-in-cheek humour. Someone in a Tree, capturing an elderly man's memory of his younger self, is a delight. The reciter (Jon Chew, shrewd and agile) looks like he has stepped out of a boyband. The friendship between samurai Kayama (Takuro Ohno), who is drawn towards western culture, and Manjiro (Joaquin Pedro Valdes), who takes the opposite trajectory, has a restrained affection even when the men fall out. The shogun is played with a gender twist by Saori Oda, who brings comic relish but never becomes outrightly clownish. The book by John Weidman, with additional material from Hugh Wheeler, leaves itself vulnerable to charges of cultural appropriation. As Weidman points out in the programme, this piece of Japanese history was dramatised by "two upper-middle-class white men living in New York". Yet it does not sound thudding or simplistic, but sparkles with knowing humour around cultural stereotypes. The scene in which Please Hello is sung as French, Dutch, Russian and American admiralty woo Japan into trade treaties is a blast – the musical is worth watching for its finely choreographed comedy alone. Arguably a show about the US's aggressive cultural imperialism, this production does more than show us this alone, and there are charges of "barbarianism" from both sides. Although set at a specific historical moment, marking the birth of Japan's economic ambition in global trading, the book touches more universally on perceptions of the outsider and assimilation, as well as notions of cultural purity and violent nationalism ("Japan will be Japan again," says one character, defending Japanese tradition from western influence). It is thrilling to see this lesser-performed Sondheim piece staged with such zest and imagination. It's one of the most original and ebullient musicals in town. 25th November 2023 – 24th February 2024

Evening Standard (****) Written by Nick Curtis
Pacific Overtures at Menier Chocolate Factory review: this Sondheim revival is a wonderful revelation. Unexpected? Yes, but don't let that put you off: this musical is a bijou delight. This is the Stephen Sondheim musical I least expected to see revived, let alone as nimbly as in this thrilling co-production between the Menier and Osaka's Umeda Arts Theater. Written in 1976 with a book by John Weidman, it tells how the US forced hermetic, shogunate Japan to open up to commerce in 1853. Told from the Asian perspective, its score and staging fuse 20th-century western and classic Japanese performance genres, including the declamatory style of kabuki. Wait, stop, don't go away - Matthew White's production is a revelation. This is the chamber version with just ten musical numbers that Sondheim and Weidman created with Hugh Wheeler in 2017 and it bowls merrily along. We go from the opening paean to tradition, The Advantages of Floating in the Middle of the Sea, to the hectic, closing number Next – which anticipates skyscrapers, modern warfare and in this staging AI - in 105-interval-free minutes. As epitomised by these two songs, the score is full of riffs and circular references. The music is beautifully intricate, the lyrics wittily wrought to fit the cadences of formal Japanese address or rude Western pidgin. White's production, unrolling like a scroll on a traverse stage, is exquisitely designed by Paul Farnsworth (set) and Ayako Maeda (costumes), and includes the prow of a battleship rendered in silk. The singing is dramatic or quietly reflective rather than melodious, and the acting broadly comic. But then, this chunk of geo-political history has a funny streak as wide as Tokyo harbour. When four US gunboats turn up here the shogun (Saori Oda, doubling neatly as the Madam of the geisha tea house) instructs hapless samurai Kayama (Takuro Ohno, stirringly good) to tell the Yanks to go home. They don't, but with the help of Americanised fisherman Manjiro (a charismatic Joaquin Pedro Valdes) he fudges a compromise that saves everyone's face. They become friends and receive advancement from the child emperor. But when the Americans come back and crack Japan open for other empires – in the hilariously sophisticated song Please Hello – their fates express the pitfalls of globalization and isolationism. Jon Chew as the Reciter, a narrator sporting the punky pompadour of a gameshow host, has a fine singing voice and conducts matters with a remote control that conjures images of flying cranes or the blood spatter of samurai sword slashes. The shadow of cultural stereotyping that hangs over the show is lessened since most of the cast are of Asian origin and it has already been performed in Tokyo and Osaka, in Japanese. This is the first revival of Sondheim's singular, peculiar musical since his death in 2021 and it is a wonderful, bijou surprise.

Time Out (****) Written by Tom Wicker
Nimble, imaginative Anglo-Japanese take on Sondheim's screechingly high concept musical about the Westernisation of Japan. There's a lot that's unlikely about 'Pacific Overtures'. First, it's a musical about the westernisation of Japan, starting in 1853: not your standard plot. Second, the book, music and lyrics are written from the perspective of the Japanese by two famously white New Yorkers – John Weidman and Stephen Sondheim. Since making its Broadway debut in 1976, this has been one of Sondheim's least-performed shows. In part, this is because it was ahead of its time in actually requiring an all-Asian cast. In the third of the Menier Chocolate Factory's trilogy of Weidman-Sondheim musicals – following 'Assassins' and 'Road Show' – director Matthew White's staging uses the shortened 2017 version of the musical. A co-production with Japanese company Umeda Arts Theater, it features traditional Japanese movement and cultural consultancy provided by You-Ri Yamanaka, and dispenses with the male actors playing the women's roles. In many ways, then, 'Pacific Overtures'

has travelled a long way from where it began. And part of the experience of watching it is, to be frank, the potential cultural minefield of its existence. This is something that White's framing gestures at. As we trundle into our seats, the cast scrutinise props from the set as though they're elements in a trendy exhibit. A guard warns: 'no touching'. As the narrator, a puckishly charismatic Jon Chew darts in and out, his attitude and modern dress never letting us forget that we're watching a narrative of first encounters heavily mediated by storytelling. This weaves through songs like 'Someone in a Tree', which lampshades the fact that we'll never know exactly what was said when Admiral Perry –who was in charge of the first American ships to visit the country – met the Japanese delegation. It's definitely there in one of the show's creative highlights, 'Please Hello'. Brilliantly choreographed by Ashley Nottingham as a cockeyed Gilbert & Sullivan number, various Western admirals rock up as ridiculous national parodies, gleefully torn from a satirical cartoon. The cast blaze in this explosion of camp, which tears these imperialist imposers to shreds as laughable buffoons. The show treads the line between exaggeration and seriousness pretty nimbly. The pared-down book brings into focus the tragedy of friends Kayama and Manjiro, whose differing reactions to the infiltration of Western customs tears them violently apart. And just as the score is finely textured, there is real beauty in this production's moments of painterly minimalism. I'm a white man from the south of England. I'm not best placed to say whether the show's underlying theme of Japan's cultural adulteration by the West is an overly outsider's view of a complicated, centuries-long interplay of geopolitics. But this production tackles the very specific story it's telling with imagination and wit. It's a visually arresting, unique musical that thrives on the skill of the ensemble cast that brings its cross-currents to life.

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

MENIER CHOCOLATE FACTORY

**THE THIRD MAN story GRAHAM GREENE book/lyrics DON BLACK, CHRISTOPHER HAMPTON music GEORGE FENTON director TREVOR NUNN co-director MICHAEL OAKLEY décor/costume PAUL FARNSWORTH lights EMMA CHAPMAN sound GREGORY CLARKE choreographer/movement director REBECCA HOWELL musical supervisor/musical director TAMARA SARINGER orchestrator JASON CARR with SAM UNDERWOOD holly martins, DEREK GRIFFITHS the porter, HARRY MORRISON popescu, GARY MILNER baron kurtz, EDWARD BAKER-DULY major calloway JONATHAN ANDREW HUME sergeant paine, SIMON BAILEY crabbit+, NATALIE DUNNE anna schmidt, ALAN VICARY dr winkel, RACHEL IZEN the porter's wife, CHANICE ALEXANDER-BURNETT, CRAIG BARTLEY, CASSIOPEIA BERKELEY-AGYEPONG, LEAH HARRIS, ALY MERALI, TOM STERLING, SAMANTHA THOMAS, TIM WALTON

Blanche Marvin Critique
The less said the better. This is one of the most disappointing productions where the actual book is far superior to Trevor Nunn's production which failed quite dreadfully. The Third Man was eventually found after a long and boring journey. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

Guardian (***) Written by Arifa Akbar
The Third Man: A Musical Thriller review – atmospheric and eccentric version of classic noir. The songs may not compare to the 1949 film's zither music, but the design amplifies Trevor Nunn's elegantly shadowy production. It takes courage to adapt a classic film noir for the stage, especially one with a screenplay by Graham Greene, exquisite black and white cinematography and Orson Welles' radiant charisma. Some might call it hubristic, even foolish, to add music to the mix. The surprise is that this musical version of the 1949 film, directed by Trevor Nunn, does not fall on its face. While the songs pass muster, its triumph is in its monochrome design, which seems like a black and white film come to life. Paul Farnworth's set encapsulates the look and feel of a noir together with Emma Chapman's lighting, which throws out an elegant welter of lamplight, long shadows and thrillerish effects. The story, of American hack writer, Holly Martins (Sam Underwood), arriving in the city to be given the news that this friend, Harry Lime (Simon Bailey), is dead, and following a trail to his suspected murder via Harry's melancholy lover, Anna Schmidt (Natalie Dunne), unravels in the same broken Vienna of 1947. Postwar rubble is strewn around the edges of this city, which swarms with poverty, illness and black market racketeers like Harry. George Fenton's music, with Don Black and Christopher Hampton's lyrics, has a few strong numbers – Café Mozart by Baron Kurtz, sung by Gary Milner, Paul and Claus, by Dunne – but many more anodyne ones. None can compare to the zither music of the film either. The incidental sound (designed by Gregory Clarke) is more effective in conjuring tension, but on the whole, the story does not have the speed and grip it requires. The drama hinges on a big reveal around the fate of Harry and the sight of him does not bring the same intake of breath as Welles in the film, although Bailey has a similar rascally charm. Underwood, as Holly, seems to be in a permanent state of unravelling, with a large repertoire of facial tics and a wobbly singing voice, though he is lovable. Dunne is a formidable singer and belts out some catchy numbers, although Paul and Claus is too cheerfully out of keeping for the morose character of Anna. Black and Hampton's book keeps the film's eccentricities (although the maniacal cockatiel does not quite pay off) and capitalises on humour. There are witty lines and Greene's riff on hack writers like Holly, and satirical take-downs of literature snobs, works well here. Ultimately, the production is let down by pace, which feels oddly sleepy but there are gorgeous aesthetics and plenty of atmosphere to see us through. The Third Man: A Musical Thriller is at Menier Chocolate Factory, London, until 9 September

Evening Standard (**) Written by Nick Curtis

The Third Man at the Menier Chocolate Factory review: please, not everything has to be turned into a musical. The creative team has a record of turning unlikely subjects into musical gold. Not this time. Sometimes I feel like walking around London's theatreland in a cowled monk's habit, ringing a bell and waving a sign that says: "Not Everything Has to be Turned Into a Musical." A case in point is this lacklustre adaptation of Graham Greene and Carol Reed's 1949 film noir about betrayal in shattered postwar Vienna, which starred Orson Welles as the elusive, immoral Harry Lime, pursued by an insistent zither soundtrack. Pretty much everything that makes the movie great – the wearily cynical performances, the stark-shadowed set pieces in the sewer and on the Ferris wheel, the slow unravelling of illusions – is diminished by the transition to the stage and the addition of songs. There seems to be no shape to George Fenton's score, which mostly consists of fragmentary themes that never develop. The exceptions are the strong numbers, mostly romantic and mournful but one of them lewdly comic, in the style of Kander and Ebb's Cabaret, that are allocated to Natalie Dunne as Lime's lover Anna: the character has been expediently changed from an actress to a club singer. The book and lyrics are by Christopher Hampton and Don Black, so they are responsible for the laborious turn the dialogue takes here and the "Lime-Crime-Slime" rhymes. On the plus side it's beautifully designed by Paul Farnsworth, in monochrome but with splashes of colour in the nightclub scenes. And it's handsomely mounted by director Trevor Nunn, who works some familiar magic and reworks some old tricks. But the whole thing feels under-prepared, over-emphatic and frankly misconceived. The plot is, mostly, familiar. Writer of pulp westerns Holly Martins has been summoned to Vienna by his old friend Harry but is told on arrival that Harry has died in a road accident. In the film Holly is portrayed as wry and world-weary by Joseph Cotten. Here, Sam Underwood makes him a sobbing, cringing hot mess. Comedy Austrians Winkel and Kurz ward him off with silly accents ("I voss not ZERE") and stiff gesticulations. Sinister Romanian Popescu darkly threatens him. Brisk British military policemen Calloway and Paine patronise him. Anna is aghast when he falls for her: frankly, anyone would be. But Holly blunders sweatily on, bashing into the set and careering through one quadrant of the audience, a clumsy expression of the way Vienna was divided among the four allied powers. The subtle exploration in the original of the moral accommodations made by Harry, Holly and Anna here become starkly black and white. Dunne sings beautifully but her Anna is barely given a character. Simon Bailey unwisely riffs on Welles's velvety delivery and the pouts and smirks that flitted across his face, when – spoiler alert! – Harry appears. At this point the hitherto ignored zither tune is hammered out on a piano. Some of the choric movement in Nunn's staging recalls his more successful 2018 production of Fiddler on the Roof. But this show has much more pointless running around and shouting in the half-dark. The songs are inserted into the story rather than growing organically out of it. You can't blame anyone for trying. The creative team here have a record, together and separately, of turning unlikely subjects into musical gold. Not this time, though.

Time Out: Written By Tim Bano
Dreadful, pointless musical desecration of the film noir masterpiece. There is no shortage of musicals that have tried to cash in on a famous film. Currently in the West End we've got 'The Lion King', 'Frozen', 'Back to the Future', 'Mrs Doubtfire' and 'Groundhog Day'. But there's a big difference between those adaptations and this piece by Don Black, Christopher Hampton and George Fenton, directed by Trevor Nunn, which is that those cash-grabs are upfront about the reason for their existence (viz. grabbing cash). The tragedy of 'The Third Man' – not in the West End but in the 200-odd seat Menier Chocolate Factory – is that it aspires to artistry and so fails all the more. It has the unenviable quality of a musical that flopped in the '80s and is now being revived in a curio of a production just to work out if it really was as bad as everyone remembers. Except it's brand new, and it's genuinely one of the worst musicals I've ever seen. It starts, obviously, with variations on the famous zither theme from the impeccable 1949 Carol Reed/Graham Greene film while an inexplicably large ensemble of Austrian poor sing about how hard life is in Vienna after the war. Then the whole thing unfolds flaccidly and forgettably: double-crossing in quartered Vienna as protagonist Holly Martins tries to seek down his old friend Harry Lime who either is or isn't dead. Sam Underwood's Martins is skittish, paranoid, it's a decent performance, as is Natalie Dunne as cold love interest Anna. The rest of the cast doesn't have much to work with. This creative team has worked on some of the most famous musicals of all time – Nunn directed 'Les Mis' and 'Cats', Black and Hampton co-wrote 'Sunset Boulevard' – and yet it's like they have complete amnesia about what a musical actually is; that there needs to be a reason for a song to happen; indeed that there actually need to be songs in the first place. Fenton, known for his film and TV music, furnishes the show with an unceasing and permanently bland score, vaguely gesturing towards klezmer, which keeps forgetting to break into song. When a song does randomly and pointlessly appear, it's set to Don Black's hokey lyrics with rhymes visible from space ('At times he drove me mad, but he was the truest friend, the best I ever had'). Where the black and white film used the limits of monochrome to unforgettable effect, making the shadows in ravaged Vienna characters as much as Harry and Holly, Emma Chapman's lighting and Paul Farnsworth's costumes make this production monochrome too – grey suits, white lights – but to no effect other than imitation. There is nothing to justify its existence on stage. Pointless and boring, the best thing about 'The Third Man' is the fact that it won't make the slightest bit of difference to the legacy of the film. And in case anyone thinks it's harsh to judge the musical by the standards of the film, well it's kinder than judging the show on its own terms. You expect so much more from the creative team who have around 220 years of professional experience between them. May it sink into the Viennese sewers, with the body of Harry Lime, where they both belong.

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

WILTON'S MUSIC HALL

**SWEENEY TODD by GEORGE DIBDIN PITT adaptor JEFF CLARKE music by MICHAEL WILLIAM BALFE, JULIUS BENEDICT, HENRY BISHOP orchestral arrangement, music preparation JAMES WIDDEN director JEFF CLARKE conductor TOBY PURSER décor ELROY ASHMORE lights, production manager PAUL KNOTT wardrobe supervisor KIRSTY ROWE wardrobe KATIA ALSIANLI repetiteur, music preparation JOHN CUTHBERT with NICK DWYER

sweeney todd, CAROLINE KENNEDY apprentice/mrs oakley/tom cutaway, MADELINE ROBINSON johanna, PAUL FEATHERSTONE colonel jeffries/reverend lupin/jonas fogg, MATT KELLETT thornhill/mr oakley/mr ruby/jean parmine/bully gregson, MATTHEW SILVETER mr grant/captain rathbone/ben the beefeater/jarvis williams, LYNSEY DOCHERTY cecily maybush/mrs Lovett

Blanche Marvin Critique
This was a version that was the actual original concept of the tale of Sweeney Todd. It needed much editing as it was so repetitious in the constant Vaudevillian style which only partially worked. Important to read the reviews as this was a strange mixture of being good and at times quite bad but it is worth the effort of reading the reviews to know about the production of that particular period. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

The Upcoming (*****) Written by Jim Compton-Hall
The Fiend of Fleet Street sets up shop in Wilton's Music Hall in a funny, raucous and bloodcurdling show. It's Sweeney Todd as you know it – unless you know it as the Sondheim musical, then it's definitely not Sweeney Todd as you know it. In fact Opera de la Luna are very careful to put in bold writing everywhere that this is NOT the version with the catchy showtunes and the complicated backstory. This Sweeney Todd is closer to the Penny Dreadful story where the character originates, and the early Victorian stage adaptations that would have been accompanied by full orchestras. He's still a murderous barber, the bodies still get "disposed of" at Mrs Lovett's pie shop, and there is still a Johanna; but there are no convoluted familial links or quests for revenge and greater evils. Todd is just a murderer who does it for the money. And in this outing, he happens across a customer with a hugely valuable string of pearls that he simply can't resist. Like the Victorian shows, the story is told with orchestral accompaniment, providing a beautiful live soundtrack and SFX. There are a couple of points where the actors have to yell their lines to be heard over the music and the SFX are often half a beat behind the action, but, for the most part, having a live orchestra is a treat. And there is some operatic singing to go along with the instruments, some of which is very impressive and some of which is very funny. In fact, it's overall a pretty amusing rendition of Sweeney Todd. There are a few comedic characters, the audience is encouraged to cheer and boo, and there plenty of meta stage jokes like messing with the orchestra so that they slip up on the SFX timings, or actors drawing attention to the fact that they have to leave the stage to "go and get" the other character that they play. Sweeney Todd has buckets of creep and darkness but there's also a whole lot of fun and laughter that makes this a super enjoyable evening. Throw in the reasonably priced tickets and Wilton's Music Hall – one of London's most beautiful venues – and there is every reason to see this show. Sweeney Todd: The Victorian Melodrama is at Wilton's Music Hall from 25th until 29th April 2023.

LondonTheatre1 (****) Written by Chris Omaweng
I had never thought the story of Sweeney Todd could pass off as a crowd-pleaser, but then Victorian melodramas, if this production is anything to go by, are markedly different from contemporary melodramas. There's much more of a comedy element, as the audience finds itself laughing at expressions of heightened emotions rather than feeling sympathetic towards whoever it is expressing them. "Please note this is NOT a production of the musical by Stephen Sondheim," the venue's website states, in bold type. Neither is it melodramatic in the sense that Andrew Lloyd Webber's The Phantom of the Opera is melodramatic, and this show is one of those rare occasions outside the British tradition that is pantomime that the antagonist – in this instance, the title character (Nick Dwyer) – is on the receiving end of boos and hisses. At one point he even appeared to encourage a more vocal audience response. This may not, I appreciate, be your cup of tea. But one could, ultimately, get away with not booing at all. You're not going to get personally called out for keeping quiet. And truth be told, at the risk of sounding joyless, it did get rather repetitive after a while anyway. Anyway, the orchestra, ably conducted by Toby Purser, is larger than the cast, a point somewhat over-explained in a late scene where the absence of a character was noted, because (according to the cast list) twenty characters are shared between seven actors, precipitating a swift costume change and a re-emergence as someone else. But the joke was wearing thin by the fifth time in about as many minutes as someone yet again left the stage for a quick character swap. The sound effects are all, as far as I could tell, created by the musicians, making, for example, the noise of a trapdoor being opened or a regular door being locked sound remarkably authentic, and crystal clear. The local vicar, Reverend Lupin (Paul Featherstone) doesn't exactly practice what he preaches. Whether that's a stereotype or not would depend to some extent, I suppose, on one's experience with people of the cloth, though given the relatively high standing that clergymen enjoyed in Victorian society, I'd say his conduct is unusual. The original scores used in the 1847 production, called The String of Pearls, didn't survive. An article in the show's programme suggests that "archives and records" of many productions from the era were destroyed thanks to bomb damage in the Second World War. Plenty of music scores from nineteenth-century melodramas is still available, so the production team effectively picked what they considered to be most appropriate melodies from a large selection of compositions. It works well, such that the cast can be heard just as clearly when speaking dialogue over the orchestra playing as they can whenever unaccompanied. That there are breaks in the music makes a significant difference, in a positive way: there isn't a relentless underscore, so the music has the impact it should have when it comes to key moments in the plotline. The language in the dialogue is accessible throughout, and the vocabulary is rich, though it would be, as it was from an era when characters just didn't 'eff, cee and effing cee' their way through a play. I loved the putdowns prior to Todd getting his comeuppance, with Thornhill (Matt Kellett) telling him that "thy hour of reckoning is nigh", and Colonel Jeffries (also Featherstone) denouncing him as a "vile deserter of decency". There's cheering from the stalls and the circle as good triumphs over evil, and whether justice really would have been administered

in the manner this play with songs does is beside the point, if only because the whole thing is more than a little surreal. Thankfully, the second half felt pacier and more engaging than the first. There are marvellous sopranos in Caroline Kennedy and Lynsey Docherty, and the costume department does well in this production too, with members of the military, shop workers and domestic servants (amongst others) all dressed as one would reasonably expect them to be. Given the dark storyline, it's a surprisingly enjoyable experience, both bizarre and bombastic, and worth seeing – even if it's just to get a different take on a well-known story.

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

JERMYN STREET THEATRE

***JULES AND JIM by TIMBERLAKE WERTENBAKER novel HENRI-PIERRE ROCHÉ director STELLA POWELL-JONES décor/costume ISABELLA VAN BRAECKEL lights CHRIS MCDONNELL composer/sound design HOLLY KHAN associate director/movement director ELLIOT PRITCHARD with ALEX MUGNAIONI jim, SAMUEL COLLINGS jules, PATRICIA ALLISON kath
New artistic director STELLA POWELL-JONES new executive producer DAVID DOYLE

Blanche Marvin Critique
It is a beautiful sad tale sensitively told in the story of deep friendship between two men in love with the same woman. The two male actors were absolutely brilliant but unfortunately yhe femme fatale was miscast with no appeal whatsoever. A sad mixture of two wonderful performances amidst the disaster of a production. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

Guardian (***) Written by Chris Wiegand
While there is compassion and curiosity in Timberlake Wertenbaker's adaptation, this production lacks the whirlwind quality of Roché's novel and the film. She has the smile. That's the first thing to note about Sex Education's Patricia Allison as Kath, whose enigmatic expression matches that of a goddess's statue and leaves close friends Jules and Jim entranced. In François Truffaut's film of Henri-Pierre Roché's novel, that smile – deemed "innocent and cruel" by the narrator – was worn by Jeanne Moreau whose fragile femme fatale remained disconcertingly unfathomable. Timberlake Wertenbaker's adaptation, staged by Jermyn Street's new artistic director Stella Powell-Jones, gives greater thought to the woman caught in the gaze of the novelist, the auteur and their title characters. As the trio alternately deepen and loosen their romances with each other, Wertenbaker keeps a compassionate curiosity about their individual behaviour but holds them to account, too. There is a heightened awareness of how easy it is to find yourself in love yet how difficult it is to nurture through the years. Like the film, the play snips away much of the novel's first third, which details the amorous interests of Austrian Jules (Samuel Collings) and Frenchman Jim (Alex Mugnaioni) before they fall for Kath in the years preceding the first world war. Playing it as a three-hander could feasibly have intensified the central trio but it means their other lovers – notably Gilberte and Albert – fade into passing references, softening the notion of these compartmentalised lives and defusing any sense of betrayal. Absent, too, is the bustle of Parisian cafe culture and the contrasting locations through which the story winds although Wertenbaker teases out the relationships between nations and the war's impact on all three. It is a well-performed show with Collings and Mugnaioni sharing a devoted camaraderie and Allison capturing the "soulquakes" of Kath's torment. But the production needs a greater sense of danger and effervescence. Despite an interval-free, 90-minute running time it lacks the whirlwind quality of the novel and film. The white walls of Isabella Van Braeckel's stylish set have abstract blue lines occasionally hinting at the nose and lips of a woman's profile and complementing Kath's artistic career. Chris McDonnell's lighting powerfully bathes the men in blue as they gaze at the statue whose smile she shares. If the play has a cooler overall effect than you would expect, it is an intriguing account of the ebb and flow of love, which is affectingly treated as a character in its own right. At Jermyn Street theatre, London, until 27 May.

LondonTheatre1 (****) Written by Peter Yates
Two's company, three's a crowd, so the saying goes. The twist in this play is that three's company and three's a crowd. Rather than a love triangle, we have more of a love circle: A is friends with B and they love each other but not like that, purely as friends; then C comes along and A falls in love with C, and then B falls in love with C but A and B still love each other and C loves both A and B – yes, sometimes at the same time – and they all live, basically, unhappily ever after. Are you with me? Timberlake Wertenbaker's script (adapted from Parisienne Henri-Pierre Roché's 1953 novel) is, at times very compelling: and at other times not so much. There's a lot of humour here, a good dollop of cod philosophy and much intense perusal of the meaning, motivation, consequences and efficacy of love to, frankly, the point of irritation. It's a long old 90 interval-less minutes in the lovely-but-cramped bijou Jermyn Street studio. You could lose twenty minutes without affecting the plot or the characters or the cod philosophy, I would suggest. But the show has its charms: dull old boring Jules, German writer and er… cod philosopher, is the most irritating character – Samuel Collings extracting the minutiae of exasperation in every sentence, phrase and word he utters – he's the kind of hifalutin, self-identified intellectual who can bore the pants ON to women. Alex Mugnaioni as Jim is the vibrant one, the tall handsome French translator and theatre man who gets all the good bits, all the good lines all the least annoying moments and, much to Jules's amusement, can get

those pants off again. The two of them together are a strange, rather subdued double-act who come across as work colleagues rather than deep-seated friends despite – or maybe because of – the occasional very awkward hugging. The lift that the play so desperately requires is supplied by Kath – Patricia Allison – who is the spark, the stimulus, the life and soul of this particular three-pronged party. Allison grabs us, holds us, consumes us just like Kath does with both Jules and Jim, separately, together, apart and forever. A really dynamic performance by Allison and in the same way that Jules and Jim have great difficulty in keeping up with Kath then both Mugnaioni and Collings are like a couple of tag-wrestlers struggling to cope with Allison's verbal body-slams, drop kicks and forearm smashes. Like Kath, Allison wins, of course, every time. So character-wise and actor-wise the show is a little unbalanced. It is engrossing though and there's plenty to keep us involved to the end and there are moments when there is real cohesion in the threesome. These, I think will increase as the run develops and director Stella Powell-Jones will undoubtedly do some smoothing-out and, maybe, some judicious trimming. It's clearly difficult directing such a dialogue-heavy show in a space the size of a shoebox but Powell-Jones does an impressive job. What was particularly difficult to fathom – again in such a small space – were the sliding frosted glass panels that hung over the stage as part of Designer Isabella van Braeckel's otherwise effectively fetching set. Characters awkwardly manoeuvred these on their curtain tracks in the early part of the play to no discernible effect at all. They then seemed to forget about them completely until near the end where their manipulation – again for no discernible effect – grated and distracted from the action. Curious. Van Braeckel though has come up with one spectacular design feature but – no spoilers. I always admire Lighting Designers who have to work in tiny spaces with an audience in such close proximity and Chris McDonnell does a great job here. Composer Holly Khan's soundscape is effective and her use of Ravel's music is clearly suitably Parisienne. Despite reservations, all-in-all it's a watchable show – of the light entertainment variety – so do go and see but be prepared to get cramp.