GIELGUD

**OPENING NIGHT by JOHN CASSAVETES bookwriter/director IVO VAN HOVE music/lyrics/orchestrations/vocal arrangements RUFUS WAINWRIGHT décor/lights/video JAN VERSWEYVELD costume AN D'HUYS sound TOM GIBBONS, ALEX TWISELTON musical supervisor NIGEL LILLEY movement/choreography POLLY BENNET with SHERIDAN SMITH myrtle, HADLEY FRASER manny, SHIRA HAAS nancy, NICOLA HUGHES sarah, AMY LENNOX dorothy, JOHN MARQUEZ david, BENJAMIN WALKER maurice, IAN McLARNON leo, CILLA SILVIA carla, JOS SLOVICK gus, REBECCA THORNHILL kelly, ROBERT FINLAYSON ensemble, DANIEL FORRESTER ensemble, JENNIFER HEPBURN ensemble, ISSY KHOGALI ensemble, CHRISSIE PERKINS ensemble

Blanche Marvin Critique
Sheridan Smith was remarkable in an unremarkable play whose direction by Ivo Van Hove is a disappointment but not even the astute acting of Smith saved the disaster of the production. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

Time Out (****) Written by Andrzej Lukowski
Sheridan Smith is superb in Ivo van Hove and Rufus Wainwright's deliciously odd not-really-a-musical. It is, to be clear, fairly nuts that leftfield European director Ivo van Hove has been allowed to plonk what I can only describe as a leftfield European musical in a big theatre in the middle of London's glittering West End. Presumably the calculation of producers Wessex Grove is that star Sheridan Smith offers enough commercial clout to underwrite the limited run of a show that feels almost entirely unshackled by genre niceties. But there is truly nothing else like 'Opening Night' in Theatreland at the moment – not even close. Like much of Belgian star Van Hove's output, 'Opening Night' is a stage adaptation of a classic arthouse film, in this case John Cassavetes's 1977 movie of the same name. It concerns the emotional disintegration of Myrtle, a famous actress struggling with alcoholism, the shocking death of a fan, and encroaching middle age – something exacerbated by her inability to connect to 'The Second Woman', the Broadway play she is currently rehearsing. In Van Hove's adaptation, a camera crew is filming the play's rehearsals – something that doesn't have much impact on the plot (most of the dialogue is Cassavetes's dialogue), but does offer a loose real world explanation for the director's trademark use of live film. As with much of his oeuvre, a big screen dominates proceedings, and what it displays is at least as important as watching the actors directly; the composition of the shots matters as much as the mise en scène. Two particular shots dominate the first half. There's an extreme close up of Smith's Myrtle from a camera embedded in her dressing room mirror, that unsparingly rams home the fact she is indeed middle aged. And there's one in the rafters that relays top down shots of the action that look perversely beautiful and unreal: dreamy, Pina Bausch-like fantasies, with some filter making the plain wooden floor look like flaking gold. The whole production feels suspended between brutal reality and waking dream. Smith is wonderful: her fading starlet isn't a hysterical diva but a clever woman facing a legitimate existential crisis. Myrtle is an ageing actress, and the script – by Nicola Hughes's icy but frustrated playwright Sarah – offers nothing to her character beyond 'ageing actress'. But Myrtle doesn't get mad. The cool, amused intelligence in Smith's eyes is glorious as Myrtle elects to totally subvert a scene in which manipulative director Manny (Hadley Frazer) demands she take a slap from her ex-lover Maurice (Benjamin Walker). Smith has famously had her own struggles in recent years, and her performance is heartfelt but also surprisingly wry and mischievous. In the second half, things get wilder, as Myrtle is haunted by visions of Nancy (Shira Haas), a troubled fan who was run over outside the theatre. It's here that Wainwright's score really comes into its own. Earlier on the songs – for the most part a deft marriage of baroque folk and retro show tunes – are just a pleasing adornment. But as Myrtle becomes ever more detached from reality, it's reflected in the increasingly unnaturalistic use of song. Pulsing beats and screeching guitars enter the fray, and matters become ever trippier: in one scene it's made clear that Myrtle is now 'really' singing, something that totally freaks everyone around her out. I liked 'Opening Night'. It's not a traditional musical. I think perhaps it's not really a musical at all, but rather a play that uses songs to specific effect. It's a weird, wry, very human vehicle for a superb group of actors to tell a story that looks like it's going to be an archetypal fable about a doomed star, but thrillingly pulls away from that, as Myrtle literally changes the script of her life and 'Opening Night' drifts into a euphoric final fantasia. Although it bears a superficial resemblance to Jamie Lloyd's recent 'Sunset Boulevard' revival, to me it felt more like a negative of Van Hove's other musical, the Bowie collaboration 'Lazarus'. Both centre on individuals that have dangerously lost touch with reality, but where Thomas Newton – the hero of the icy, inscrutable 'Lazarus' – has to die, Myrtle gets a chance to change everything. There are no dance numbers, power ballads, lavish sets, or cute romantic storylines. By entering the West End, 'Opening Night' is almost inevitably inviting an audience that will be confused by it. And yet: there's a palpable warmth to it. Maybe it's a musical, maybe it isn't, but under all the avant-garde bells and whistles, it unquestionably has a heart – a buoyancy and belief in humanity that's lacking in the original film. 6 March – 27 July

Guardian (****) Written by Arifa Akbar
John Cassavetes' 1977 film about a Broadway star in crisis might seem a natural fit for a stage adaptation. Then again, there is the risk of theatrical navel-gazing, and with its melange of gothicism, midlife angst and thespy drama, an odd narrative arc to navigate. To throw songs into the mix – composed by Rufus Wainwright in his first foray into musical theatre – and swap the glacial queenliness of Gena Rowlands, who played troubled superstar Myrtle in the film, for the insuppressibly likable Sheridan Smith, might have been a step too far. Even for a writer-

director with as much appetite for high-wire risk as Ivo van Hove. Yet Opening Night is an extravagantly original production, every bit as eccentric as the film but also its own alchemical creation, more vivacious in this musical incarnation. The trope of the brittle older woman in crisis is well worn, and Myrtle – an ageing alcoholic actor in meltdown over playing an even more ageing actor on stage – sits squarely alongside Blanche DuBois and Norma Desmond. We follow her as she is stalked by the ghost of a dead young fan, Nancy (Shira Haas), and contends with the desolations of stardom as well as the controlling men around her: Manny (Hadley Fraser), the play-within-the-play's director who goes from charmer to bully in seconds; producer David (John Marquez); and former lover Maurice (Benjamin Walker). But there is counterintuitive casting in Smith, who does not strive for Rowlands' unreachability or dangerous magnetism. Instead her Myrtle has an earthbound glamour and a celebrity honed from hard graft, it seems, with a Brooklyn accent combined with a touch of Elizabeth Taylor. Smith brings vulnerability, even flecks of comedy, and makes Myrtle's crisis modern, relatable – that of a woman wanting to age on her own terms. There is compassionate treatment of the drama's other midlife women too, from scriptwriter Sarah (Nicola Hughes, absolutely arresting) to Manny's longsuffering wife Dorothy (Amy Lennox), who ruminate marital disappointment or menopausal hot flushes with disgruntled strength. A film crew follow the fictive play's rehearsals in a Broadway theatre, and a back screen gestures towards their captured footage. Jan Versweyveld's set has a central sheer red curtain that captures the razzle of the theatre but also implicates our culture of celebrity voyeurism. There are many moving parts on stage, yet none of it feels like a churn. The screen magnifies characters so we see their bloodshot eyes and tears. When Myrtle turns up drunk at the stage door on opening night, the screen shows her staggering at the back of the Gielgud theatre itself, a thrilling coup de hi-tech theatre which resembles the walk-about in Jamie Lloyd's recent Sunset Boulevard but services the story better here. (Smith has said it attracts the passing crowd every night.) The warmth of the production is counterintuitive too. Its tone is almost upbeat, but without clashing against Myrtle's core anguish. Much of that is down to Wainwright's slowly gorgeous music. The early songs have a springy, Chorus Line sound while later ones are full-bodied and tender with an edge of the operatic, bringing heat and intimacy to the drama. Songs such as Meet Me at the Start, in which Myrtle confesses her love to Maurice, open up the show's heart, while the soaring Ready for Battle, marking Myrtle's comeback, turns her from a woman falling apart to one soldiering on, and raises hairs. Performances soar too. Haas plays dead Nancy like a bad faerie, singing the eerie I Forgive You while perched on Myrtle's knee, and Hughes oozes dark intensity in Life is Thin. Unadventurous musical adaptations of films comprise a crowded corner in the West End, but this one seems to shake up musical theatre itself. It may be the most unusual thing on the London stage right now and is captivating in its glittering strangeness.

Evening Standard (*) Written by Nick Curtis
This dismally muddled, self-important, furtively misogynist musical about an actress going to pieces squanders the talents of everyone involved, even breaking Sheridan Smith's unique ability to connect with an audience. It's adapted from John Cassavetes' 1977 film by Ivo van Hove, whose London productions are either sublime or, like this one, awful. Singer-songwriter Rufus Wainwright contributes his first-ever musical score, a hodgepodge of genre pastiche and schoolboy rhyme so lame I hope it will also be his last. The use of live video adds another tiresome layer of introspection to a project wedged firmly up its own fundament. The underlying message is that oafish audiences don't appreciate the pain of creatives who crucify themselves on stage every night, and that it's tough to be a woman. Certainly the talents of Smith and Wainwright seem inextricably linked to their sensitivity, but Van Hove leaves both of them horribly exposed here. He puts Smith in particular through the wringer, forcing her to confront her vulnerabilities and blaming us for watching. How dare he? Writer Sarah (Nicola Hughes) is furious at Myrtle's attempts to change her vapid character, Virginia, who is slapped, shamed about her age and derided for not being a mother ("she's not even a housewife!" as one exultantly vicious lyric puts it). Myrtle's behaviour gets more erratic after a young female fan (Shira Haas) is run over outside the theatre and becomes an interfering spirit representing lost youth and sensuality. Smith is required to change costume on stage and is repeatedly mauled. She, and Amy Lennox as Manny's Stepford-ish wife, are often barefoot and ingratiating around masterful patriarchs. Both they and Hughes can at least sing Wainwright's embarrassing songs on key, which is more than can be said for some cast members. There's something about Cassavetes' jarring film that makes directors want to adapt but also distort it. Van Hove did an earlier musical version in Amsterdam in 2006, and 24-hour play The Second Woman – captivatingly performed by Ruth Wilson at the Young Vic last year – sees an actress play a scene from it 100 times with 100 different men. Here Van Hove simplifies and updates the jazzy narrative of the film and shoves everything subtextual into the foreground. The show becomes a series of needy pleas for love and tedious emotional collapses, while Wainwright's score skips from a Ravel homage/ripoff to hollow torch songs to footling showtunes. His lyrics range from the staggeringly obvious to the buttock-clenchingly pretentious. Jan Versweyveld's skeletal theatre set is dominated by a screen showing pitiless live close-ups, freeze frames and aeriel views of the main cast – mostly Smith – and filler shots of the other actors rhubarbing in a corridor. After disastrous previews, some changes have apparently been made, including the removal of a prolonged vacuuming scene (yes, really). But the show remains a hot mess, unsalvageable. Roll on closing night.

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

TRAFALGAR

****PEOPLE, PLACES & THINGS by DUNCAN MACMILLAN director JEREMY HERRIN décor BUNNY CHRISTIE costume CHRISTINA CUNNINGHAM lights JAMES FARNCOMBE music MATTHEW HERBERT sound TOM GIBBONS video/projections ANDRZEJ GOULDING movement POLLY BENNETT with DENISE COUGH emma, SINÉAD CUSACK doctor/therapist/mum, MALACHI KIRBY mark, DANNY KIRRANE foster, KEVIN McMONAGLE paul/dad, HOLLY ATKINS charlotte/ensemble, PAKSIE VERNON jodi/ensemble, RYAN HUTTON shaun, AYỌ OWÓYẸMI-PETERS laura/ensemble, DILLON SCOTT-LEWIS t/ensemble, RUSSEL ANTHONY, LOUISE TEMPLETON, MIRIAM ELWELL-SUTTON, EMMA JANE FEARNLEY, GENEVIEVE LABUSCHAGNE, IMOGEN MACKENZIE, LOTTIE POWER

Blanche Marvin Critique
Denise Cough's powerful performance deserves four stars aimed at her rather than the production. She is brilliant as she follows the journey of her cure of addiction and the various characters that she meets. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

Guardian (****) Written by Arifa Akbar
Duncan Macmillan's 2015 play about addiction is a tricksy and unnerving thing, even for those who know what's coming. This reprise of the original National Theatre and Headlong production reunites some of its main players including director Jeremy Herrin and Denise Gough, who won an Olivier award for her lead performance.
Gough plays Emma, an actor undergoing rehab for drink and drug addiction with no clear backstory. We follow her into a rehabilitation centre and a therapy circle of addicts telling their respective stories. At first it seems like a paler version of Lucy Prebble's The Effect, recently revived at the National Theatre. The group scenes are protracted yet do not travel deep enough into the philosophical questions raised, and rehearse much that is overfamiliar, from the testimonies of those in rehab to the relationship between addict and therapist (Sinéad Cusack). There are also mentions of Trump, Ukraine and Covid, rather too shoehorned in. Gough does not seem quite fully invested as Emma but this is exactly what the role requires, as her performance captures every turn of her character's psyche. Emma is not only a pathological addict but also a pathological actor ("If I am not a character, I'm not even sure I'm there," she says) although you only see the extent of this in hindsight. The swivel that comes with the second act is not quite as stark as that in Anthony Neilson's mental health play The Wonderful World of Dissocia, but it casts a new, dark light on the first act nonetheless, raising questions around the efficacy, and ethics, of the kind of 12-step programme to which Emma submits. The brutal power of the play is engineered as a creep, the "boo" of the second act not quite as tacky as a twist but a shock nonetheless. Bunny Christie's pulsating white set design shows Emma bared – a specimen to be examined through the speculum of the stage, while simultaneously taking us into her mind, with all its distorted perceptions. The configuration of the auditorium mirrors this duality, giving the illusion of an audience that is seeing itself from without as well as being within. In Emma's mother (also played by Cusack) and father (Kevin McMonagle), we see a soured but dogged love, shorn of hope. Anyone who has been close to an addict will know better than to judge them. The scene in which they appear is vital and also utterly destabilising because there is no clear line between abuser and abused. Emma's outcome is defined by us, it seems, the play a dramatic Rorschach test, of sorts. To me, Macmillan seems to be saying that not only is there no escape for an addict from the people, places and things that cause their addiction, but that their only refuge takes them back to the original source of their pain. How bleak – but also brilliantly done.

Time Out (****) Written by Andrzej Lukowski
'People, Places and Things' in 2024 is never going to be quite the same thing as 'People, Places and Things' in 2015: so much of the thrill of its initial ascent lay in being there to watch actor Denise Gough explode in stature from relative unknown to all-time great right in front of our eyes. As Jeremy Herrin's original production of Duncan Macmillan's smash addiction drama returns, it's now a given that Gough – among other things now a fixture of the 'Star Wars' universe – will deliver a phenomenal performance. And she does! She is beyond tremendous as Emma, a booze-and-drugs-addled actor who we first meet slurring her way through a performance of 'The Seagull' before flaming out at a club night and checking herself into a rehab centre. Disorientated and pugnacious, as she dries out and gathers her wits she begins to rail against the 12-step programme and the very idea of sobriety, essentially declaring her self-destructive lifestyle to be an appropriate response to the pointlessness of human existence. Gough is magnificent and absurd in equal measure, a performance that's simultaneously high comedy and high tragedy. Still, the third time around I felt complacent enough about Gough's greatness that some of the play's flatter bits bothered me a little more. While Herrin's kinetic production – with its pounding beats and screaming clones of Emma – is rarely boring, it does somewhat bog down once Emma sobers up and reluctantly agrees to therapy. Her newfound rehab bestie Mark is performed with engagingly laidback charisma by Malachi Kirby, but fundamentally all the parts bar Emma are fairly thin, or at least they are next to her one-woman opera. It's difficult to accurately depict therapy on stage without succumbing to certain cliches. Gough is magnificent and absurd in equal measure. It's tricky, though, because the first half's whiff of cliche feels like an effective way of lulling us into a false sense of security before a second half that has to rank as one of the greatest in twenty-first century drama. After entering rehab a second time, Emma confronts her parents with how much she's changed. Everything is set for her to be gratefully accepted back into the fold, for her recovery to be eulogised, for her and her parents to be able to collectively mourn her late brother Mark. And that… doesn't happen. Her confrontation with her parents is devastating, each line from her mum and dad a mortal wound for the new shiny version of herself that Emma has assembled. It's all the more devastating for their weary acceptance of her old self, interspersing some of the most devastating lines you'll ever hear in the theatre with discussion of the three of them getting a takeaway that night. The device of having Sinéad Cusack play Emma's affable doctor and therapist brilliantly pays off when she returns as the mum: we expect her to be kind and concerned and indeed maternal; she is not. It's a scene that flips the story on its head: before, you could reasonably say it was a play about rehab. After, it's something more existential, a drama about how self-invention lies at the heart of the human experience, and how that hits its limits when other people – in this case Emma's parents – simply have a different idea about who we are. And that's not to say Emma – not her real name, btw – is actually right about who she is.At some point 'People, Places and Things' needs to be set free from this production. A new director might freshen up the first half. Gough is too good to not turn herself towards something new. But there's no rush. Minor quibbles aside, after a seven year break – going cold turkey if you will – this is the best sort of relapse.

CHARING CROSS

****THE FABULIST music GIOVANNI PAISIELLO book/lyrics JAMES P. FARWELL director JOHN WALTON movement director SEAN KEMPTON music supervisor/arrangements/orchestration BOBBY GOLDER décor/costume DAVID SHIELDS illusions HARRY DE CRUZ lights FRIDTHJOFUR THORSTEINSSON sound ANDREW JOHNSON assoc/sound/op OSCAR COTRAN with LILY DE LA HAYE cassandra, RÉKA JÓNÁS clarice, DAN SMITH julian/agrofontido, CONSTANTINE ANDRONIKOU pupuppini. JAMES PATERSON count petronius, STUART PENDRED cardinal bandini, JACK HOLTON julian (alternate), MARIENELLA PHILIPS clarice/assandra (alternate)

Blanche Marvin Critique
A highly imaginative choice of production in which the actual music is pre-Mozartian and very much the kind of music that Mozart imitated. It's a very stimulating and novice introduction to the theatre where the singing of all the artists was brilliant and the set the most beautifully imagined. It is a unique introduction to a period piece. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

WhatsOnStage (***) Written by Lucinda Everett
Can you believe in both science and magic? Embrace both reason and romance? Can you escape the clutches of Mussolini by dressing as a film extra and pulling your skirt over your head to hide your beard? These are just some of the questions posed by James P Farwell's brand-new musical. It's based on The Imaginary Astrologer, a short opera composed by Giovanni Paisiello for Catherine the Great. (Paisiello was a favourite of hers and Napoleon's). But Paisiello's original story, which Farwell explains was "mainly a tableau", has been beefed up into a full play with a new book and lyrics. Julian, a magician (or fabulist, as they're sometimes called) is on the run as a heretic in 1920s Tuscany, where the recently signed Concordat has given the Catholic Church increased powers over culture and education. Stumbling onto a film set, he falls for screenwriter Clarice and must prove himself to her father, Count Petronius, a scientist who takes a dim view of magicians, while escaping detection by her uncle Cardinal Bandini, who missed out on being Pope "by one vote". Paisiello's uplifting music is the perfect accompaniment to what is mostly a lively romantic comedy, and is played beautifully by a small but mighty orchestra. The cast of six are all excellent singers but Réka Jónás as Clarice and Lily De-La-Haye as her film director sister Cassandra are remarkable, their sparkling voices soaring upwards towards notes unimaginable. Theirs is also the most compelling relationship on stage. Clarice is ruled by love while Cassandra relies on the reason of philosophy to guide her. Totally unable to relate to one another, and driven further apart by more than a touch of sibling rivalry, their bickering and scrapping (often mid-song) bring some of the show's funniest moments. And their eventual reconciliation is touching. The romantic connections between Clarice and Julian (Dan Smith), and between Cassandra and Julian's friend Pupuppini (Constantine Andronikou) are less convincing. Love at first sight, that hurried hallmark of the rom-com genre, only really works if the chemistry is palpable – and that's a rare thing. But the disconnect might also be down to Farwell's book, which seems less concerned with deep relationships or meaty plots, and more focused on debating those aforementioned big questions. The discussion of science versus magic and love versus logic is tempered with just about enough action and comic relief in the show's first half. There are magic tricks, buoyant direction from John Walton and some solid comedic performances, although notably, they're from the supporting cast rather than the leads – Stuart Pendred is particularly watchable as the vainglorious (and therefore eminently dupable) Cardinal. And while the dialogue didn't hit my funny bone, it tickled many audience members. But in act two, the pace is slowed dramatically by a run of songs (Farwell's lyrics aren't as strong as his dialogue), and the plot thins out, making it an uphill struggle toward the show's happy ending. In such a diminutive theatre, this show's ambitions are admirable. And while it doesn't always hit the mark, it will prove a cheering evening for many, and a real treat for Paisiello fans. 12 September – 21 September

The Stage (***) Written by Holly O'Mahony
f you go to see this show anticipating a musical, as it's billed, then you'll spend the first few scenes rerouting your expectations. It's really an operetta and a comedy of manners. James P Farwell's book and lyrics are set to the score of an existing short opera, The Imaginary Astrologer, by the Italian classical-era composer Giovanni Paisiello. Farwell's story is set more than 100 years after Paisiello's death, in Mussolini's Fascist Italy, but he makes no attempt to climb inside the minds of characters from that time, or Paisiello's. Instead, his comedy feels at times contemporary and at others old-fashioned in its distinctly British humour. It's a hodgepodge of ideas and influences, under the direction of John Walton, yet it's often a delight, thanks not least to Paisiello's accomplished and sprightly score, which captures the giddy hijinx of the characters playing out below a quintet of musicians. Farwell's book and lyrics are no match for Paisiello's score intellectually, but nor are they trying to be – and that's the charm. In Walton's production, the quick laughs, thinly sketched setting, melodramatic performances, lashings of tomfoolery, camped-up costumes, strap-on beards and cardboard props are straight out of a pantomime. This unusual offering comes together as accessible and enjoyable. Farwell's story follows an archetypal plot: there's love at first sight between a young man, Julian (Dan Smith) and a young woman, Clarice (Réka Jónás). There's a "you'll do" secondary narrative between Julian's pal Pupuppini (Constantine Andronikou) and Clarice's sister Cassandra (Lily de-la-Haye). There's a protective father, Count Petronius (a guffawing James Paterson), who's unsure these travelling gents are good enough for his daughters. And there's a powerful, killjoy uncle, Cardinal Bandini (Stuart Pendred), who wields his close ties with the church over them all. Embellishing this set-up are some pleasing quirks: the sisters are running a film production company, making subversive movies eons before their time (the Battle of Waterloo as a sex farce is one idea on the table). Meanwhile, Jónás and De-la-Haye are

terrific sopranos, their voices vastly outshining their hackneyed characters. Julian, comically Zorro-like in his appearance in a shimmering satin cape and straw hat, is a magician (who prefers the fancy title of "fabulist"), ready to prove how magic can defy the laws of science – and, thanks to help from illusion designer Harry De Cruz, we see a table fly and a book burst into flames. It's a humorously silly, gateway operetta – a chance for the curious to dip a toe into the art form's waters, and have a laugh.

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

CHARING CROSS

**BRONCO BILLY based on the WARNER BROSS MOTION PICTURE written by DENNIS E. HACKIN by special arrangements with WARNER BROS. THEATRE VENTURES director HUNTER BIRD orchestrations/arrangements/musical supervision DAVID O décor AMY JANE COOK costume SARAH MERCADE choreographer ALEXZANDRA SARMIENTO lights NICK RICHINGS sound ANDREW JOHNSON musical director MARCUS CARTER-ADAMS illusions JOHN BULLEID fight/intimacy RACHEL BOWN-WILLIAMS, RUTH COOPER-BROWN with TARINN CALLENDER bronco billy, VICTORIA HAMILTON-BARRITT constance lily, EMILY BENJAMIN antoinette lily, GEMMA ATKINS dee dee delaware, JONATHAN BOURNE sam lily, JOSH BUTLER lasso leonard james, ALICE CROFT mitzi fritts, CHRIS JARED edgar white lipton, KAREN MAVUNDUKURE doc blue, HENRY MAYNARD lefty lebow, HELEN K WINT lorraine, SILAS WYATT-BARKE john arlington, ALEXANDER MCMORRAN sinclair st clair, AHARON RAYNER joe eagle, KALISHA AMARIS off-stage cover, DAVID MUSCAT off-stage cover

Blanche Marvin Critique
A popularised musical for the low-brow population. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

Guardian (**) Written by Chris Wiegand
Hunter Bird's often madcap production, based on the 1980 western, has anodyne songs and lacks the film's weathered perspective. Bronco Billy is one of Clint Eastwood's ropier westerns, from a time when he was sending up his Man With No Name persona. Released in 1980, in between two comedies where his co-star was an orangutan called Clyde, the film follows a grizzled sharpshooter whose ramshackle wild west troupe provides shelter for a runaway heiress. It's a screwy caper boosted by the chemistry between Eastwood and Sondra Locke (who were offscreen partners) and eccentric support from his stock company of actors. This flimsier musical version, with a book by original screenwriter Dennis Hacklin, isn't short on star quality: the magnetic Tarinn Callender is Billy, his megawatt smile matched by Emily Benjamin's as heiress Antoinette, while Victoria Hamilton-Barritt wrings delightful detail from the expanded role of Antoinette's stepmother. All three are brilliantly talented singers – if only they had songs that went beyond these perfectly pleasant, often anodyne numbers about living your dreams by Chip Rosenbloom, John Torres and Michele Brourman. "There's a world out there that has lost its way," sings ringmaster Doc (Karen Mavundukure) at the start. Billy purveys homespun values with his family-friendly shows but they are cash-strapped so – in a diversion from the film's plot – the gang head for Hollywood to enter a TV talent competition. Eastwood's taciturn Billy would have grimaced at the suggestion, devoted as he is to putting on goodwill free shows for the community. The musical skips those scenes, cleans up some of his chequered backstory, plays down any genuine tension and danger, and queasily accelerates the comedy. The occasional tender, quieter episodes are sandwiched in between madcap shenanigans as a surfeit of antagonists hunt down Antoinette. Hunter Bird's restlessly exuberant production has fired the confetti cannon within minutes and Amy Jane Cook's revolve set design spins regularly from circus truck to jail to apartment. The 1979 setting means there's a dose of disco and funk added to the country score and Sarah Mercadé's colourful costume design gives Henry Maynard, as the clown Lefty Lebow, an outsize Stetson and a pierrot smock. But while we see a few circus tricks and some illusions (by John Bulleid), often incorporated into the plot rather than the troupe's own show, there is little in the way of big-top spectacle and Alexzandra Sarmiento's choreography seems reined in. Actors frequently leave the stage to exit and enter through doors in the auditorium but don't create any immersion in the story which remains distant. What's missing most is a real sense of the troupe's wear and tear – not just their hard-scrabble past but that of the wild west itself. All that came for free with Eastwood's casting and Billy's lived-in, country and western-style wisdom in the film was reinforced through a duet with co-star Merle Haggard. The musical's central romance is rarely combustible and neither are the troupe – everyone is too darn sunny. Aficionados of Hamilton-Barritt's line in venal stepmothers will relish her scenes – all silks, snarls and piercing screams – but unfortunately this musical misfires. 23 januray – 7 April

Time Out (*****) Written by Tom Wicker
Joyous, madcap musical reinvention of the cult Clint Eastwood film. What's that you say? You want a show about cowboys that's also a soap opera, which also involves disco? And you want it to be one of the year's best new musicals? Well, slap my thigh and roll up to 'Bronco Billy'. Adapted by Chicago-born writer Dennis Hackin from his own 1979 film, it's inspired by his parents, who always wanted to be cowboys. It sees a down-on-their-luck troupe of Wild West entertainers head to Hollywood for an audition they hope will transform their fortunes. They're accompanied by a chocolate company heiress (in disguise) and pursued by her slimy husband, murderous stepmother, a lawyer and a hitman. Director Hunter Bird takes the late-'70s setting and runs with it, casting its madcap caper vibe in bright colours and every orange of beige. It's a beautifully pitched, disco-ball reflection of an era of TV and film, complete with great practical effects and some genre-bending choreography, which feels new and unique. The revolving set also sees the troupe's van becoming a ramshackle character in its own right. It's all anchored by the well-balanced mix of sweetness and saltiness in Hackin's script, which is both a sly wink to its inspirations and a touching ode to family wherever you find it, as well as some stupidly catchy songs by Chip Rosenbloom and John Torres. These provide the connective tissue that holds the production's mash-up of genres

together, from telling a love story to revelling in arch soap opera excess. The latter is grabbed with both hands by Victoria Hamilton-Barrett, as stepmother Constance Lily, wearing the kind of wig that deserves its own spin-off series and an Emmy award. Somehow channelling Liza Minelli by way of all the best Joans – Cusack's psychopathic black widow in 'The Addams Family Values' and Collins's Alexis Carrington in Dynasty – she tears through scenes like a deliriously fun tornado. She imbues every song with charisma to spare. But no one's lumbered with the thankless 'straight' role in this colourful line-up. Tarinn Callender brings abundant heart as ex-army vet Bronco Billy, the big-dreaming but hopeless businessman 'father' to his family of misfits; as secret heiress Antoinette, who helps to turn the troupe's fortunes around, Emily Benjamin shades in her character arc with a hint of prickle and a mean left hook; as Billy's no-nonsense right-hand woman, Doc Blue, Karen Mavundukure's singing voice could power the London train network; while Josh Butler is sweetly clueless as an ex-car thief. Charing Cross Theatre has a hit on its hands. This joyful piece of storytelling, brilliantly performed by its cast, succeeds in being both sincere and funny. Not one thing or another, but entirely its own thing, it deserves to keep on travellin' in London for a long while yet.

WhatsOnStage (***) Written by Theo Bosanquet
Well, howdy partner and yeehaw, this screen-to-stage musical is bringing a serious dose of Wild West kitsch to the London stage. Adapted from a largely forgotten 1980 comedy western starring Clint Eastwood and Sondra Locke (the book is by scriptwriter Dennis Hackin), it tells the story of a sharp-shooter who falls for the heiress of a candy business when she winds up joining his travelling show to escape her scheming stepmother. Plot-wise, it sits somewhere between Annie Get Your Gun and Crazy for You, even if musically it falls far below that tier. The songs, by Chip Rosenbloom and John Torres, with additional lyrics by Michele Brourman, are a patchy collection and there are at least six too many (it commits that cardinal musical sin of communicating every character intention via the medium of cheesy ballad). It's schmaltzy, saccharine and leans so heavily on cowboy clichés that it's in danger of choking on its own lasso. But fortunately, Hunter Bird's production has its tongue planted so firmly in its cheek that it works a strange kind of magic that by the end leaves you smiling as wide as the Grand Canyon (look, if you can't beat them, join them on the platitudes I say). A huge part of its charm is thanks to the wondrous cast, who imbue the show with more star power than it deserves. In the central roles, Tarinn Callender and Emily Benjamin provide a clear reminder of their West End creds, combining accomplished vocals with a comedic touch and convincing chemistry. Callender's baritone brings real richness to numbers such as "I'm Gonna Be Strong" and "It's Just a Dance" (the programme doesn't contain a list of song titles, so I'm making some assumptions here), while Benjamin's Antoinette shows why she was recently round the corner playing Sally Bowles. They're well supported by other members of the travelling troupe in Henry Maynard's clown Lefty, Helen K Wint and Aharon Rayner's lovable couple Lorraine and Joe, Josh Butler's lasso-twirling Leonard and Karen Mavundukure's straight-talking ringmaster Doc Blue – whose stirring delivery of "Stand Up" is a highlight. But the undoubted show-stealer is Victoria Hamilton-Barritt, who channels a dash of the late great Chita Rivera in her riotously villainous turn as Constance, living up to every wicked stepmother trope there ever was as she plots the assassination of Antoinette alongside her lawyer (Chris Jared), son-in-law (Silas Wyatt-Barke) and the worst hitman in history (Alexander McMorran). The set design by Amy Jane Cook is suitably carnivalesque and features a Priscilla-sized bus that revolves with dizzying regularity and provides the scene for many of the circus 'family' gatherings, as they traverse the States in pursuit of Hollywood fame. Sarah Mercade's colourful costumes reflect the score's heady mix of pop, soul, country and disco (with a heavy dash of Zippo thrown in). And the band, under musical director Marcus Carter-Adams, is excellent – a particular shout out to Nik Carter's soaring sax. The constituent parts are all pretty stellar. Give this company a show from the golden age, and I've no doubt they could win a West End transfer. But as it stands, it's more of a curio – albeit a clearly well-funded one. Still, as a way to clear the winter blues, you could certainly do a lot worse, and when Billy and his crew croon "Ride with Us" with such enthusiasm, you're left with little choice but to jump aboard.

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

PALLADIUM

Sunday 10 March 2024, Sunday Night at the London Palladium with Bill Kenwright CBE - Memorial

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

WYNDHAM'S

***THE UNFRIEND by STEVEN MOFFAT director MARK GATISS lights MARK HENDERSON sound/music ELLA WAHLSTRÖM video/animation ANDRZEJ GOULDING with LEE MACK peter, SARAH ALEXANDER debbie, FRANCES BARBER elsa, NICK SAMSPON the neighbour, MUZZ KHAN pc junkin, JEM MATTHEWS alex, MADDIE HOLLIDAY rosie

Blanche Marvin Critique
An awkward comedy following the adventures of a con lady. A mediocre experience that is passable. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

Time Out (***) Written by Tim Bano
Now led by Lee Mack and Sarah Alexander, Steven Moffat's comedy is lightweight but a pleasant enough way to spend a couple of hours. There were indignant jabs from critics when Steven Moffat's debut play hit the West End last year, transferring from Chichester. 'Well it wouldn't get a West End run if it wasn't by the former Doctor Who showrunner and creator of Sherlock' was the gist, and that's probably true; it almost certainly wouldn't get a

second West End run if it didn't have the likes of Moffat and his Sherlock colleague Mark Gatiss involved. But it's a decently funny play with a great premise: awkwardly British couple Peter and Debbie meet a voluble American woman on a cruise. 'You must look us up if you're ever in town' they say to each other, but Elsa Jean Krakowski follows through and turns up on their doorstep unannounced. It also turns out she might be a murderer. The only difference here in its second stint is a casting reshuffle: out go Amanda Abbington and the sublime Reece Shearsmith as Debbie and Peter, in come Sarah Alexander and Lee Mack in roles that could almost be made for them. Almost, because although they've got long teeth in sitcoms – Mack with about a thousand series of 'Not Going Out' and Alexander with a pedigree that stretches back to Moffat's own sitcom roots when she starred in 'Coupling' – the weird thing about the play is that it's not quite a sitcom. The setup is there, as is the living room set, and the high hit rate of gags. But this isn't a half-hour jobbie. They've got to sustain it over two hours, with a script that has some saggy stretches. Frances Barber remains a scenery-chewing delight as Elsa, hideously American in her over-friendliness and her velour tracksuits and her 'people positive' attitude, but inscrutable enough to leave just a trace of doubt about her nature and motives. It's a production made by a talented group, but a group who are all doing stuff that's just missed the target of those talents: Moffat, a TV writer, doing a play. Gatiss, usually an actor and writer, debuting as a director. Mack ever so slightly shackled by a script he has to stick to. You're half hoping, half expecting he'll ad-lib a little, but there's not really any room for that here, and so he seems a tiny bit diminished. So yes it's patchy, and a bit stiff, and a bit dated. The best scene – a wonderfully puerile bit of farce involving diarrhoea and a man brandishing a toilet brush – is completely unnecessary to plot or structure or anything really. It's there just because it's funny. In this version, too, that scene earns its place a bit less without the intensely uptight Shearsmith conveying more in an anguished facial expression than some actors do in their whole career. Mack does a decent job, but he sits at sitcom level, never digging too deep. But who's coming for depth? It's a laugh, and there are far worse ways to spend two hours in a theatre. 16 December 2023 – 9 March 2024

Independent (**) Written by Isobel Lewis
Steven Moffat's debut play is smug and sitcom-ish. Frances Barber steals the show as the murderer who came to tea in this inconsistent production. The Unfriend has a great premise… for a sitcom. It also has a prestige TV cast to match, with Amanda Abbington, Reece Shearsmith and Frances Barber all assembled to tell the story of a middle-class couple who accidentally invite a serial killer into their home. But this isn't a sitcom. It's the debut play from Sherlock creator and former Doctor Who showrunner Steven Moffat, directed by Mark Gatiss, and the story gets bogged down by writing that's inconsistent in quality. Middle class couple Peter (Shearsmith) and Debbie (Abbington) are soaking up the sun on a cruise when they meet Elsa Jean Krakowski (Barber), a loud, charming American. She's decidedly un-PC and rattles off fat jokes while spouting about the dangers of vaccines, but is – we're told – a laugh. That is, until Elsa invites herself to their Chiswick home and one perfunctory google reveals that Elsa is a suspect in not one, but six murders – including her husband. "She's a murderer and we're too embarrassed to bring it up," says Debbie, with an exasperated cry. This revelation is the crux of Moffat's comedy, which is less about murder than British awkwardness. In one scene, we see Peter and Debbie sternly tell Elsa what they've learnt and ask her to leave, only to then realise it was a dream sequence. The reality, unsurprisingly, is far more pathetic. Shearsmith is given most of the funny lines, while Abbington is the naturalistic straight man doing Proper Acting. But her part feels underwritten and leaves her resorting to being the finger-wagging fun sponge. Barber, meanwhile, is a tremendous physical comedian, wailing in pain and shrieking with laughter. Your eyes are drawn to her from the moment she arrives, baring her feet and swaggering around in a velour tracksuit with the words "choose life" encrusted on the back in diamante. Where The Unfriend is let down is in its script. There's an icky smugness to the writing; every genuinely funny line undercut by unbearable comments of "she's Murder Poppins!" and "Who likes flowers? They're just vegetables for looking at". When the action begins to lag, Moffat resorts to long stretches of toilet humour and political commentary. Both are clearly attempts to elicit laughs, but where the former really works (Marcus Onilude stealing the show as a police officer emptying his bowels in their downstairsbathroom), the latter feels tepid and obvious. There are also gaping holes in the plot that are simply never explained. Peter and Debbie are posited as the average couple, yet there's no attempt to explain how this Observer-reading, middle-class pair manage to take frequent month-long cruise trips with two teenage kids at home. It's a shame, because Moffat's play has potential. As Peter and Debbie watch pantomime villain Elsa turn their teenage kids from apathetic and angry to sweet and hard-working, they lament: "She's the killer who came to stay and every day she's improving our lives." In the final moments, there's a genuinely good twist. While I won't spoil, it almost makes it worth it. But not quite.

Evening Standard (****) Written by Nick Curtis
What a hoot. Amanda Abbington, Reece Shearsmith and Frances Barber excel in this uproarious, if somewhat contrived, comedy of English embarrassment by former Doctor Who and Sherlock showrunner Steven Moffat. The story of a couple too polite and uptight to ask a suspected killer to leave their home, it has the meticulous bourgeois manners and spiraling hysteria of a darker Alan Ayckbourn play. Abbington and Shearsmith are Peter and Debbie, befriended on a cruise by Barber's voluptuously eccentric, Trump-supporting Elsa Jean Krakowski. Think kaftan-clad Jennifer Coolidge in The White Lotus but with more gleeful calculation, and you're there. Shortly before Elsa inveigles herself into their London home, Debbie discovers she is the subject of a crime podcast and suspected of murdering her father, her first husband and at least four others with poison. Improbable, yes: but apparently something similar really happened to friends of Moffat's, except it was only three alleged murders and the woman got off on a technicality. What follows is a relentlessly snowballing orgy of cringe and discomfiture. Elsa's arrival initially gives Peter and Debbie's stroppy teenage son and daughter (Gabriel Howell and Maddie Holliday, mining gold from slight roles) one more reason to hate their parents. Then she begins to work a kind of

unifying magic on the family – "she's Murder Poppins" as Debbie puts it – which is almost worse. Tensions are further ratcheted up by Michael Simkins, pitch-perfect as a neighbour so dull no one can remember his name, constantly intruding to debate a collapsing garden wall. And by the arrival of a policeman who develops stomach trouble after Elsa serves him a sandwich. The action turns lavatorial and farcical in the second half. If you surrender to the absurdity, it's a delight. Shearsmith delivers an impeccable, physically detailed comic performance as the harried Peter but it's Abbington who really impresses with her lightness and deft timing. I particularly loved her monologue about how she'd actually quite like to murder some of her acquaintances. "You've met Anthea," she reminds Peter, as if it closes the argument. But it's Barber's Elsa, a glorious grotesque, who gets the best of the show's many killer lines. On the cruise ship she tells Peter he's so tense he "could snap a proctologist off at the knuckle". To Peter's son, she inappropriately remarks that she has so many chins her body resembles "the underside of a caterpillar". Barber's gleeful delight in the part is palpable. Apart from a few saggy moments, Mark Gatiss directs this Chichester Festival Theatre production with aplomb. He and Shearsmith made up half of The League of Gentlemen, he worked on Sherlock with Moffat and Abbington, and he and Barber are part of the wider Doctor Who family. I can just about remember the days when theatre sneered at TV talent. But this love-in of starry small screen creatives fills a hole in the West End as a much-needed, riotous bit of fun.

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

WYNDHAM'S

***LONG DAY'S JOURNEY INTO NIGHT by EUGENE O'NEILL director JEREMY HERRIN décor/costume LIZZIE CLACHAN lights JACK KNOWLES original music/sound TOM GIBBONS with BRIAN COX james tyrone, PATRICIA CLARKSON mary tyrone, DARYL McCORMACK james tyrone jr, LAURIE KYNASTON edmund tyrone, LOUISA HARLAND cathleen

Blanche Marvin Critique
A disappointing Brian Cox gave a repeated performance of the bombastic father, actor and husband. The disappointment came from the lack of depth of the tragic relationships within this family. Dominated by the mother who is a drug addict in order to avoid the pain of her illness while the youngest son has been discovered to have a serious illness of tuberculosis. An intense production lacking the disturbance of a tragic family. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

Time Out (***) Written by Andrzej Lukowski
Brian Cox stars in this tender take on Eugene O'Neill's shattering masterpiece. Having signed his life over to a little show called 'Succession' for six years, Brian Cox is both making up for lost time and gleefully cashing in his move from 'well-respected actor' to 'bona fide superstar'. Last autumn he warmed up by starring as JS Bach in new play 'The Score' at Theatre Royal Bath. And now he returns to the West End for the first time in a decade to headline Eugene O'Neill's masterwork 'Long Day's Journey Into Night'. Hopefully he's got a bit more in the tank after this, as despite a superb supporting cast, I'd say Cox doesn't quite nail the role of James Tyrone, the patriarch of a disintegrating family, heavily based on O'Neill's own dad (the playwright famously refused to allow the play be staged until after his death). Cox is decent, but I found his performance diffused by the production: director Jeremy Herrin takes a typically forgiving view of the Tyrones, which pays off elsewhere, but I think blunts Cox's James; a successful actor embittered by creative failure and his failure as a father and husband.
There's also another issue: fair or not, it's hard to shake comparisons to Logan Roy - speaking in the same fruity brogue and in a role that's very much about a father attempting to relate to his troubled sons who he himself has fucked up, there's just something a bit… unhelpful about the resonance. The men are not the same: James is a frailer figure than the monstrous Logan (he certainly swears a lot less). But aspects of his Logan blur into his James and leave this character a bit lacking in definition. I think even a different accent would have helped. He is still good, and his performance exerts more of a hold over the role as the play wears on, particularly the scene set in the quiet of the night when a tired James finally confesses his sense of failure to his son Edmund (Laurie Kynaston). The warmer, more-generous-than-usual direction finds its best outlet in a superlative turn from US actor Patricia Clarkson as James's wife Mary. She is a character who can come across as waspish and embittered, and rightly so. But Clarkson has taken a different route: when she's not loaded on pills, her Mary comes across like a sad, wise ghost. When she tells James that he never allowed their house to feel like a home, or when she brings up his past infidelities, she does so not to wound but to plaintively state the truth of her situation. Even when she's unable to admit to her family that she is taking pills again, you can understand why she turns to them. She describes a lonely life shackled to James's career, boxed in by her family's concern for her, haunted by the death of her second son. When she sinks into a narcotic fug she's still the same gentle woman, only she has briefly dissolved her unbearable present. It is desperately sad. In a role that has somehow been recast twice since this production was announced, Kynaston is very solid as a peppy Edmund - his boyishness hasn't been ruined by booze and bitterness; he's the most vital member of this moribund family; we believe he might overcome his illness. I liked Daryl McCormack in the smaller-but-vital role of older brother Jamie – he brings a plain-spokenness to the part, and a palpable sense of love and care for Kynaston's Edmund. Even when he drunkenly admits his darkest thoughts, there's the sense he's only doing so because he wants to protect his little brother. There's also a lovely turn from Louisa Harland as the Tyrones's sparky Irish maid Cathleen – she's funny, but moreover, she's undamaged; there's something soothing about her brief appearances, a reminder the whole world isn't as messed up as this family. Herrin's warm approach works a little better here than it did with his recent revival of 'The Glass Menagerie': it is key to O'Neill's magnum opus that the Tyrones love each other deeply, regardless of what a disaster they have made of it. Still, I'd like to see a bit more daring than a tweak to the acting next time this play

is revived. This is the third 'Long Day's Journey' to hit the West End in 12 years, and none have exactly been formally wild. There's some nifty sound design here from Tom Gibbons – sepulchral fog horns, and subtler ambient sounds – but mostly this is a very straight production. It remains a truly great play, perhaps the greatest American play of them all, but while the masterworks of O'Neill's peers Miller and Williams have proven ripe for dramatic reinvention in recent years, 'Long Day's Journey Into Night' seems curiously resistant. It's a daunting play, yes, but it shouldn't be a museum piece. 19 March – 8 June

Evening Standard (****) Written by Nick Curtis
It's typical of the wry, bloody-minded dedication Brian Cox brings to his craft that, at 77, he's followed the Shakespearean TV role of Logan Roy in Succession with the monolithic family tragedy of 20th century American theatre. Eugene O'Neill's autobiographical play sees actor James Tyrone locked in an implacable knot of addiction, regret and resentment with his wife Mary (the mighty Patricia Clarkson) and sons Jamie and Edmund (Daryl McCormack and Laurie Kynaston). It's a long and challenging work, the arc of a single day in 1912 condensed into three-plus hours in a dowdy Connecticut living room. The characters flick between hatred and love as they play out intricate variations of old recriminations and rapprochements in the first half. They get huge, chewy, self-explanatory monologues in the second. Despite minor early line-fluffs from Cox and Clarkson on opening night, Jeremy Herrin's production is full of pathos and ruined grandeur, with superb performances all round. Tyrone is an Irish Catholic who dragged himself out of poverty to become a noted Shakesperean, like O'Neill's father. (I could also draw a parallel with Cox's path out of Scottish hardship, but he'd probably tell me to f**k off.) Having squandered his talent, though, Tyrone is an angry, drunken has-been: a miser who'll throw money at worthless property and bar-room flatterers but stint his family. Wastrel Jamie and consumptive would-be writer Edmund are kept close but pushed away. Both are haunted by a middle brother whose death – along with the loss of her genteel life to the grimy peregrinations of theatre – turned their mother into a morphine-using ghost. Cox is magnetic as Tyrone, volcanic one moment, maudlin the next. He's well-matched by Clarkson whose prim body language and sly evasions betray the wariness of the secret addict. Tyrone's bombastic soliloquies are compelling, Mary's maundering recollections more than usually bearable. Kynaston, a former winner of The Evening Standard's Theatre Award for newcomers, brings great delicacy and watchfulness to Edmund: he also resembles Clarkson in profile. McCormack, so breezy in Bad Sisters and Good Luck to You, Leo Grande, brings a malign, defeated charisma to Jamie. Derry Girls' Louisa Harland turns the caricatured Oirish servant Kathleen into a gust of light relief. Though the strained bonds of affection are apparent here, Herrin shows us that each of the Tyrones is selfishly feeding an inner demon. Designer Lizzie Clachan emphasises the oppressive, inescapable nature of their tragedy with a cramped box of a set. Hell is other family members, just as it was for the Roys. I promised myself I wouldn't make too many comparisons between Cox's sublime turn in the best TV show in recent years, and his towering performance here. But, you know, f**k it: this is O'Neill for the Succession generation.

Guardian (***) Written by Arifa Akbar
Cox is thrilling as an overbearing patriarch but it's Clarkson who steals the show in Eugene O'Neill's agonising family drama. The overbearing patriarch in Eugene O'Neill's semi-autobiographical drama is an actor who feels his career has been straitjacketed by typecasting. Could James Tyrone be speaking for Brian Cox too who, playing him, steps almost seamlessly from Succession's paterfamilias to O'Neill's flawed father marshalling obstreperous sons? Even if so, Cox is, as always, thrilling to watch. Yet it is Patricia Clarkson as his "morphine fiend" of a wife, just returned from a sanatorium and tumbling back into addiction, who steals the show. Clarkson exudes vulnerability along with hard denial. For all the play's period elements – it is set in 1912 – hers feels like a true, infuriating, compassionate portrait of an addict. Tyrone is less textured, a disgruntled and judgmental father switching between anger, flecks of wry humour and expressions of love. First staged posthumously in 1956 against O'Neill's instruction that it not be dramatised for 25 years after his death, it might represent the gruelling apex of classic American dysfunction family dramas. We spend a day with the Tyrones, during the course of which the source of Mary's addiction is revealed along with the family's points of weakness and pain, from James's tight-fistedness and tendencies towards drink to wrangles between his sons, Edmund (Laurie Kynaston), a failed poet with TB, and Jamie (Daryl McCormack), a failed actor and drunk. Under Jeremy Herrin's direction, the production does not seek to leaven the drama's gloomy spirit: it is a long, talking play with little action delicately well-crafted which slides between domestic exchange and accusation, anger, emotional conflagration. Here it is stripped to its elemental state as the family convene in their summer home and vacillate between love and hate. Anger is tempered by anxious love that ironically seem to fuel each other's various addictions: parents wring their hands over Edmund's illness, sons wring theirs over their mother's soul-sapping addiction. In one pique, Mary tells James the family house has never felt like a home and Lizzie Clachan's set, spare and wooden, reflects her sentiment. It has the look of early American puritanism, Shaker-like in its simple lines, severe colour palette and sleek lighting (by Jack Knowles). There are doorways within doorways, it seems, which gesture towards Mary's sense of being spied upon too, although the set-up, as empty as it is, does not quite carry a sense of over-heated crowdedness. "There's gloom in the air you could cut with a knife," says James. He is right. This drama is so stark it seems almost Beckettian, despite its naturalism. Yet there is forgiveness and tenderness between the hard edges, especially between Mary and James – Cox and Clarkson have a lovely, natural chemistry. And although characters spiral into resentment and rage, they always return to love and togetherness, which makes this distinct from the emotional desolations of a Tennessee Williams drama. Louisa Harland, for her part, is so effective as the family maid, Cathleen, that you want more of her. She lifts every scene she is in, turning a functional role into a comic highlight. Some scenes glitter with dark energy, and are truly tragic. Others feel protracted, the play's old-fashioned exposition exposed, and the over-used device of characters narrating memories feeling like lengthy

confessions. The circularity of family argument and accusation, are grinding too, and do not always absorb us, emotionally. At three and a half hours it feels withering. Then again, that is the point here. This is the ultimate family reckoning, with some light, but mostly shade.

PHOENIX

****STRANGER THINGS THE FIRST SHADOW by KATE TREFRY original story THE DUFFER BROTHERS, JACK THORNE, KATE TREFRY based on NETFLIX SERIES 'STRANGER THINGS' created by THE DUFFER BROTHERS director STEPHEN DALDRY co-director JUSTIN MARTIN décor MIRIAM BUETHER costume BRIGITTE REIFFENSTUEL lights JON CLARK sound PAUL ARDITTI original music/arrangements D.J. WALDE illusions/visual effects JAMIE HARRISONA, CHRIS FISHER video/visual effects 59 PRODUCTIONS choreographer CORAL MESSAM movement LYNNE PAGE with SHANE ATTWOOLL chief hopper, KEMI AWODERU sue anderson, CHASE BROWN lonnie byers, CHRISTOPHER BUCKLEY bob newby, AMMAR DUFFUS charles sinclair, GILLES GEARY ted wheeler, FLORENCE GUY karen childress, MAX HARWOOD alan munson, MICHAEL JIBSON victor creel, OSCAR LLOYD james hopper jr., LOUIS MCCARTNEY henry creel, ISABELLA PAPPAS joyce maldonado, MATTHEW PIDGEON principal newby, CALUM ROSS walter henderson, MAISIE NORMA SEATON claudia yount, PATRICK VAILL dr brenner, LAUREN WARD virginia creel, ELLA KARUNA WILLIAMS patty newby, ANIKA BOYLE/FAITH DELANEY/IMOGEN TURNER alice creel, SAMUEL BAXTER/REYA-NYOMI BROWN/PATRICIA CASTRO/LYDIA FRASER/MARK HAMMERSLEY/TOM PETERS/KINGDOM SIBANDA/MEESHA TURNER ensemble, TRICIA ADELE-TURNER/LAUREN ARNEY/ISAAC GRYN, BENJAMIN LAFAYETTE/TIANA SIMONE/DANNY SYKES

Blanche Marvin Critique
A most extraordinary technical performance of the magic one can create on stage with very simple material. It is a "phantasmagorical tragedy about Henry Creel (Louis McCartney), whose father was the sole survivor of the naval vessel. The rest of the play is set 16 years later, in 1959, where we meet a troubled teenage Henry as he moves to Hawkins, Indiana with his damaged dad and overprotective mum." (Andrzej Lukowski, Time Out). The adventure of this production is in the magical undertones. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

Time Out (***) Written by Andrzej Lukowski
'Stranger Things' fans should get down to this stage prequel pronto, but the visually stunning show would have been so much better with a ruthless edit. 'Stranger Things: The First Shadow' is a sprawling maximalist monolith, a gargantuan entertainment that goes beyond being a mere 'play'. It's too unwieldy and too indulgent to be a theatrical classic. But nonetheless, this prequel to the Netflix retro horror smash is the very antithesis of a cynical screen-to-stage adaptation. As overwhelming in scale as as the show's monstrous Mindflayer, it's a seethingly ambitious three-hour extravaganza of groundbreaking special effects, gratuitous easter eggs and a wild, irreverent theatricality that feels totally in love with the source material while being appreciably distinct from it. It's clearly made by a fan, that being big-name director Stephen Daldry, who used his Netflix connections (he's the man responsible for 'The Crown') to leverage an official collab with the Duffer Brothers, creators of the retro horror smash. It starts as it means to go on, with pretty much the most technically audacious opening ten minutes of a show I've ever seen, as we watch a US naval vessel deploy an experimental cloaking device in 1943, to catastrophic effect. Yes, the sets wobble a bit, and yes, writer Kate Trefry's dialogue is basically just some sailors bellowing cliches. But we're talking about watching a giant vessel getting pulled into a horrifying parallel dimension on stage. It is awesome; and when it cut into a thunderous playback of Kyle Dixon and Michael Stein's iconic electronic score and a full-blown projected credits sequence I was pretty much ready to punch the air screaming. The technical team deserves more praise than I can adequately give them: particular respect to designer Miriam Buether, video and visual effects designers 59 Productions, and illusion and visual effects designers Jamie Harrison and Chris Fisher, but essentially everyone in the groaning credits list deserves extravagant praise. But there's a lot more to 'The First Shadow' than spectacular horror set-pieces. At its core, it's a phantasmagorical tragedy about Henry Creel (Louis McCartney), whose father was the sole survivor of the naval vessel. The rest of the play is set 16 years later, in 1959, where we meet a troubled teenage Henry as he moves to Hawkins, Indiana with his damaged dad and overprotective mum. If you've watched the fourth season of the show you'll be aware of exactly who Henry is – or rather, what he becomes – but so long as you're on board with an FX-heavy drama about a boy with supernatural powers, struggling between his best and worst instincts, I don't think newcomers will have a huge problem here. McCartney gives an excellent performance as Henry, a sensitive young man whose colossal powers would seem to doom him, and yet who still wants to be normal, and who strikes up a genuine friendship with fellow outsider Patty (Ella Karuna Williams). The story of his fall is both touchingly and gruesomely rendered, and as a lean two-and-a-half-hour chronicle of one man's descent this would really be something. Unfortunately, there's a monumental amount of bloat, of the sort that you get when a story is created by four different writers: that's the Duffers, 'Cursed Child' playwright Jack Thorne, and Trefry herself, who does a solid job of writing it all up, but you feel has been left with a lot of bases she's required to cover. I like the TV show, and understand why it was decided that teenage incarnations of its older characters would be included. But it would have generally been better if these were restricted to cameos, rather than giving Hopper (Oscar Lloyd) and Joyce (Isabella Pappas) lengthy subplots that add little. Although it does all tie back to Henry in a

tangential fashion, having Lloyd's Hopper investigate a spate of pet murders as if he were already an actual policeman and not a kid at school is a bit cringe. Pappas's Joyce being the head of the school drama club works better. But having Hopper and Joyce go out Scooby Doo-ing once weird shit starts happening feels like a pointless sideshow. And the choice of Howard Richardson's forgotten curio 'The Dark of the Moon' as the school play – which you're unlikely to know, but are exposed to at length – feels like a thoroughly indigestible piece of symbolism. The zanier stuff also missed the mark for me. Because Henry is a much darker and more tragic character than the kids from the TV show, the wackier high school sequences – and a full-blown musical theatre number! – felt like overegging the pudding. It's a bleak, sad central story, but I think the writers and co-directors Daldry and Justin Martin feel they need to goof to keep it in line with the TV show, and I'm not convinced they were right. Some of the show link-ups are great. Patrick Vaill is superb as a fanatical younger version of creepy scientist Doctor Brenner. And Christopher Buckley is the beating heart of the show as the sweet younger incarnation of Bob Newby – frankly a bit annoying as an adult, but beautifully open and vulnerable here (and better integrated into the plot than Hopper and Joyce). To be clear, if you're any sort of 'Stranger Things' fan and you can afford the ticket, it would be ridiculous for you not to go. 'The First Shadow' suffers from dramatic bloat and tonal inconsistency. The biggest frustration with it is the sense that it might have been show of the year with 30 minutes of really ruthless cuts. But you're not getting another 'Stranger Things' stage play any time soon, and the things it does get right, it gets right stunningly well. It's not perfect, but it's as close to the Upside Down as you're going to get without having your head bitten off by a demogorgon.

Guardian (*****) Written by Arifa Akbar
Phoenix theatre, London. This origin story has all the dark mystery of the Duffer Brothers' Netflix series and delivers one coup de theatre after another. It starts with those floating red letters and that electro-ethereal music. The intro creates the surreal effect of Netflix's sci-fi juggernaut being brought to life as a stage-sized facsimile before our eyes. But the big surprise about this prequel to the TV series, about high-schoolers who tap into the dangerous world of the Upside Down, is that it is neither derivative nor an exercise in imitation. This is breathtaking theatre with its own arresting imagination. With an original story by the Duffer Brothers, Jack Thorne and Kate Trefry, we are still in Hawkins, Indiana, where pets are mysteriously dying, but it kicks off exactly four decades before the 1983 start of the first series. Writer Trefry takes a flashback from the fourth season and turns it into a typically complicated plot, although my 10-year-old companion (the guidance is for 12+) had no problem following it. The production has the same sense of sprawling mystery, beginning with the disappearance of a wartime naval ship and a laboratory experiment that explains the birth of the Upside Down. There is no Eleven yet but Henry Creel (Louis McCartney), the new kid in town, brings dark powers. He has an oddball romance with Patty (Ella Karuna Williams) and a sinister relationship with Dr Brenner (Patrick Vaill). There is speed, action and scale, with one coup de theatre after another and immense craft in Stephen Daldry and Justin Martin's co-direction. A quotidian reality of high-school hallways and toilets morphs into eye-popping alternate worlds. These switches happen in seconds, the gothic returning to the ordinary on Miriam Buether's nimble set. Jon Clark's stunning lighting switches between sinister and sunny, while characters transform with it. There is a dazzling doubling to this, which adults might read as split selves while kids will merely find thrilling. It is truly dark too, with horror film jumps and menacing gurgles (great sound design by Paul Arditti), contrasted with a bright-eyed, retro Americana laid on thick and smatterings of song. Even if you can't keep up with the plot, it is underpinned by serious inquiries into the psychopathy of war, toxic inheritance, and the search for good parents and release from bad ones. It also touches on othering and adolescent anxieties about being "normal". The show has fine, fleet acting too. Joyce Maldonado (Isabella Pappas) has not yet made her mistakes with Lonnie (Chase Brown) and is full of fire. The swaggering James Hopper Jr (Oscar Lloyd), who will later become the town's police chief like his father, gets embroiled in the central investigation with Joyce and Bob Newby (Christopher Buckley). Those familiar with the series will be able to trace storylines back but the production is not just a clever parlour game for fans. If you come at it afresh, it is still irresistible. A spurt of lazy film-to-stage adaptations have recently hit the West End but this parallel world is a winner. From 14th December 2023

Evening Standard (*****) Written by Nick Curtis
This astonishing show turns normal expectations of theatre upside down. Director Stephen Daldry has taken the Duffer Brothers' Eighties-set Netflix sci-fi hit and magicked it into a spectacular, multimedia prequel, full of enough thrills, scares and knowing nods to please fans and the uninitiated in equal measure. It's comparable to the theatrical alchemy of Harry Potter and the Cursed Child, but far more technically sophisticated, pushing monsters into the auditorium while a quintet of assured young lead actors keep things on a – mostly – human scale. A couple of lip-pursingly unlikely plot twists shunt Kate Trefry's bulging narrative past the three-hour mark, but it scarcely matters. As a piece of total theatre, this is streets ahead of anything else. It begins with a pre-prequel suggesting the Philadelphia Experiment of 1943 – a mythical attempt to render the USS Eldridge invisible – first breached the wall to another, hellish dimension. I won't spoil it but the design team conjures up a spectacular set-piece onstage. Then we fast forward to Hawkins, Indiana in 1959 where Joyce Maldonado – played as a harassed mum by Winona Ryder on the TV show, and here as a drily formidable high-schooler by Isabella Pappas – is putting on a school play. The authoritarian principal thinks she's doing Oklahoma! but secretly she's staging folk horror The Dark of the Moon, about a witch boy in love with a human girl. In the leads she casts the principal's adopted, mixed-heritage daughter Patty (Ella Karuna Williams) and haunted new boy Henry Creel (Louis McCartney) whose presence tends to make light fittings pop and radios scream with static. When the cast's pets

start dying horribly, the principal's son Bob (Christopher Buckley) and police chief Hopper's unloved boy James (Oscar Lloyd) – both with the hots for Joyce – investigate. I can't begin to detail the nerdgasm of references to classic horror and sci-fi, comic books, ham radio and rock 'n' roll the creators subtly weave together (the story was created by Trefry with the Duffers and Jack Thorne). Or the way they distill the conservatism and paranoia of the Fifties and anticipate the freer Sixties. I can tell you there is mind-boggling 3D-film imagery, true-crime style newspaper montages, clever use of doubles and misdirection, and gruesome physical effects. Williams and McCartney both make impressive stage debuts here, but the latter seems to make Henry disjoint and mutate before our eyes. The staging adopts the TV series' red neon colour coding and its ominous theme music. And you can see in the young characters' performances seeds of their older onscreen incarnations, including Patrick Vaill's thunderingly menacing Dr Brenner. Equally, you can enjoy this immersive, overwhelming experience, which has a love for live performance at its very core, without having seen a second of the TV show. Daldry, the consummate showman of British culture, has done it again.

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

DONMAR

***THE HUMAN BODY by LUCY KIRKWOOD director MICHAEL LONGHURST AND ANN YEE décor FLY DAVIS lights JOSHUA PHARO sound/composition BEN AND MAX RINGHAM video NATHAN AMZI AND JOE RANSOM fight BRET YOUNT intimacy SARA GREEN with KEELEY HAWES iris elcock, JACK DAVENPORT george blythe, TOM GOODMAN-HILL bob danvers-walker/graham hawes/julian elcock/mr sieves/duncan/dustman/waiter/reynolds/mr flack/american reporter/usher, SIOBHÁN REDMOND helen mackeson/mrs howells/mrs arbuthnot/shirley/mr clegg/waitress, PEARL MACKIE interviewer/gladys/jean/mrs sieves/marion cutler/sylvia samuels/judy/mrs thwaite/mr jessup/erica/averill hughes, FLORA JACOBY RICHARDSON/AUDREY KATTAN laura elcock/barbara sieves

Blanche Marvin Critique
It's a play that partially reproduces the film of Brief Encounter on one part and on the other shows the protagonist's life as a working wife which allows us to be introduced to the beginnings of the NHS. It divides the play into two parts which do not succeed as anything newly discovered or interpreted. She is Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

Guardian (***) Written by Arifa Akbar
Hawes and Jack Davenport radiate as postwar lovers in Lucy Kirkwood's cinephile postwar romantic drama set against the birth of the NHS. As debate on the future of the National Health Service rises in urgency week by week (notwithstanding the current junior doctors' strike), theatre is doing the job of reminding us of all we stand to lose by going back to its beginnings. Michael Sheen has just assumed the role of Aneurin Bevan in Nye at the National Theatre, while Lucy Kirkwood sets Bevan's 1948 vision of healthcare "available to all, free of charge" as the backdrop to this love story. The drama pivots around a Shropshire GP and Labour party councillor, Iris Elcock (Keeley Hawes), a proto-new woman juggling the home/work balance. Her staid marriage to an injured ex-navy officer, Julian (Tom Goodman-Hill), shows its cracks after a chance meeting with George Blythe (Jack Davenport), a local man who spent the war in Hollywood. He has returned, apolitical and apathetic, it seems, until he meets Iris. Hawes and Davenport have a potentially explosive chemistry from the moment they meet in a train carriage, while Kirkwood's script crackles with unspoken desires, disappointments, yearning and some fantastic humour. Having recently adapted Roald Dahl's The Witches, Kirkwood shows her range here, often deftly weaving bigger politics with the politics of Iris's marriage and affair. The production is, ostensibly, a paean to British film-making of the period, with references to Brief Encounter and a costume palette bleached of colour so it that looks like a film in motion. Fly Davis's monochromatic set has a sometimes dizzying revolve and a screen capturing Iris and George's black and white romance up close. A roving camera emerges too, along with an imposing spotlight. There is a similar use of film and screen techniques to Jamie Lloyd's recent Sunset Boulevard and The Picture of Dorian Gray, currently starring Sarah Snook. The effect here, under the direction of Michael Longhurst and Ann Yee, takes away from the intensity, and earnestness, of the central love story rather than adding to it. Conceptually, the screen work is inspired – capturing the couple and their intimacies magnified. Sometimes it reaps dividends: when George tentatively reveals his feelings to Iris, we see his fingers grazing hers, and her clasping back, on screen. But more often it has the opposite effect: sometimes diverting us from the thrilling, physical, performances given by Hawes and Davenport, other times giving their romance a generic celluloid sentimentality. Schmaltzy film music accompanies moments of heightened passion, ironically removing us from the moment. Hawes and Davenport are still phenomenal to watch, capturing the surprised headiness of mid-life lovers, while others in the cast (including Siobhán Redmond, Pearl Mackie and Flora Jacoby Richardson, who plays Iris's daughter on opening night) turn actorly cartwheels, playing multiple characters. The marital drama gathers intensity and the play works best when the camera remains off-stage. Kirkwood's script crystallises the struggles of postwar women, newly independent, who face pushback into their old domestic roles. The play perhaps has too many moving parts – thematically, in its plot turns, and in the literal motion on stage. The story of the NHS sometimes fights for primacy with the romance but ultimately rises up, its message powerful. When Julian tries to dismiss Bevan's idea as "bound to fail", Iris corrects him: "The idea will not have failed," she says. "We will have failed the idea." Quite.
19 February – 13 April

Evening Standard (***) Written by Nick Curtis
Keeley Hawes makes an impressive return to live theatre in Lucy Kirkwood's muddled drama set in 1948, which splices the creation of the NHS together with a black-and-white British postwar film romance. A primetime TV favourite for three decades in Spooks, Line of Duty and The Durrells, Hawes shines here in an altruistic role that could be insipid. And she has a worthy foil in Jack Davenport, playing a wittily jaded movie star. Though I kind of loved the play's mix of stridency and scattiness, and the way it juxtaposes theatrical and cinematic action, it's overstuffed, overlong and unfocused. Our heroine is Iris Elcock, a pioneering female Shropshire doctor, Labour councillor and would-be MP. She fights prejudice daily, at work and at home. Her once-supportive GP husband Julian (Tom Goodman-Hill), badly wounded in the war, has cooled on her politically and sexually. Iris also manages the household and their young daughter, who is more interested in Princess Elizabeth's wedding dress than in equality. Still, Iris soldiers brightly on towards the brave new socialist dawn until she is blindsided by George Blythe, a local boy who made a career (and avoided the war) playing handsome cads in Hollywood. Their flirtation is filmed by circling cameras and projected in lustrous monochrome on screens. Though the play acknowledges its heavy debt to Brief Encounter, one of the most pleasing things about it is the immediate, easy, sensual spark between two attractive, careworn, middle-aged characters. Kirkwood supplies them with spry banter and keeps Iris's speeches just the right side of preachy. Goodman-Hill, Siobhán Redmond and Pearl Mackie augment the central performances with cameos that range from the deft to the demented. The production, by Michael Longhurst and Ann Yee, is engrossing but meandering. Designer Fly Davis dresses the cast predominantly in shades of grey against a powder-blue set, suggesting ration-book drabness and also cinematic artifice. Props are handed over by a polished and visible stage management team – the must-have, along with slick video, for fashionable West End shows from Sunset Boulevard to The Picture of Dorian Gray. Kirkwood reminds us how bad things were for the British working class before the welfare state: and that doctors and Churchill's Tories initially voted against an NHS. Hers is one of several plays appearing this year that presumably began life in the crucible of the pandemic. It's therefore full of foreshadowing and bathos. And ultimately it gets lost between conflicting demands: to celebrate feminist pioneers and heroic medics; to coo over postwar British cinema; and to interrogate the myth of national unity in wartime. But Davenport is very funny in it and Hawes is superb. She has the ability to fit her face and body language to the period of any story, and she is luminous here, both IRL and onscreen. It's a triumph in, and over, the material.

Time Out (***) Written by Andrzej Lukowski
Keeley Hawes and Jack Davenport charm in this homage to the early NHS and the film 'Brief Encounter'. This starry drama from Lucy Kirkwood is a period piece about the foundation of the NHS… and also a full-on homage to Noël Coward's 'Brief Encounter'. The year is 1948, and Iris (Keeley Hawes) is a doctor living in south Shropshire during the final months before the launch of the NHS. She's also a Labour councillor, who travels to London once a week to serve as a parliamentary aide. Plus, she's got domestic duties: times being what they are, she is expected to devote a seemly amount of attention to her daughter Laura and husband Julian (Tom Goodman-Hill) - an injured, embittered former navy doctor who is dubious about the government nationalising his practice. Genuinely believing in all these causes, Iris rises to them uncomplainingly. But her life is changed by a (what else?) brief encounter on a train, where she meets dashing minor-league Hollywood actor George (Jack Davenport), a local boy made good who has come home to visit his mother. Although there is a fair amount of scene-setting for the NHS side of the story, once George shows up it's difficult to exaggerate the extent to which the first half of 'The Human Body' feels like a stage remake of 'Brief Encounter'. While Iris and George have different biographical details to the film's Laura and Alec, their love unfolds similarly. Moreover, Michael Longhurst's production plays explicit homage by using live black and white video to film the couple during their scenes together, their damnably attractive faces blown up on a big screen, radiating poise and glamour. If that wasn't obvious enough, at one point they even discuss the film 'Brief Encounter'. The homage drops off in the second half: the silver screen stuff is Iris's fantasy of escape, and the play becomes more about the pragmatic reality of a woman in '40s Britain trying to enact meaningful change on the world. Kirkwood is a mercurial playwright: her last three works were a big budget musical ('The Witches'), a high concept conspiracy thriller ('Rapture') and a ragged raw monologue about police violence towards women ('Maryland'). 'The Human Body' is a lot more MOR than all that - though steeped in interesting detail about the Atlee/Bevan years, it's essentially a fairly conventional period romance that often teeters on melodrama. What differentiates it from ITV teatime dramas is its theatricality: Fly Davis's set and all the props – even a tray of canapés at a party – are NHS blue. Goodman-Hill, Pearl Mackie and Siobhán Redmond have a ball playing different characters; and there are of course the 'Brief Encounter'-isms. But none of this stuff amounts to a masterstroke. As a stage homage to the film it feels overshadowed by Emma Rice's landmark adaptation. And of course the film itself is almost incomparable, virtually a part of the British soul. Invoking comparisons is dangerous because you're doomed to come off second best. Still, the cast sells it: Hawes is terrific as a woman who has given everything she has in the name of her country, her patients and her family and is shocked to discover that she still somehow has her own needs. And Davenport is terrifically fun as a man so mired in his own cynicism that he's shocked to discover how moved he is by Iris's belief in something better. Both actors are playing to type; but they're the right types. It's star casting that pays off. 'The Human Body' is a heartfelt but old-fashioned drama that gets hung up trying to find an original theatrical language. It dreams of being something more than it is. But what it is, is still pretty damn likeable.

GILLIAN LYNNE

***STANDING AT THE SKY'S EDGE music/lyrics RICHARD HAWLEY book CHRIS BUSH director ROBERT HASTIE décor/costume BEN STONES choreographer LYNNE PAGE orchestrator/arranger TOM DEERING lights MARK HENDERSON sound BOBBY AITKEN wigs/hair/makeup CYNTHIA DE LA ROSA musical director/associate music supervisor ALEX BEETSCHEN with ALAYNA ANDERSON young connie, JONATHAN ANDRE max/workman 3, MONIQUE ASHE-PALMER onstage swing, ELIZABETH AYODELE joy, JONATHON BENTLEY gary/nigel/workman 1, ADAM COLBECK-DUNN onstage swing, VIQUICHELE CROSS onstage swing, JAMIE DONCASTER onstage swing, CAROLINE FITZGERALD onstage swing, LUCA FOSTER-LEJEUNE young young jimmy, MYA FOX-SCOTT jenny, JOEL HARPER-JACKSON harry, RENÉE HART young connie, SHARLENE HECTOR grace/alice, SAMUEL JORDAN jimmy, JEROME LINCOLN onstage swing, MEL LOWE connie, ERIC MADGWICK young jimmy, DAVID McKECHNIE joe/workman 2, SEAN McLEVY onstage swing, RACHAEL LOUISE MILLER cathy, BAKER MUKASA george, ALASTAIR NATKIEL marcus/housing officer, CHIOMA NDUKA young connie, LAURA PITT-PULFORD poppy, ADAM PRICE charles/trev/seb, LAURYN REDDING nikki, NICOLA SLOANE vivienne/karen, SAM STOCKS young jimmy, LILLIE-PEARL WILDMAN justine, KAREN WILKINSON onstage swing, RACHAEL WOODING rose

Blanche Marvin Critique
It's a musical which discovers the lives of various families that move into the same flat in an industrial estate over a period of time. The actual singing of the various people who inhabited the flat was specifically performed. But the general feeling of the production's point and purpose seems rather minor compared to the actual performances. This production proves that performance can sometimes overcome nostalgia. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

Time Out (*****) Written by Caroline McGinn
Richard Hawley and Chris Bush's monumental musical love letter to a Sheffield estate is unlike anything else in the West End. I was blown away by the emotional power of this show, about three generations of incomers in Sheffield's iconic – and infamous – brutalist housing estate, Park Hill. It's a stunning achievement, which takes the popular but very different elements of retro pop music, agitprop and soap opera, melts them in the crucible of 50 years of social trauma and forges something potent, gorgeous and unlike any big-ticket musical I've seen before. 'Standing at the Sky's Edge' has deeply local foundations. It's based on local songwriter Richard Hawley's music. And it was made in Sheffield, at the Crucible Theatre, with meticulous care and attention from that theatre's creative team. It's been rightly garlanded with praise and awards already. But its West End transfer makes it clear that this singular show can speak beyond its own backyard. It is part kitchen sink musical, and part state-of-the-nation soap. It documents poverty, migration, hard graft, the painful decline of industry and working-class male pride, the double-edged hope offered by regeneration, the fragile joys of love in 'found families' – not exactly 'jazz hands' themes, but vividly relatable and, more importantly, shared by communities. They deserve to be sung just as loudly as the more familiar stories of triumphant individuals expressing themselves, which tend to leave all this stuff behind. What makes this an instant classic is the Crucible's outstanding production, a true ensemble achievement. It is the right way to approach a community-based story. Divided into three timelines, in the '60s we see optimistic Harry, carrying his bride Rose over the threshold; in the rundown '80s refugee Joy hiding behind a locked door; in the present, posh incomer Poppy is trying to persuade her hilariously awful parents that she's bought into a design icon. All of them struggle with the same scary sink unit, and slap their feelings into the same walls and floors. Director Robert Hastie and choreographer Lynn Page meticulously, brilliantly layer their lives and times into a single shared space. Their social differences and emotional affinities are emotionally sedimented together through deeply affecting snatches of song and dance, rooted in everyday joys and sorrows, and everyday moves, but elevated to a pitch where you're constantly on the edge of tears. The Crucible team has created a total theatrical world, impressively scaffolded by its light and sound designers (Ben Stone, Mark Hendersen and Bobby Aitken) - no mean feat given that they had to recreate a towering 14-storey new brutalist castle famous for its concrete 'streets in the sky'. It's intimate and epic. The cast of 30-odd flow up and around an austere kitchen-diner framed by upper and lower walkways, the highs and lows of their lives illuminated by brutal spotlights, tender lamplights and neon striplights. In the show's most glorious moments the whole chorus is bathed in Technicolor sunrises on the balconies, a democratic source of joy that the actual Park Hill designers built in for every resident. Chris Bush's book does a good job, bringing some laughs to lighten the heavy industrial themes. There are a couple of bum notes (would striking '80s workers complain about 'wanting to be seen'?), and I found the wrap-up rushed and sentimental. But it's still much stronger than your average jukebox musical, where writers often end up building a mad Frankenstein story out of random scavenged phrases and Fernandos that they find in the lyrics. This show rightly treats local songwriter and sometime Pulp guitarist Richard Hawley's back catalogue as mood music. Which is not to downplay it at all: it has been souped up massively, adding more urgency and tenderness, so its emotional ripples hit ten on the Richter scale, repeatedly. Music is the beating heart here. Instead of being hidden in a pit, the band – heavy on strings and snarling electric guitar – is nestled into the central wall of the set. Hawley's gentle, retro solo ballads for the working man get supercharged with astonishing female performances and poignant arrangements for many voices. It's not often that an orchestrator gets a shoutout but Tom Deering and the show's musical director Alex Beeching deserve it: they have picked up concrete slabs and made them fly. The texture is both intimate and electric. Female leads Rachael Wooding, Laura Pitt-

Pulford and Elizabeth Ayodele and especially Lauryn Redding will break your heart with lungs of steel. It doesn't matter whether you've heard of Hawley or are a fan already. What most people enjoy about music is the way it makes them feel. And 'Standing at the Sky's Edge' has all the feels – joy, lust, fear, sadness, despair, are crafted into an emotional edifice which stands nearly as tall as the place that inspired it. 21 March – 3 August

London Theatre (*****) Written by Marianka Swain
If home is defined not by a place but by the people you love, then my new theatrical home is the Gillian Lynne, the West End venue lucky enough to land Standing at the Sky's Edge. I adored this musical, which began at the Sheffield Crucible, when I last saw it at the National Theatre, and it's only grown stronger since. I predict a long and glorious life in this new home. Robert Hastie's (rightly) Olivier Award-winning production benefits not only from Richard Hawley's soul-stirring songs, but from a notably excellent book by Chris Bush. Her clever, precise, poignant and laugh-out-loud funny script tracks three generations of inhabitants at Sheffield's iconic Park Hill Estate, showing a changing Britain along the way, but always putting people before politics. In 1960, we meet loved-up working-class couple Harry and Rose. They're struggling to conceive, but otherwise life is good: Harry's on track to become the youngest-ever foreman at his steel works, and they're thrilled to land this new social housing – the dream of the "streets in the sky". By 1989 Park Hill is rundown and dangerous, but it's still a sanctuary for Joy and her older cousins, who have fled Liberia. Fast-forward again to 2015 and the controversially gentrified estate is now a "fresh start" for middle-class Londoner Poppy – she's recovering from a messy break-up with fiancée Nikki. Bush weaves in significant national events, including elections and a mention of the economically ruinous Brexit, while one moving sequence sees the striking miners go back to work amid a decimated community. But the real gift of this special show is how it makes the small moments in our everyday lives feel monumental – even more now, writ large in a West End theatre. Bush builds her characters with such care and warmth, until they all feel like family. We roll our eyes along with Poppy as her mother frets about her surviving Sheffield ("Can you get Ocado up here?"), and it's impossible not to root for the gently developing romance between Joy and local lad Jimmy. Among the fantastic new cast members, Laura Pitt-Pulford brings exquisite vocals and wistful, deeply affecting vulnerability to Poppy, evident even beneath the fractious humour. Her journey to acceptance, and self-acceptance, is beautifully drawn. Wonderful too is Elizabeth Ayodele as the ardent, courageous Joy, who likewise opens herself up to a new world. Lauryn Redding makes a growling rock-star showstopper out of "Open Up Your Door", and gives Nikki a charismatic blend of belligerent Scouse swagger and raw emotion. Joel Harper-Jackson makes you feel every part of Harry's tragic downfall – from passionate, confident provider to a bitter, fearful man stripped of all dignity and purpose. Samuel Jordan reprises his tender, touchingly naïve Jimmy, and Baker Mukasa his kindly optimistic George. Rachael Wooding remains an absolute powerhouse as Rose, who finds surprising reserves of strength as Harry slips away from her. Throughout, Hawley's evocative songs (superbly arranged by Tom Deering) enrich and deepen the drama – from aching heartbreakers through to the mighty title number, which opens Act II in barnstorming fashion. Ben Stones's striking multi-level design places us in that landmark Brutalist building, while leaving plenty of playing space. Although this is a love letter to Sheffield and its community (Henderson's relish gets a cameo role), Bush articulates the opposing argument too: that your hometown can sometimes be a trap, and you might need to leave to grow. Likewise, she gives us swooning declarations of love, yet has an exasperated Poppy call out the grand-gesture-profferring Nikki's "Richard Curtis bullshit". It's that mix of earthy humour and starry-eyed hope, gritty realism and heartfelt empathy which gives Bush and Hawley's homegrown hit its unique and utterly beguiling identity. The sky's the limit for this total triumph of a British musical.

WhatsOnStage (*****) Written by Alex Wood
I've never seen a musical's romantic ending so hotly debated as that of Standing at the Sky's Edge. Streams of people, funnelling out of the Gillian Lynne (just as they did last year during the show's run at the National Theatre, and likely at its two previous runs at national portfolio venue, Sheffield's Crucible Theatre), either mightily miffed or wholeheartedly on board with Chris Bush's choices. Bush, sure to be one of the most exciting playwrights around, has pieced together a tightly wrought tapestry of intergenerational harmony and conflict. The setting – a single flat in the Park Hill Estate, where a variety of different inhabitants play out their lives, thrown about by history like flotsam. Three hours, six decades, a soundtrack of numbers by famed Sheffield artist Richard Hawley. In Bush's hands, the vast, brutalist estate, now a south Yorkshire landmark, is a microcosm – a symbol for post-war optimism, the promise of a welfare state, as well as the backdrop for decimation of industry during the 1980s, before the rampant gentrification that brings us to the present day. But rather than being a "state-of-the-nation" epic, Bush makes sure it's the individual characters that are placed front and centre – scenes hop backwards and forwards between the decades, washing over one another as the years coalesce and contrast. The earliest Park Hill inhabitants are Harry (Joel Harper-Jackson), the youngest foreman on a steelworks about to encounter the wave of industrial decline from the 1970s, and his stern, unwavering wife Rose (Rachael Wooding). Flashforward a couple of decades and the flat is occupied by Grace (Sharlene Hector), George (Baker Mukasa) and their niece Joy (Elizabeth Ayodele), all three escaping civil war – with Joy also catching the eye of local lad Jimmy (Samuel Jordan). Finally, Bush hops over into the present millennium to alight on southerner Poppy (Laura Pitt-Pulford), a woman escaping her own past in order to find some semblance of emotional security in the newly redeveloped building. All of this plays out on the immense, colossal backdrop of Ben Stones' set – brutalist concrete beams clawing towards the ceiling as if attempting to break through to the clouds beyond. Compared to the cavernous Olivier stage, where the show last played in London, the slightly more intimate confines of the Gillian Lynne make

the experience feel more like an embrace – the audience almost peering over the flat and into the hearts and minds of its residents. The show's critical clout is indisputable at this point – with two Olivier Awards, a South Bank Sky Arts Award and even a registered trademark status to its name, Sky's Edge is soaring its way to the status as one of the most well-received musicals produced on these shores in many decades. Under Robert Hastie's direction, the streets are paved with ghosts – figures from the past, present and future flit between columns and dance along silently – their spectral form silhouetted by Mark Henderson's lighting. A large ensemble allows Park Hill to breathe – crowds surge from the shadows during moments of unfettered elation, or stand sentinel as they watch miners head towards their final shifts. As much as Hawley's tunes are cracking earworms, much of the praise must go to orchestrator, arranger and originating music supervisor Tom Deering, who has refashioned them into richly crafted musical numbers, aided no end by sound designer Bobby Aitken. I'd dare anyone not to be moved by the emotional oomph of Wooding's delivery of "After the Rain", or stirred by the chaotic climax of "There's A Storm A-Comin'" to close out the first act. It's a testament to Bush's writing – including that controversial conclusion to one of the narrative arcs – that, in a relatively re-cast ensemble (kudos to casting directors Stuart Burt and Chloe Blake), the characters feel freshly portrayed, with new edges compared to the production's previous run. Pitt-Pulford's Poppy shines with glimmers of melancholy around the eyes, while Lauryn Redding's Nikki, who arrives bold as brass late in act one, is more bumblingly comedic than the character's portrayal at the National. Ayodele's Joy, who goes on one of the largest emotional journeys of anyone, emerges as the emotional heart of the piece, while Jordan seems to have found even greater depths to Jimmy's heartwrenching backstory. Provoking fevered reactions – many audible gasps or sobs were heard after a variety of plot beats – while being resolutely, brazenly assured in its craft, makes Standing at the Sky's Edge a towering feat of contemporary musical theatre. It stands as a shining tribute to the combined power of both popular music and stage storytelling, and subsidised and commercial theatre. Unmissable.

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

COLISEUM

****SPIRITED AWAY by HAYAO MIYAZAKI adaptor/directotr JOHN CAIRD co-adaptor MAOKO IMAI original score JOE HISAISHI music supervisor/orchestrator/arrangements BRAD HAAK associate music supervisor/orchestration/ableton programming CONNOR KEELAN décor JON BAUSOR puppetry design/direction TOBY OLIÉ choreographer/staging SHIGEHIRO IDE lights JIRO KATSUSHIBA sound KOICHI YAMAMOTO costume SACHIKO NAKAHARA hair/makeup HIROAKI MIYAUCHI projections SATOSHI KURIYAMA music director ERIKA FUKASAWA with KANNA HASHIMOTO chihiro, KOTARO DAIGO haku, HIKARU YAMANO no-face (kaonashi) FU HINAMI lin/chihiro's mother, TOMOROWO TAGUCHI kamaji, ROMI PARK yubaba/zeniba, KENYA OSUMI aniyaku/chihiro's father, SUNAO YOSHIMURA chichiyaku, OBATA NO ONIISAN aogaeru, YUYA IGARASHI kashira, MAYU MUSHA baby(bo), MIYU AYAHASHI, KAITO ARAI, YOKO OSE, WATARU OSHIGE, MOTOKO ORII, AKINO KONNO, RYO SAWAMURA, MAYU SUETOMI, RICO TAKAHASHI, HAYATO TAKEHIRO, SAYA CHINEN, HANANO TESHIROGI, AYAME NAKAGAMI, YUUKI NISHINOMIYA, REI HANASHIMA, YOSHIKI FUJIOKA, NORIHIDE MANTANI, EIJI MIZUNO, MIFFY, MAKI MORITA, YUNA YASUNO, YAMATO

Blanche Marvin Critique
This is a huge spectacle telling a fairytale from a Japanese point of view. The actual physical production was amazingly anticipatory with each magical moment made with a particular sense of humour. The actual costumes, scenery, music and design were distilled with great animation. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

Guardian (****) Written by Arifa Akbar
Hayao Miyazaki's masterpiece is brought to life with imaginative puppetry, wondrous music and moments of delicate poetry. Food and cooking feature prominently in the films of Studio Ghibli's legendary animator Hayao Miyazaki. They are central to the odyssey of young Chihiro in Spirited Away (2001) as she stumbles through a portal to find her parents turned into pigs after feasting, uninvited, at a sorceress's banquet. There are many other meals in this lavishly imaginative surtitled adaptation from Japan, which is meticulous in its visual detail and choreography, delightful in its puppetry, both meditative and whirling in its speed, and packed full of comedy and adventure. But it does come to feel like a gargantuan meal with too many dishes, all of them delicious, but a surfeit nonetheless. As we follow Chihiro (Mone Kamishiraishi) into the magical bathhouse of gods and spirits, it is hard not to compare John Caird's production with the RSC's immaculate My Neighbour Totoro. As an animation, Spirited Away is seen as the more perfect masterpiece, often branded the best animation of all time, complete with its myriad mythic creatures and Homeric questing. While superbly performed, it is a harder challenge to animate its emotional life because it is so dominated by action and spectacle. The love story between Chihiro and the sorceress's apprentice, Haku (Kotaro Daigo) is delicate and heartfelt; the scene in which Haku offers Chihiro rice balls is full of plaintive tenderness. Caird, who co-adapted the film with Maoko Imai, is an associate director at the RSC and this has the same fluidity as Totoro across all the elements. There is an almost constantly reconfiguring set by Jon Bausor, including a revolve that takes us to different parts of the bathhouse, and the same spectacular addition of music and song, with a magnificent score by Joe Hisaishi (who also composed My Neighbour Totoro). The music is one of the show's greatest strengths and brings especially wondrous effects through its percussive accompaniments, with a kabuki-like feel that heightens comic elements. But more than that, it adds sweeping emotion and an epic feel. The production begins and ends with a screen conjuring slanting

rain or smoke in black and white, sometimes spreading its effects across the surfaces of Bausor's set, so that it looks like a 3D graphic novel. Sachiko Nakahara's costumes stand out too, much more elaborate than Totoro's, and the puppetry designed by Toby Olié is a combination of the cute, magical and comic. There is no puppet that matches the physical scale and surprise of Basil Twist's in Totoro but they are no less imaginative – maybe more so. Sorceress Yubaba (Mari Natsuki) turns into a gigantic face held by several puppeteers, coal-man Kamaji (Tomorowo Taguchi) is a characterful arachnoid-human hybrid and No-Face (Hikaru Yamano) becomes the scariest creation of the show as a hideously engorged monster of the bath-house. The sooty coal carriers of the boiler room have an uncanny resemblance to the soot sprites in Totoro and are sweet, but not quite as lively. The physical movement is symphonic, not only in the reconfiguring set but the quantity of parts on stage. The magical transformations and special effects are kept emphatically lo-fi – the water around the bathhouse is wavering light, the morphing of the parents to pigs is done with masks and Chihiro's transparency when she enters the magic world is achieved deftly with a sheer sheet. When Yubaba's twin miniaturises her sister's attendants, they spin behind a curtain and emerge as their new selves. But the minute clever flourishes can become confusing too. There is plenty of comedy but it irons away some of the terror that Chihiro feels in this world. The lyrical Ghibli pauses, which Miyazaki describes as "ma" or emptiness, are here in abundance, capturing some of the poetry of the film. Like Chihiro's world, it is utterly magical but this banquet of a show also leaves you stuffed, like her parents. 11 May – 24 August

Time Out (***) Written by Andrzej Lukowski
It's not quite in the same league as 'My Neighbour Totoro', but the West End's other big Studio Ghibli adaptation is full of magic 'Spirited Away' is famously not the first of Hayao Miyazaki's animated masterpieces to hit the London stage in the last two years. There is also, of course, the RSC's 'My Neighbour Totoro', which has just announced a 2025 West End run after two sell out seasons at the Barbican. Comparisons between the two Studio Ghibli adaptations are inescapable. But if 'Totoro' was ambitious, you have to admire the sheer gall of anyone even thinking of tackling 'Spirited Away'. Whereas 'Totoro' is a story of a limited number of supernatural creatures crossing over into a recognisable human world, 'Spirited Away' is about a young girl, Chihiro, who enters a fantastical realm entirely populated with wild spirit beings, from an emo dragon-boy to a colossal overgrown baby. It's a huge ask technically and to cut to the chase, this impressive but slightly starchy Anglo-Japanese Tokyo production – directed by John Caird and co-adapted with Maoko Imai – doesn't pull it off with the same panache and feeling of ground being broken as 'Totoro'. Although Toby Olie's puppets and Sachiko Nakahara's costumes are vivid and impressive, they aren't the absolute showstoppers that the RSC's gargantuan, Jim Henson's Creature Workshop-forged constructs are. And where all the spirits in 'Totoro' are puppets, 'Spirited Away' simply features too many characters to do that, and is reliant on human actors changing costumes a lot – sometimes it has the look and feel of an old fashioned song and dance spectacular. Indeed there are so many performers doing so many things at once that I found Mone Kamishiraishi's child heroine a bit muted. Her Chihiro gets lost in the noise and dazzle of the world in which she's stranded. The simpler, more human story of 'Totoro' allowed for bigger individual performances. Fortunately we live in a world where these two shows can co-exist. If the main challenge facing 'Spirited Away' is that a true transposition of the film would have to take your breath away constantly, then for three hours it at least does it frequently. The highlight for me was Hikaru Yamano as the sort-of villain No Face; it's probably the single most important character to get right, and they get it right. A wandering spirit that looks like a walking shadow with an eerily blank mask attached, Yamano's extraordinary physicality (combined with Shigehiro Ide's sinuous choreography) is really something: he seems to literally melt away into the dark any time another character threatens to look at him. It's a vindication of not making everything a puppet; though conversely when he takes on his larger, scarier form it's the best puppet in the show, a huge, rapacious colossus. Jon Bausor's flexible, multilevel bathhouse set is a clever use of vertical space but can be a little confusing to follow because it doubles up as so many things: the iconic bridge crossing sequence falls flat because it's only vaguely apparent that the characters are on a bridge. But then the show comes into its own when there is a full change of scene for the iconic train ride sequence - Chihiro and No-Face sat next to each other in an unnatural carriage, surrounded by hazy beings, with Satoshi Kuriyama's ravishing sunrise projections pulsing in the background and Joe Hisaishi's classic score surging magnificently. It's beautiful, both as a homage to the film's most iconic scene, but also something more than that – it has a greater, more visceral, more emotional impact for being right there in front of us. It has a punchy simplicity and powerful stillness (we're basically just looking at two characters sitting down) that much of the rest of the show lacks. A proper West End spectacle and it is really very cool that a foreign language production is taking up residence in London's biggest theatre for four months. I've gone on about a certain other show a lot here, but maybe the real take home message is that these films really work on the stage – bring on 'Princess Mononoke', 'Howl's Moving Castle' and all the rest…

Evening Standard (***) Written by Nick Curtis
Although Hayao Miyazaki's anime films for Studio Ghibli give me the ick, with their nightmare tweeness and yowling urchins, this faithful adaptation of his 2001 hit is superbly done. Live action, music and bewitching bunraku puppets – created by Toby 'War Horse' Olié – combine in John Caird's production to replicate the film's baffling dream logic, where a young girl battles adversity in the spirit world, finds love and saves her parents. The actors create credible relationships with serpentine dragons, giant, rotting godheads and tiny soot sprites, and there's a core of emotional truth behind the story's non-sequiturs and wild tangents. The show captures scale and perspective in a way theatre rarely achieves. It plunges us into rivers, zooms us into the sky and is visually

ravishing throughout. Jon Bausor's sets unfold and reform like origami and Joe Hisaishi's original score is milked for its lush sentiment. Caird's adaptation, created with his wife Maoko Imai, began life four years ago and its Tokyo run sold out in four minutes. It's performed here in Japanese with English subtitles, and though this is testament to London's cosmopolitanism, I do wonder who its audience is meant to be. It's too sappy and fairytale-ish to be entirely for adults, too discomfiting and grotesque for some children. It's less accessible than the RSC's similarly inventive 2023 adaptation of Miyazaki's My Neighbour Totoro, which transfers to the Gillian Lynne Theatre later this year. Various actors rotate through the lead roles in Caird's production but on opening night Mone Kamishiraishi was a winningly brave heroine Chihiro, evading many of the tics to which adults playing children are too often prone. En route to a new house Chihiro's parents take her to an abandoned theme park, eat a mysterious buffet and are turned into pigs by the witch Yubaba. Shape-shifting dragon-boy Haku (Kotara Daigo, overdoing the mystical pensiveness) helps Chihiro overcome tasks in order to lift the spell in Yubaba's bath-house, where gods and monsters come to relax. It's a parable of growing up and staying true to yourself – Yubaba dominates her minions by stealing their names – with echoes of The Wizard of Oz and the Alice books. Whatever the merits of the human cast it's the creatures that matter, from the comic frog-spirit Aogaeru to the spidery janitor Kamaji, his attenuated extra limbs operated by four puppeteers. Yubaba becomes a Thatcher-like bird and a giant, articulated head, while the wan, masked and cowled spirit No-Face morphs into an enormous, malign mass with a cavernous, devouring mouth. Even the relentless inventiveness of Caird, Olié and their team starts to pall though as the story meanders through yet more bizarre twists and turns and the acting gets shoutier. The stage adaptation runs more than 180 minutes to the film's 125. So if you ask me what Spirited Away is really about, I'd say it's about an hour too long.

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

GARRICK

????BOYS FROM THE BLACK STUFF by ALAN BLEASDALE adaptor JAMES GRAHAM director KATE WASSERBERG décor/costume AMY JANE COOK lights IAN SCOTT movement director RACHAEL NANYONJO composer/sound designer DYFAN JONES video JAMIE JENKIN with GEORGE CAPLE snowy/kevin/scotty, DOMINIC CARTER molloy/marley'landlord/catholic priest/policeman/gas man/clerk/paper boy, ARON JULIUS logo, NATHAN McMULLEN chrissie, LAUREN O'NEIL angie/jean/lawton/student/lollipop lady/clerk, JAMIE PEACOCK moss/clerk/redundant worker/protestant reverend/milkman, HAYLEY SHEEN miss sutcliffe/freda/margaret, BARRY SLOANE yosser, PHILIP WHITCHURCH george, MARK WOMACK dixie, HELEN CARTER miss sutcliffe/freda/margaret, ELLIOTT KINGSLEY/VICTORIA OXLEY/LIAM POWELL-BERRY/LIAM TOBIN ensemble

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

Reincarnated in James Graham-penned stage form, Alan Bleasdale's classic '80s drama is a tremendously powerful study in tragic masculinity. How do you adapt one of the all time great British TV series of the '80s for the '20s stage? 'Very respectfully' is the answer offered by James Graham's version of Alan Bleasdale's 'Boys from the Blackstuff'. The prolific playwright was seen at the NT just last year with his supremely enjoyable Gareth Southgate drama 'Dear England', which was Graham writ large: the writer humorously but deftly synthesising vast amounts of data, facts and characters into one kinetic narrative. 'Boys from the Blackstuff' does not feel like a James Graham play. It feels an awful lot like Bleasdale's landmark 1982 TV drama – even if the execution of the story is often relatively different, the same plot but chopped up, reformatted, at times made a splash more PC. Certainly it's testimony to Graham's skill at keeping multiple narrative balls in the air. Let's assume you haven't seen the TV show (you can stream it for free on iPlayer FYI). 'Boys from the Blackstuff' concerns the titular group of male Liverpudlian labourers, who as the play begins have already lost their jobs laying tarmac ('the blackstuff') due to their ill-advised pursuit of an illicit side-project. The 'boys' are now on the dole, unable to find legitimate work, though they are all proud men and desperate to get back to employment. Indeed, the show spawned a catchphrase to that effect – in the words of the clearly somewhat unhinged Yosser Hughes (played by the late Bernard Hill on TV and Barry Sloane here): 'gissa job'. They have, however, found some off the books work which they're conducting in tandem with signing on - something that has brought them to the attention of Moss (Jamie Peacock), a young DHSS officer determined to make a name for himself. Graham's adaptation can't quite escape the fact that he's adapting an anthology-style TV series that didn't have a single storyline running throughout its whole length. Kate Wasserberg's transferring Liverpool Royal Court production doesn't really try any fancy tricks - one bit of dramatic harness work aside, it's stripped back, with a rugged and no-frills industrial-style set from Amy Jane Cook. What it does incredibly well is trust the characters. Sloane is tremendous as Yosser, a man unhinged by his loss of place in the world - I'm not sure it's the most accurate or sensitive portrait of mental illness, but I don't think that's what Bleasedale was necessarily going for. There is a spectrum of realism amongst the men's predicaments: Yosser is at the outer edge of it, like some Ancient Greek king whose loss of station has come down in him like a punishment from the gods. More understated but just as powerful is Nathan McMullen's Chrissie, who is offered a job but feels he can't take it for ethical reasons – his obstinate refusal to accept it in the face of his desperate wife's fury and tears is deeply unsettling. In 2024, 'Boys from the Blackstuff' undoubtedly comes across as a period piece: mass unemployment and deindustrialisation are different to the current issues facing this country. But it has a timeless echo in any straightened times. And it is, simply, a tremendous story about men, masculinity and change – about the double edged nature of dignity and pride; about what happens when a society leaves you behind and you can't follow or obstinately refuse to. And Bleasdale's characters are just wonderful, avatars of shattered masculinity but also fully rounded characters in their own right. Maybe nobody quite like Yosser Hughes ever really existed. But it was important that Bleasdale invent him. And this stirring play means he and his comrades get to live on a little longer. 13 June – 3 Aug

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

In 1982, Alan Bleasdale's TV series Boys from the Blackstuff, about unemployed Liverpudlian road-workers, distilled the Thatcherite evisceration of regional communities and working practices. Today, James Graham's stage adaptation feels simultaneously like an awesome period piece – as grand and remote as a diplodocus – and oddly current in its depiction of a rich nation blighted by desperation and penury. Kate Wasserberg's production originated at Liverpool's Royal Court and is briefly at the National before a transfer to the West End's Garrick Theatre, which feels like an example of frictionless mobility that didn't exist in 1982, and is still rare now. It's initially hard to tell our five proud, angry protagonists apart as they endure the ritual humiliation of a dole office interrogation. Gradually, distinct but unsubtle personalities emerge, along with the revelation of a rift that developed between gruffly decent Dixie (Mark Womack) and the others during their last on-the-books job in Middlesbrough a year before. Chrissie (Nathan McMullen) is the nice guy with pet geese and a despairing wife called Angie. Loggo (Aron Julius), the only black man in the fivesome, is the least well-rounded, there to remind us that Liverpool's trading past included his ancestors. Dying ex-docker George (Philip Whitchurch) is the link to a nobler age of proud, organised labour; his son dies in a raid on a cash-in-hand building site. Then there's disturbed and volatile Yosser Hughes (Barry Sloane), unbalanced by the departure of his wife and children, and prone to accosting anyone employed with the demand: "Gizza job. I could do that." The late Bernard Hill turned Yosser into an emblem of disenfranchisement on screen: here, Sloane shows what happens when male pride is eaten away by shame. His Yosser is also very funny, though my dim memory of Hill's screen incarnation is of heartbreaking desolation. Perhaps under-employed playwrights besiege the ever-busy James Graham with cries of "gizza job", too. Alongside this piece the author of Quiz, Ink, Tammy Faye and Best of Enemies recently premiered Punch in Nottingham and is working on a second series of Sherwood for the BBC. While Blackstuff has his customary, vigorous blend of hard politics and demotic entertainment, it's not his subtlest work. The piece necessarily centres a brusque working-class masculinity, there's little tonal variation and quite a lot of meaningful underlining. "I wanted to pay my respects," says the dodgy developer at George's son's funeral. "You should've paid them a LIVING WAGE," spits Angie (Lauren O'Neil). She at least gets a smidgeon of character: the other women are comic stooges or ciphers. Wasserberg keeps the action brisk though, and the acting is full-throated and vivid. Designer Amy Jane Cook gives us two looming cranes framing a screen where Liverpool's dark skies, docks and two cathedrals swim into being. This is a blast from the past which still echoes today: flawed but stirring.

Independent (***) Written by Tim Bano

There haven't been many better bits of telly than the five episodes that make up Boys from the Blackstuff, the seminal series by Alan Bleasdale about a group of tarmac layers in Liverpool in 1982, each cracking under the pressures of unemployment. It started life as a BBC Play for Today before widening out into a series that was bleak and hard-hitting, but also funny and surreal, slow and lyrical, and absolutely gripping. Forty years later, it has become a stage adaptation. This one has the good fortune of James Graham, the UK's political playwright par excellence, handling the precious goods, and when it opened at Liverpool's Royal Court Theatre last year strong reviews followed in its wake. Now it's on the Southbank (before a West End run), and perhaps landing more softly than it did on the streets where it's set. It's immediately clear exactly which streets we're talking about: Amy Jane Cook's industrial set plonks us on the Liverpool docks, all gantries and girders and rusty corrugated iron. The lads file in to report to the dole office, while the dole "sniffers" remain in a permanent state of suspicion that the lads are doing cash-in-hand jobs. Which they are. This sets off a game of cat-and-mouse that propels the first half of the production. But Graham's mashing of the show's discrete storylines into one play feels lumpy. The first half takes a while to get out of montage mode, only settling just before the interval. Then when we come back it's all denouement: every scene feels like the penultimate scene. The strength of Bleasdale's material is a blessing and a curse. Graham feels the need to preserve it, but that stops the play becoming something that coheres in its own right. Kate Wasserberg's chunky production is a similarly vexed mix of functional and imaginative. There are lots of scenes that just allow a couple of characters to talk in the middle of the stage, but when inertia threatens to set in, something will happen to push it away: the cast singing a shanty, or a bit of clever slow-motion. The good moments are really, really good – and usually they involve Barry Sloane's Yosser Hughes, half-man half-moustache, the character who came to symbolise mass unemployment in the Eighties. There's a huge debt to Bernard Hill of course, who played Yosser in the original series and died just a couple of weeks ago, but Sloane makes the part his own. From the moment he comes on he's at breaking point: we can see it in the way his arms are pumped and tense, gorilla-style, the way his voice growls. And if he's that tightly coiled from the beginning then there's nowhere for him to go…except to break. That's where Graham nails it, not on the structural level but in its guts. The emotional punch is the same as it was 40 years ago: no missing the fact that this is about pride, hope, hard work – and the ripping away of those things by Thatcher's government. The whole second half consists of moments of desperation, of men about to snap, coming one after the other: Nathan McMullen's kindly Chrissie wondering whether to stick to his principles or feed his family, Mark Womack's security guard Dixie forced into taking bribes. And Yosser, of course, who most of all keeps the sadness and the comedy of Boys from the Blackstuff so tightly bound together. Sloane is ridiculous in his absurdly masculine swagger, and his insistence that he could do any job better than the person who's actually doing it: bricklayer, priest, lollipop lady. "I could do that" is the line, always. It's that ridiculousness that makes the tragedy so tragic when it all falls apart for him, culminating in an amazing slow-motion fight scene. He leaves the stage slowly beating his heart; it's devastating.

It's only when Graham finds those raw edges – poverty, desperation, the uselessness of hard-nosed masculinity – that the show comes alive. Too often, though, it's a tribute to a series from 40 years ago, rather than a play for today.

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

@SOHOPLACE

????DEATH OF ENGLAND: MICHAEL by CLINT DYER, ROY WILLIAMS director CLINT DYER décor SADEYSA GREENAWAY-BAILEY, ULTZ lights JACKIE SHEMESH sound BENJAMIN GRANT, PETE MALKIN with THOMAS COOMBES michael

WhatsOnStage (****) Written by Theo Bosanquet

Over four years since its premiere, Clint Dyer and Roy Williams' state of the nation monologue has lost none of its urgency in this West End revival, which features a powerhouse performance by Thomas Coombes. Michael is mourning the death of his flower stall-owning father, Alan, and by extension the country he claimed to love. Like many father-son relationships, theirs was complicated and full of contradictions. Alan was a family man as well as a deep-rooted racist, though he always said these views had a "time and a place" (he would suspend his prejudice when it came to customers, for example). The 100-minute solo piece is flecked with fire, brimstone, and heavily racist language. Coombes, dressed in a white shirt that soon becomes drenched in sweat, pinballs around the four points of the red cross stage (designed by Ultz and Sadeysa Greenaway-Bailey), and often off it, as he tells his father's story and grapples with his own identity in the wake of his death. He doesn't so much speak as roar, augmented by Benjamin Grant and Pete Malkin's pulsating soundscape which echoes key phrases back to him. The script has been updated to include England's loss to Italy in the Euros final at Wembley in 2021 (the original hinged around the World Cup semi-final defeat three years earlier). Alan's heart gives out and he dies during a racist outburst in the wake of the penalty shoot-out, a seemingly karmic death. The funeral becomes the scene of Michael's own cocaine and alcohol-fuelled meltdown, as he admonishes attendees including his childhood friend Delroy and sister Carly (here represented by a pair of boxing gloves and a soft toy bulldog, respectively). One slight misfire is a scene towards the end in which Michael discovers a secret about his father. I won't spoil it, but it throws his character into a very different light, to the point it feels like an unnecessary stretch – especially given the way he dies. But it does highlight Michael's own issue with the myth-making around Alan; the way younger generations often need to deride older ones to further themselves. Watching Michael unravel in the close confines of @sohoplace is a visceral experience; it's like being strapped to a rocket powered by fury. Coombes hits top gear from the get-go and never relents. And, entertaining as it can be, the underlying portrait it paints, of a disenfranchised white working-class man whose anti-immigrant sentiments have been stoked by the far right, is all too believable (emerging to news of anti-Muslim riots in Southport, with chants of "England for the English", was a sobering reminder of its topicality). Running in rep with two other plays in the series – Delroy and, in a few weeks' time, Closing Time – these revivals present a chance both to see these prescient dramas in context, and marvel at the way Williams and Dyer have painted such a detailed picture of a country and its myriad complications. 15 July – 28 September

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

Inflamed by Brexit and first staged (and cancelled) under Covid, I feared that Roy Williams and Clint Dyer's exploration of the British white and black working-class experience might have dated in this West End transfer. Absolutely not. Michael and Delroy, the two male monologues in the linked Death of England trilogy (Closing Time, a female two-hander, joins in repertory later) are full of contemporary rage, swagger and furious feeling. Thomas Coombes and Paapa Essiedu give tour de force performances as boyhood best friends in hardscrabble East London, for whom the racial divide keeps reopening like a wound. I get the feeling the writers found their characters and just let them run. Seeing the first two 100-minute, free-ranging installments, which deal respectively with death and birth from a hapless male perspective, is a lot; seeing all three, as you can on Saturdays from 24 Aug, would be exhausting, though it would balance out the testosterone a bit. DOE started as a 10-minute workshopped 'microplay' in 2014 but grew to embrace the referendum on EU membership and the rise of populist dog-whistle politics. Dyer's original full stagings at the National Theatre – staggered in every sense – became a bellwether for theatre's woes during and after Covid. Rafe Spall's performance as Michael, a chaotic young man mourning his racist father, was cut short by lockdown in early 2020. Michael Balogun career-makingly stepped in to replace Giles Terera in Delroy later that year for a single performance as restrictions relaxed and then abruptly re-tightened. In 2023, Closing Time lost an actress to illness in rehearsals. Dyer's re-mounted stagings for @sohoplace, on the same St George's Cross set, with similar dynamic use of music and snap lighting changes but with scripts lightly updated, shows how fluidly the DOE plays embrace a changing social and political terrain. There are references not only to Covid, Black Lives Matter and the 2021 Euros final, but to Gaza and current US politics. Delroy wonders why he has lost his job, reputation and contact with his girlfriend Carly (Michael's sister) and their child due to a racist police action, while Donald Trump can run for president with 34 felonies to his name. The exhilaration of DOE is that you never know where it's going to go. Delroy offers ferocious justification for voting Leave (and "for Boris. Twice.") Michael discovers his dad had a (not entirely convincing) secret life. The plays deal in grey areas, as well as black and white. The tone, too, can shift from intense physicality or gutsy soliloquy to a bantering, music-hall interplay with the audience. Essiedu, with his sensitivity and charm, is particularly good at the latter, almost to the expense of his character's integrity. Raw, ungoverned,

up-to-the-minute: this is exactly the kind of show the West End needs and increasingly welcomes. And this theatre feels like it was built for it.

Guardian (***) Written by Arifa Akbar
Clint Dyer and Roy Williams' riotous plays are a little unwieldy in this revival but the antagonised politics remains clear – and Paapa Essiedu is sensational. he world has changed since Clint Dyer and Roy Williams' sweary, swaggery, dysfunctional near-family first railed about their lives, shaped by Brexit Britain, in fast, fulminating dramatic monologue. As a trilogy of plays, it began with Michael, the son of a racist flower-seller, originally played by Rafe Spall, who told his lairy story at his father's funeral. Then, a monologue by his Black British best friend, Delroy, about police profiling and his mixed-race relationship with Michael's sister, Carly. These revivals are updated to reflect our world, post-Covid and post-Boris so we recognise the antagonised politics of class, masculine identity and race hate currently coursing through our society, from far-right violence (Southport is not named but it may as well be) to Nigel Farage. They are staged in a shiny new West End venue and it is surprising that this backdrop does not dampen their riotous spirits, although there is not as much danger in Death of England: Michael starring Thomas Coombes, and now set in 2021. It is still a feat of monologue theatre, with an energetic central performance, but Coombes's Michael is a lovable cockney. The effect is more broadly comic with some grotesque humour, but the tortured undertow of filial inadequacy, split loyalties between his father and his friend, Delroy, and jittery mournfulness, are not felt sharply. His father's funeral is not quite the emotional car-crash of the original, nor the same visually arresting set-piece, the coffin rising up from the stage floor, then swallowed up again. Directed by Clint Dyer at 100 minutes straight, we feel its bagginess, the forced redemption of the far-fetched final reveal, and its awkward turns into sentimentality. The set, designed by ULTZ and Sadeysa Greenaway-Bailey, is still strikingly configured as a St George's cross and the audience sits within its arms, implicated and addressed. The sudden garish bright or blanket dark of Jackie Shemesh's lighting, along with Benjamin Grant and Pete Malkin's psychological sound design (words echo after being uttered) give the impression of being inside Michael's mind, though sometimes the sound and lighting seem overdone. Death of England: Delroy, starring Paapa Essiedu and now set in the present day, feels more loaded with the everyday police racism and humiliation faced by this working-class bailiff who makes no apologies for having voted for Brexit. The performance here elevates this play into its own, one-man coup de theatre. Essiedu has astonishing poise, bringing tragic depth and integrity to Delroy but lilting joy and comedy, too. His enraged injustice, when it comes, is immense and you feel it burn. The sentimentality, when that comes, is transformed into a tenderness which brings tears to your eyes. Like Coombes, he interacts with the audience, teasing and ad-libbing, but with the potential to turn from light to dark in a flash. He is bantering one minute, and tearing up the stage floor the next. In its story it shows the inherited legacy of racism and how this can intersect with mixed-race friendship and romance. Where Michael is engaged in a reckoning with his absent father, Delroy battles in his mind with his mother, Denise. Both she and Carly are absent presences but Essiedu evokes them so vividly that they seem to enter the drama, although a picaresque depiction of the women still seems a little reductive. His romance with Carly feels real and hot, despite the discomforting racial politics, and there is a gorgeous moment with a disco ball that conveys heady teen lust. Also performed over 100 minutes , its plot is also unwieldy but Essiedu's is a must-see performance that makes magic of even the wobbliest lines.

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WhatsOnStage (****) Written by Theo Bosanquet
Paapa Essiedu could easily make it as a stand-up, on the evidence of his breathless performance of Clint Dyer and Roy Williams' Delroy, the second in their Death of England series that is being revived at @sohoplace. Delroy, whose childhood friend Michael is the subject of the first play, here has right of reply as he reflects on his work as a bailiff, his impending fatherhood (with Michael's sister, Carly), and why he voted for Brexit. The story pivots around his attempt to make it to the hospital in time for the birth, only to be thwarted by being arrested for, essentially, being a Black man in a hurry. Essiedu superbly patters with the audience. He challenges us to respond to him, and castigates us for our lack of energy. He even asks us directly if we saw the first play, Michael. So there goes my argument that you can easily watch any of this Death of England trilogy in isolation (but, whisper it, you can). The picture painted is slightly more nuanced than its predecessor. Delroy is wearing an ankle tag, a vest and a durag. His outfit belies his status as a bailiff, which he's eager to point out is a job he only does for the money. He's a cynic – targets for his wrath range from Palestine sympathisers who work for the BBC to Trump's recent repurposing of the Black power symbol. At one stage, a golliwog doll is used to represent a Black policeman. But as the play develops, we see the man beneath the posturing. His relationship with Carly, painted by Michael as one purely based on lust, is clearly much more, and the climactic scenes where he reconciles with her and meets his new daughter are deeply affecting. There's a telling moment of realisation when he notices the baby's mouth resembles that of his racist late father-in-law Alan – "he's living on, through me". Delroy and Michael may have drifted, but the two are inextricably linked, and a scene where they confront each other at the hospital is brilliantly

done, as Delroy tells him he voted for Brexit to make Britain the "n*gger of the world". There's venom but there's brotherhood too; one longs to be a fly on the wall at their first all-family Christmas. Astutely directed by Dyer on Sadeysa Greenaway-Bailey and Ultz's George cross-shaped stage (which literally gets torn apart, in a moment of peak visual metaphor), Essiedu gives nothing short of a tour de force performance. He demands our focus and our judgment, literally turning us into his jury. Like Michael, he seems to be searching for validation but isn't entirely sure what for. Death of England: Michael and Delroy will soon be joined by Closing Time, a duologue between Carly and Delroy's mother, here tellingly represented by the statue of Nefertiti. The trilogy is one of the finest state of the nation series of the century so far. The first two parts brilliantly capture the sense of a country wrestling with an existential crisis, and an underlying search for belonging in the world. Catch them (any of them, but ideally all of them), while you can. 23 July – 28 September

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WhatsOnStage (***) Written by Alun Hood

Roy Williams and Clint Dyer's play is being staged in rep with Death of England: Michael and Death of England: Delroy at London's @sohoplace until 28 September.

When this concluding tranche of Clint Dyer and Roy Williams's punchy, vital trilogy of state-of-the-nation Death Of England plays premiered at the National last autumn, this country was still under a culture wars-stoking Tory government. Fast forward ten months and, while only a fool would describe the UK as healed and trouble-free, this entertaining but not fully cogent two-hander already seems dated, especially compared to Michael and Delroy, the riveting solo plays that precede it. Where those impassioned monologues felt urgent and character-driven, as they dealt with difficult but essential topics such as ingrained racism and social disenfranchisement, Closing Time puts issues rather than people to the fore, ultimately with detrimental dramatic impact. It's still mightily watchable, but where Michael and Delroy spoke to each other as scripts (the eponymous best friends share common ground and chosen family, but their differences in skin colour contribute to markedly contrasting life experiences), this one feels more contrived, as though authors Dyer and Williams were obligated, rather than truly compelled, to create a couple of balancing female voices. Black, regal Denise (Sharon Duncan-Brewster, reprising her National Theatre role), is Delroy's Mum, and motormouth Carly (Erin Doherty), mother of Delroy's child but also sister of Michael and possibly tainted by the same unthinking racism espoused by their now-deceased father, are in the process of closing up a business they were running together. Aside from the improbability that Carly's mother would've sold her house to fund this shop which Denise also sunk her life savings into, the concept of a family-run concern being bought out by a commercial juggernaut such as Gail's Bakery as gentrification marches unchecked across the urban landscape, hardly feels original. I didn't see last year's production but I wonder if compressing the play from its original two-act, two and a half hours length to an interval-free 100 minutes, presumably to make it more of a piece with its predecessors and to render three show days more manageable, might have blunted the text's force. Where Michael and Delroy get a whole play each to themselves, Carly and Denise receive the same amount of stage time between them, inevitably robbing the women of a certain amount of nuance and detail. The result is a script that is frequently hilarious, ultimately moving but doesn't really provide any insights that weren't already covered in the earlier plays. Certainly, Dyer's staging, played out on an identical St George's Cross set by Sadeysa Greenaway-Bailey and ULTZ, with the same impressively high-precision, bombastic bells-and-whistles lighting, sound and music, has a similar command of energy, stillness and focus as the first two pieces of this rich theatrical pie. The tone here is more hectoring and relentless, however, as the two women bawl and shout each other down. When moments of genuine emotion come, such as Denise talking about her dual heritage granddaughter (unironically named Meghan…"I don't know whether they're trying to be nouveau riche or nouveau radical") or the final defeated yet hopeful image of the two women walking together into the next phase of their lives, they register as welcome respite from all the sound and fury. Both performances are flawless. If Thomas Coombes and Paapa Essiedu match the outstanding writing of Michael and Delroy in their respective plays, Duncan-Brewster and Doherty are probably better than what they've been given to work with here. The former is fiery, humane and affecting, while the latter finds a bruised, watchful vulnerability beneath all of Carly's defensive bite. Neither actor hits a false note and each makes the (sometimes overly-contrived) direct address to the audience feel fresh and spontaneous. Duncan-Brewster's ability to switch between characters at lightning-fast speed is breathtaking, and Doherty is so good that she fully convinces even when not everything the authors have given Carly rings fully true. For instance, when the character is forced to make a public apology, she whips herself up into a self-righteous frenzy that has the opposite effect. Doherty manages it superbly, but the writing feels forced and histrionic. There is a brilliantly callous piece of storytelling where we discover exactly why Denise and Carly's business has gone down the pan, and this elevates the play in an unexpected way. The writers set a situation up as a bit of outrageous fun, which quickly devolves into something pretty uncomfortable. It's not fair to share here what happens except to say that the point that even the smallest iota of racism can have perilous and far-reaching consequences, is very powerfully made. It may not be in the same league as its predecessors, but Closing Time is

a captivating, troubling slice of modern British life that feels unsettlingly accurate, if never revelatory. If you've only the time or the finances to see two parts of the trilogy then this is probably the one to skip, but the opportunity to watch a pair of actresses of this calibre firing on all cylinders is still something to savour. 22 August – 28 September

The Stage (***) Written by Sam Marlowe
And so Clint Dyer and Roy Williams' intimate-yet-epic state-of-the-nation trilogy reaches its end, with this two-woman face-off in which a war of words is waged, and an uneasy peace brokered, over issues of race, class, family, love and betrayal. Like the two preceding plays presented, in Dyer's productions, in this West End season, this one is at times over-deliberate and unsubtle in its drawing of direct connecting lines between the personal and the political. But, where the other pieces are monologues, this is instead a kind of hybrid that switches between fervid, direct-address confessionals and confrontational dialogue. Such is the scorching talent of Sharon Duncan-Brewster and Erin Doherty that the solo set pieces are riveting – but the writing reaches its most potent intensity when they interact. The acting is flawless; the motor of Dyer's staging, it purrs, snarls, revs and roars, powering even the less fluent passages of the text into overdrive. We previously met Michael, son of a racist, white flower-stall owner, struggling to come to terms with his father's death and legacy; then Delroy, his best friend since schooldays, who is Black. Now we find Carly (Doherty), sister to Michael and girlfriend to Delroy, and Denise (Duncan-Brewster), Delroy's mum, in the process of closing down their joint business: a florist adjoining a Caribbean takeaway. Covid is partly responsible for the venture's failure; but there's also been a shocking incident that has destroyed their reputation and ruptured their close relationship. Is Carly more her father's daughter than she cares to admit? Can understanding be reached, and love survive, when hurt is so profound? Doherty's Carly, radiating sex and swagger, brilliantly combines the tough and tender, as well as morphing miraculously into her blustering dad and a teenage memory of her brother at his most gawky and gormless. Duncan-Brewster, meanwhile, is a volcano of grief, pain and fury, elegantly smouldering between red-hot, lava-spitting eruptions. They sling words back and forth at each other, and at us, weighing up the damage that might be done or the points scored and proven, rolling the choicest lines around their mouths with casual relish. The dramatic texture is vivid as well as combative, and often richest in its smaller details. Carly recalls her father stroking her face with "rough sausage fingers"; Denise describes the sweaty, heart-flipping horror of staring at her phone as the online evidence of Carly's awful treachery goes viral. The piece is strong on the blood sport and mob mentality of social media, faceless commenters queuing up to castigate and punish moral transgressors. And in a flashback scene in which the family gathers to watch Charles' coronation on telly, there's a delicious takedown of the archaic, pantomime privilege of the Royal family; Carly and Delroy's baby daughter is named Meghan, a mischievous touch. But this is above all a play about England itself, which has even been updated to include mention of the recent riots; a portrait of a country of push and pull, angry, confused and afraid, but where there is also striving for connection and hope for greater harmony. Line by line it may not always fully convince; yet as a whole, the trilogy feels like work of genuine historical significance. And it could hardly be more thrillingly performed.

The Guardian (***) Written by Arifa Akbar
Mxed race relationships are under angry scrutiny on the West End stage: Jeremy O Harris's Slave Play dissects sex and power through the prism of America's legacy of slavery, while this reprised third instalment of Clint Dyer and Roy Williams' trilogy offers a British perspective – with mixed results. We have heard from the men: Michael, raised by a white racist father, and Delroy, his Black British, pro-Brexit best friend. Now it's time for the women to have their say. In one corner is Carly (Erin Doherty), Michael's sister and Delroy's partner. In the other is her mother-in-law, Denise (Sharon Duncan-Brewster). The joint business venture they embarked upon has folded after a social media scandal that involved Carly's (racist?) fetishisation of Black men. The women are in a kind of mixed-relationship of their own and we find them in pitched battle, clearing out their florist-cum-takeaway while the men watch the footie. Directed by Dyer, it is still a bold, brash reflection on racism, white culpability and working-class identity but its emotional power is drowned out by exaggerated and flattening comedy, the women shouting and stomping so their hostility verges on farce. The bagginess of the script is more glaring than in the original, too. This is an exploration of what is found beneath the surface of Carly's attraction to Delroy, but for too long the dialogue wanders aimlessly, recapping plot, indulging in mini diatribes against their men, all men, and men's relationship to football. There are topical references to Kamala Harris and Covid, along with slightly dated ones to Liz Truss and Boris Johnson, but these feel bolted-on. The women inhabit the same St George's Cross-shaped stage as the men, designed by ULTZ and Sadeysa Greenaway-Bailey, but the drama becomes reliant on the lighting (by Jackie Shemesh) and sound (by Benjamin Grant and Pete Malkin) for its effects. The cast juggle between multiple characters deftly but the tone is too screamy for the tension to build, and some deliveries are so fast that lines are swallowed. Several of the high moments of the play are lost to this, including Carly's bombshell social-media rant. You glimpse a stronger, more searing play in a few scenes, such as Denise's sabre-sharp diatribe on King Charles's coronation ("A 74-year-old man is being showered with a billion quid's worth of stolen bling"). But these are individual vignettes that do not gel as a whole, the action too hectic yet too long and loose.

ROYAL COURT

????BLUETS based on the book by MAGGIE NELSON adaptor MARGARET PERRY director KATIE MITCHELL décor ALEX EALES video director GRANT GEE lights ANTHONY DORAN music/sound PAUL CLARK video designer ELLIE THOMPSON with EMMA D'ARCY b, KAYLA MEIKLE c, BEN WHISHAW a

The Stage (****) Written by Dave Fargnoli
Exploring suffering, sexual desire and depression through the lens of an obsessive fascination with the colour blue, Maggie Nelson's lushly philosophical book of prose poems is a tantalising, thought-provoking work. Incisively adapted for the stage by Margaret Perry, the elusive text feels like an ideal match for director Katie Mitchell's signature cinematic style, which blends performance, live video and pre-recorded footage to extraordinary effect. Precisely placed between a wall of screens and a bank of cameras, Mitchell's three performers – Ben Whishaw, Emma D'Arcy and Kayla Meikle – share pensive philosophical musings against constantly shifting, evocative imagery. Shots are composed, disassembled and reframed with remarkable fluidity, and if all the fiddly repositioning detracts attention from the spoken text, it is fascinating to watch, becoming a sort of waltz, its rhythms and exact steps dictated by the technical requirements of working with cameras. Each actor provides a distinct vocal texture, though Mitchell ensures all three tightly constrain their emotions. If the experiences that the narrators describe are intense – sobbing against bathroom tiles, caring for a paralysed friend – their delivery is always intentionally muted. Whishaw is the gentlest, his voice soft and soulful, threaded with sadness. Emma D'Arcy shows sharper edges, with tense physicality and a more guarded approach to the text, while Kayla Meikle seems the most emotionally open, getting closer to expressing pleasure or excitement. It's visibly demanding work: Mitchell keeps the actors constantly moving, reorienting themselves at new angles with every jump of the cameras' perspective. Though the breakneck speed of these transitions occasionally interrupts the flow of their delivery, moments of unexpected humour emerge from their interactions – entwining hands to suggest sex, slumping against handrails as they exhaustedly travel by Tube. Grant Gee and Ellie Thompson's video montage presents a slow cascade of charged, sensual images. A pianist delicately fingers a keyboard. Flowers burst into bloom. London streets and stations scroll by, and we're transported to cafes, hotel rooms and green spaces. Anthony Doran's lighting enhances the conditions shown in the video, with orange pulses for streetlights, the downward glare of white halogens, even the rippling golden flecks of a ballroom shimmering beneath a mirror ball. Dreamlike and intentionally slow-moving, the production walks a tightrope between being soporific and enthralling. As it transitions from deep melancholy to somnolent acceptance, it's a challenging, yet deeply rewarding watch, suffused with wistful beauty.

The Guardian (***) Written by Arifa Akbar
Emma D'Arcy, Ben Whishaw and Kayla Meikle narrate and act out Nelson's dark meditations from their own film-making booths in Katie Mitchell's intriguing experiment. Maggie Nelson's book-length meditation on the colour blue comprises 240 short, non-sequitur paragraphs that flit from the loss of a lover to the injury of a friend and the protagonist's descent into depression, along with abstract reflections on colour. It is fitting that such an experimental text should get experimental treatment in its staging. The director, Katie Mitchell, uses microphones, cameras and screens to turn it into theatre as overt and contemporaneous film-making. Emma D'Arcy, Ben Whishaw and Kayla Meikle each stand at their own terminals containing camera, table and standing mic, to both narrate and act out a lo-fi movie with a tray of props, their images superimposed on to an overhead screen. So Meikle, in one instance, wraps herself in a duvet to give the impression of being in bed on the big screen while D'Arcy and Whishaw entwine their arms and claw their fingers in a close-up to intimate sex taking place. There has been an abundance of screen use on stage in recent times, from Jamie Lloyd's current production of Romeo and Juliet to Ivo van Hove's Opening Night. This is quite its own thing, resembling an art gallery installation or conceptual film. It is left-field, but it works – so much so that Margaret Perry's adaptation seems more accessible, better shaped and less mannered than Nelson's on paper, although there is still a sense of morsels of thought being offered which never metabolise into anything bigger, with little framing around narrative threads. The material comes alive in being spoken, too – Nelson is a poet and her words fit this medium well. D'Arcy, Meikle and Whishaw perform with smooth, speedy synchronicity, bringing surprising bathos and even occasional laughs to run alongside the dark subject-matter. There is a flamboyant intellectualism that feels European in sensibility (the production was originally developed at Deutsches Schauspielhaus Hamburg) and encompasses philosophical inquiries by Goethe, Wittgenstein and Plato. Modern-day artists who have investigated the allure of the colour blue are also mentioned, from Joni Mitchell to Billie Holiday, but there is a sense of touching bases and name-checking thinkers rather than really exploring meanings. It is not so much a deep dive as a survey that skates on all the blue surfaces of its world. The film being made takes on the feel of a surreal dream, in the vein of Un Chien Andalou, with the same dark, disjointed narrative and a flatness to the storytelling that gradually turns into a lull. As the screen conjures images of water, cityscapes and bowls of marbles or magnifies lips and eyebrows, you feel you might have closed your eyes and begun dreaming. Ultimately, it is an odd night at the theatre, but not an uninteresting one, and you cannot dismiss it as an abstruse experiment in itself. The first production to be programmed by the venue's new artistic director, David Byrne, it suggests an intent to push mainstream theatre into edgier ground. Nelson's books are often deemed unclassifiable, and it seems fitting that this adaptation is just as genre-defying, and perplexing, as its original source. 17 May – 29 Jun

Time Out (***) Written by Andrzej Lukowski
The mighty Katie Mitchell directs Ben Whishaw in an obliquely alluring adaptation of Maggie Nelson's poetry collection. One problem with taking over a famous new writing theatre is that everyone is expecting your first season to be some great statement of intent, but you've actually only had about five minutes to cobble together a programme (and you're not allowed to just bung on a revival). What new artistic director David Byrne's first main

house Royal Court show 'Bluets' definitely does show us about him is that he can call upon big name directors – the eternally hip auteur Katie Mitchell – and actors – Ben Whishaw, who co-stars with Emma D'Arcy and Kayla Meikle. It is, however, not a new show, but rather an English language remount of one that premiered in Hamburg in 2019. I'd say a bit of massaging has been done to present it as new writing in the same way as the rest of Byrne's inaugural season: this a new adaptation from rising star Margaret Perry, but the words are very much those of author Maggie Nelson, this being a staged arrangement of her 2009 experimental poetry collection of the same name. The source text is a dense and complicated thing that consists of over 200 mini poems, with the main thematic obsessions the loss of a lover, a quadriplegic friend, and the colour blue. In performance it definitely feels closer to a single oblique narrative in which desire, anxiety and the colour blue intermingle into an unknowable, often strangely alluring whole. In a memorable early passage the narrator - or narrators - talks about their collection of blue objects and how they just put them in their mouth, letting a liquid dribble out. It's a movement of alien eroticism that feels strangely indistinguishable from their desire for a departed love and concern for a disabled friend. I think you'd clearly need to sit down and study the original poems for a good while to pick up every nuance and allusion – it is certainly too dense and abstract to work as 'a drama'. In a similar manner to Mitchell's recent 'little scratch', Perry's adaptation divides the text into three voices, who may or may not constitute different characters, but adds a note of personality that helps make the text more digestible. Whishaw is quiet and intense; D'Arcy has a wry, sardonic quality; Meikle is earthier and more emotional. Perhaps they represent different people. Perhaps they are aspects of the same whole. In many ways all of this has just been preamble, as the main point of a Katie Mitchell show is the Katie Mitchelling. Live video is having a moment in the West End thanks to Jamie Lloyd's recent conversion to the medium. But Mitchell has been a master of it for years. Here each of the performers has a screen set up behind them displaying differ recorded backdrops - a street at night, or the inside of a car, or the banks of a river - which they move about in front of in the spot as if they were going for a walk, or driving, with the action relayed to a big screen where it looks kind of like a film. The effect is somewhat comical if you look at them directly – movie star Ben Whishaw bobbing about in place pretending to go for a walk – but aside from the fact a splash of humour is probably not a bad thing here, it inevitably looks really great on the big screen. As ever with Mitchell, the text is interesting, but the real action lies in admiring her virtuosic staging – the cast are good, but they're skilled cogs in Mitchell's prodigious machine. It's all a bit obscure. It feels somewhat strained by the larger Downstairs theatre (it would have absolutely slayed in the Upstairs theatre). Ultimately, it's a five-year-old Katie Mitchell show, that's extremely cool to get to see but falls a bit oddly as the very first main house show of Byrne's very first season. But there are sound, pragmatic reasons for all this: as stopgaps go, it'll definitely do.

Standard (****) Written by Nick Curtis
The perceptions of a person depressed by a breakup and obsessed with the colour blue are splintered across four video screens, and between three actors speaking into microphones and cameras, in this boggling adaptation of Maggie Nelson's book. That those actors are Ben Whishaw, House of the Dragon's Emma D'Arcy and the estimable Kayla Meikle attests to the pulling power of director Katie Mitchell. The adaptation is by Margaret Perry, but Mitchell is the guiding force of this intriguing, precision-tooled work that's also defiantly full of intellectual name-dropping. An example of her 'live cinema' concept, which she developed in Germany and feels is greeted with "misogyny and rage" by critics here, it's a bold opening statement for David Byrne's tenure as the new artistic director of the Royal Court. I found it captivating, though not always for the right reasons. Our protagonist gets up, drives around smoking, goes to the swimming pool, masturbates, and pitches for academic funding. They visit a friend who is paralysed after an accident. But mostly they channel their romantic grief into a fascination with all things azure, from the prosaic (marbles, bottle caps, the sea) to the highfalutin: works by Goethe, Joni Mitchell, Derek Jarman and French literary sex-memoirist Catherine Millet, among others, are namechecked. The narrator's gender is obscured at first, and the casting of Whishaw, a gay man, and D'Arcy, who is non-binary, underlines that the derangement of depression can be universal. Eventually we infer the character is a woman, betrayed by a man with another woman, but by then the narrative is secondary to the dazzling, if largely static, stagecraft. The three actors stand at workstations, each kitted out with a script, a microphone and several cameras, and supplied with different sets of tabletop paraphernalia swapped out by a fantastically well-drilled stage management team. They interact with recorded background film on the small screens behind them and the larger one above, change shirts, complete each other's sentences and occasionally transgress into each other's zones. Sometimes they are reduced on screen to a hand, a mouth, a watchful eye. It's a massively complex fusion of technology and technique, flawlessly done. Though always distinct, the actors generate a single identity through fragmented snapshots. In theatre as in life, though, screens distract. I often found myself watching the flickering rectangles rather than the living performers or diverted by trivia: who was best at walking on the spot in front of a moving film scenario, for example. The show's self-satisfaction is catching. I smugly noted stylistic similarities to Mitchell's stage production of Little Scratch (2023) and narrative echoes of Caryl Churchill's Blue Kettle (1997). But maybe that's my Little England rage speaking. Why shouldn't theatre be clever, culturally aware, technologically adventurous and discombobulating? Mitchell is streets ahead of other theatrical auteurs grappling with the integration of live and broadcast action, and here she has three superb actors – and even more importantly, a superb stage management team – up to the challenge.

Independent (***) Written by Tim Bano
It's a bold move for the Royal Court's new artistic director David Byrne to programme this show as the first on the main stage under his tenure: an adaptation of Maggie Nelson's 2009 memoir-cum-philosophical-tract-cum-poetic treatise Bluets, which plants us in the mind of a heartbroken woman who falls in love with the colour blue. It's dense and demanding, esoteric and plotless, full of references to Goethe and Catherine Millet and Derek Jarman and Heraclitus. Then again, with Emma D'Arcy and Ben Whishaw in the cast and Katie Mitchell at the helm, it suddenly becomes a much more appealing proposition. Mitchell uses the Live Cinema approach she's been

developing for the past 20 years or so: actors stand in front of screens with moving backgrounds on them, and cameras film the actor plus background to make a kind of merged live film on an even bigger screen above. So here we've got Whishaw, D'Arcy and Kayla Meikle standing in a line, each with a screen behind, each with a desk in front. Margaret Perry, adapting the book, has split the lines into shards shared between the three. When one speaks, another grabs a prop or changes clothes and sets themselves up in front of their small screen, and the big screen makes it look like they're driving or at the Sainsbury's checkout. They're lightning fast as they strip off jackets, lie on pillows, swig whisky. We can choose whether to watch the shards or the composite. It's so technically spectacular, this blend of setup and final shot, while the wash of nice words rolls over you. It needs the skill of these three actors to carry it, but it's not really about their acting skills individually. Yes Whishaw is a bit nervy, D'Arcy gloomy and inward, Meikle blank and bewildered, occasionally comically so. But we're not getting to see how great they are as actors. It's much more about the totality: the way they keep this complicated show moving with split-second precision, being in exactly the right place at exactly the right time for each other's next scene, the way they share the lines, coming together to become this one woman who's desperately unhappy and obsessed with blue. We're watching three actors create one character, three sets of actions mediated into one image on the big screen, like a prism being fed different colours and instead of merging into white light it merges into blue. Far more surface level than in the book is the intense loneliness of the central character. You'd think that might be watered down by the fact there's three of them on stage sharing the lines and the space. But no, it's more so: when one actor speaks a little fragment of disconsolate thought – they're all disconsolate, these thoughts – another is up there on the screen in a car or on a tube train, often with headphones, often with the blue light of their phone up against their eyes, looking terribly lonely. No one else in their life gets to be seen. Perry's adaptation necessarily sacrifices a lot from the book, but keeps many of its most beautiful lines, and having the added textures of the film, plus a fantastic ever-present score from Paul Clark and Munotida Chinyanga, creates something very different from the book, a theatrical piece unlike much else in London at the moment – a far remove, even, from the many other shows using live cameras on stage. I suspect this will hit a lot harder for fans of the book. Anyone going in cold might find it all a bit slow, frustrating and alienating. Although there's this technical mastershow going on, which is properly stunning, that doesn't automatically make it a good show. Because, look, there's no story, and an obliqueness and opacity that makes it hard to stay "in" it, and spending that much time in that person's head with all those ponderous purple thoughts – it's a slog, even at 80 minutes. But my goodness it's a beautiful slog.

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

ROYAL COURT

????ECHO (EVERY COLD-HEARTED OXYGEN) by NASSIM SOLIEMANPOUR director OMAR ELERIAN with KATE MARAVAN, FIONA SHAW, BENEDICT WONG, SHEILA ATIM, ADRIAN LESTER, JEREMY O. HARRIS, REBECCA LUCY TAYLOR, MONICA DOLAN, EMILIA CLARKE, MEERA SYAL, JODIE WHITTAKER, MAWAAN RIZWAN, JESSICA GUNNINA, NICK MOHAMMED, TOBY JONES, KATHRYN HUNTER

Guardian (***) Written by Kate Wyver
A Persian rug gains value the more it is stepped on, playwright Nassim Soleimanpour explains, his face looming over us on a video call. The value of the ageing one on the Royal Court stage is about to rocket, as a new performer pads over it each night in this cosmic meditation on the shapeshifting meaning of borders and home. Cheeky on screen and sincere in script, the Iranian playwright is known for his "cold read" performances which began when he was refused a passport. As he was unable to travel with his plays, other actors stepped into his shoes, reading a script they had never seen before. Tonight, Adrian Lester is our extension of Soleimanpour's voice (later shows include Toby Jones, Meera Syal, Jodie Whittaker, Mawaan Rizwan and Kathryn Hunter), as the writer reckons with the possibility of never being able to return to his home country. Reading from a screen and receiving instructions through an ear piece, Lester is bemused at first but quickly offers the gravitas the script desires. The role itself is fairly undemanding, a side character to Soleimanpour's online presence, but its strength is as a symbol of the writer's absence, a baton-passing of resistance. Omar Elerian's subtle direction and Derek Richards' production design toy with time and space, providing a glimpse of what it is like to be pulled from one home to another. Borders fold in on themselves through tricksy video design, with an apparent live stream from Soleimanpour's Berlin apartment tumbling us into an interrogation scene in Iran. Later, the show zooms out, reaching for universal connection and covering Lester in stock-projections of the galaxy. But it is the individual, grounded intimacies that soften the distance between writer and performer: stories of Soleimanpour's father during the Iranian revolution; his wife, Shirin, rolling her eyes at his bad jokes; the generous notion of the rug getting better the more it is shared. These fragile moments shuffle closest to Soleimanpour's hopeful description of theatre as a time capsule, a way to hold on to people and the places we love even when we can't do so in person.

Time Out (***) Written by Andrzej Lukowski
Nassim Soleimanpour's global cult smash 'White Rabbit, Red Rabbit' was an ingenious response to the fact that the Iranian playwright was at the time unable to leave his home country. He wrote a sly subversive script designed for a different actor to perform cold every night, pointedly acting as stand ins for the writer who was physically banned from travel. It was good, but was it so good that it justified him making an entire career out of variations thereof? As with 2017's 'Nassim', 'ECHO' – staged as part of this year's LIFT festival – has its moments but struggles to really find a truly compelling reason for being performed by a cold reader (on press night the redoubtable Adrian Lester). What the production - directed by metatheatrical master Omar Elerian - does bring to the table is a heap more cool techy stuff than the ultra lo-fi 'White Rabbit…', and an awful lot more of Soleimanpour himself. Early on, our performer (Lester) is put into apparent live video contact with Soleimanpour, who merrily bumbles about his Berlin flat – where he lives with his wife, and dog Echo – chatting away inanely to

his bemused star. 'Echo' does two things well. It is excellent on the nature of what it is to have a divided self as a result of emigration, as most specifically embodied by the fact Soleimanpour finds himself unable to clearly say where his home is. He has left Iran, yet Iran never leaves him, and he does not seem to have an emotional connection with Berlin. He is not a refugee. But that makes things more complicated; a life spent flitting between his troubled homeland and his more prosaic adopted home, never sure if he will complete his journeys without detention. And the lengthy video sequences are on the whole superb, especially the scene that moves from apparent liveness to a '2001: A Space Odyssey'-indebted journey around Soleimanpour's various lives and pasts. But with the playwright himself now such a prominent presence as a performer, the need for Lester (or whoever) to be his physical proxy feels diminished and the actor often feels like he's mostly there to provide a live focal point for what is largely a video work. It's not like there is no point to the performer. But there is unquestionably less point. There is also the nagging sense that brilliant as 'White Rabbit, Red Rabbit' was conceptually, Soleimanpour isn't necessarily a particularly great writer of text – when 'ECHO' gets serious the writing drifts into vaguely hippieish stuff about how we're all interconnected. It's an excuse for some cool cosmic projections, but does border on the cliched. At its best 'ECHO' is moving, profound and visually stunning, but it comes saddled with a load of baggage from Soleimanpour being 'the cold read guy'. And while it's fascinating to see how far that format can be pushed with the collaboration of a talent like Elerian and the big-name stars signed up for this run, I can't help but feel Soleimanpour is now stuck with this form rather than being a master of it.

Evening Standard (**) Written by Nick Curtis
Each performance of this slippery metatheatrical experience features a different famous actor, unrehearsed and unprepared, interacting with the life story and the apparently live and recorded image of expat Iranian writer Nassim Soleimanpour. Jodie Whittaker, Nick Mohammed and Emilia Clark are on the list: on opening night Adrian Lester was the guinea pig. There's novelty value and tenterhooks tension here. I hesitate to critique the poetic expression of the writer's experience of oppression and displacement. Soleimanpour created his first play to travel when he couldn't, and his "cold readings" have attracted star actors and international acclaim, particularly in New York. Still, I wonder if the technique has any profound artistic value, or if it's just a way to lure celebs into a one-night stand with an audience who want to watch them stumble and possibly fail. And while this particular show can be stimulating in its execution and heartening in its message of human togetherness it's also, on a moment-by-moment level, rather boring. Omar Elerian's production features three video screens, a desk with a laptop and a Persian rug on stage. After a brief, awkward exchange between Lester and a pre-recorded voice, Soleimanpour appears on screen, showing us that the stage is a mock-up of his Berlin apartment, and introducing us to his wife Shiren and his dog Echo. The stilted and ostensibly real interactions quickly start to disintegrate. The screen image shifts to Tehran, where Soleimanpour and his proxy Lester undergo a border interrogation. Later we're in Sweden, where the author once had a snowmobile holiday with a descendent of August Strindberg. For a long while we're among the stars while Lester intones a speech about time, matter and human connection that sounds rehearsed but which is presumably (as he admits later passages are) fed to him through an earpiece. This, at least, is testament to the actor's nimble expressiveness. Soleimanpour paints a bittersweet picture of affectionate family life under Iran's theocracy. He, Shiren and Echo left after the 2022 state murder of Mahsa Amini by the "morality police". But he insists he's "not a refugee" and can go back regularly. It's not clear if we can trust this narrative, and the fate of his dissident father, his mother and his brother is uncertain. His musings waver between profundity and bathos. Plays are a form of communion between the past, present and future. So are Persian rugs. So are friendship bracelets. Um, yes, okay.

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

REGENT'S PARK OPEN AIR

????FIDDLER ON THE ROOF based on the SHOLEM ALEICHEM STORIES by SPECIAL PERMISSION of ARNOLD PEARL book JOSEPH STEIN music JERRY BOCK lyrics SHELDON HARNICK original new york production directed and choreographed by JEROME ROBBINS DAVID ALLEN director JORDAN FEIN musical supervisor/additional orchestrations MARK ASPINALL violin arrangements MARK ASPINALL, RAPHAEL PAPO choreographer JULIA CHENG fight/intimacy coordinator YARIT DOR sound JAMES HASSETT, NICK LINDSTER lights AIDEEN MALONE costume/décor TOM SCUTT musical director DAN TUREK voice/text director CAITLIN STEGEMOLLER with LIV ANDRUSIER tzeitel, NATASHA JULES BERNARD mirila, GREG BERNSTEIN mendel, NOA BODNER rifka, RALPH BOGARD avram, LAWRENCE BOOTHMAN nachum, JONATHAN BOURNE offstage swing, HANNAH BRISTOW chava, GEORGIA BRUCE hodel, ADAM DANNHEISSER tevye, GEORGIA DIXON bielke, JONATHAN DRYDEN TAYLOR constable, DAVID FREEDMAN rabbi, HELEN GOLDWYN shandel, DICKON GOUGH mordcha, THOMAS-LEE KIDD sasha, BEVERLEY KLEIN yente, DANIEL KRIKLER perchik, DARYA TOPOL MARGALITH schprintze, GREGOR MILNE fyedka, RAPHAEL PAPO the fiddler, ALEX PINDER russian #2, LARA PULVER golde, DYLAN SAFFER onstage swing, MICHAEL S. SIEGEL lazar wolf, ALEX TRANTER russian #1, DAN WOLFF motel

Guardian (*****) Written by Mark Lawson
Jordan Fein's revival, using its outdoor setting to sublime effect, stresses the musical's comedy while resonating with the current plight of refugees. By starting Fiddler on the Roof at 7.45pm, Jordan Fein's revival contrived that Sunrise, Sunset – the musical's devastating lament for the speed of spent life – was sung as darkness fell on Regent's Park on Tuesday. Only outdoor theatre could contrive such a sublime effect. But there are other benefits. Trevor Nunn's memorable 2018 version used the tight confines of the Menier Chocolate Factory to emphasise the cheek-by-jowl poverty and claustrophobia of the shtetl Anatevka in 1905, while Fein uses his venue to emphasise the community's vulnerability – literally with no roof over their heads and surrounded by woods from which the Russian tsar's pogrom police suddenly appear. Where Nunn emphasised tragedy, Fein foregrounds comedy, setting the piece in the tradition of deflective Jewish humour from Sholem Aleichem (Fiddler's source author) to Mel Brooks and Woody Allen. Tevye's Dream, in which the milkman father of five daughters resurrects his late mother-

in-law to break a wedding bargain, is played as a fast full-cast farce (choreography by Julia Cheng). As Tevye, Broadway import Adam Dannheisser perfectly times the one-liners ("Am I gonna have another dream?" when another filial match unravels) but also conveys the character's deep faith: in If I Were a Rich Man, the true bonus of wealth is more time for synagogue. Lara Pulver as his wife Golde radiates the brains and determination – a 60-year-old show about marrying off daughters is surprisingly feminist – that have made an arranged marriage in extreme poverty work. Fein (who revolutionised Oklahoma! at the Young Vic) and musical supervisor Mark Aspinall subtly tweak the soundscape. The title character, thrillingly fiddled by Raphael Papo, shadows Tevye like a golem, duetting and adding cadenzas. The show's final notes are a surprise, throwing the action forwards. As score and text, Fiddler is not, for me, quite the equal of two other Broadway classics simultaneously available in London: Guys and Dolls (at the Bridge) and Kiss Me, Kate (at the Barbican). Some of their best songs come after the interval, while Fiddler frontloads its showstoppers. However, the work always soars in performance and this version demonstrates its depth. Alarmingly, the theatre has acknowledged employing extra security due to pro-Palestinian protests. Beyond the horror of creatives and material being targeted for assumed affiliations and beliefs, the reaction misrepresents the piece. It was written in 1964 to reflect the Holocaust through an earlier persecution. But later productions, including this, invite the audience to see the emigrating chorale, Anatevka – which is spine-tinglingly sung here by two dozen cast members with the cohesion of a real community – as a broader reflection of displacement and refugee status. 27 July – 21 September

WhatsOnStage (*****) Written by Sarah Crompton
London is currently experiencing a bonanza of brilliant revivals of classic American musicals. Now, to join Hello Dolly!, Guys and Dolls, and A Chorus Line, along comes another glory of Broadway's late golden age. The quality of Jordan Fein's wonderful, emotional production is that it perfectly holds the balance of Fiddler on the Roof, neither tilting towards saccharine nor bitterness, towards schmaltz or politics. It honours the care with which book writer Joseph Stein, lyricist Sheldon Harnick and composer Jerry Bock first created the show in 1964, under the passionate ferocity of their director Jerome Robbins. This version led by the American actor Adam Dannheisser as Tevye, milkman in the impoverished village of Anatevka, turns the story of a man struggling to maintain his Jewish traditions and his faith in the face of societal change and cruel political upheaval, into a nuanced study of community and love. And it does all this while giving full force and energy to songs such as "If I Were a Rich Man" and "Tradition". Coming as it does at a time when the Israeli government's war on Gaza after Hamas' 7 October attacks made the cancellation of the show a possibility, it's a sensitive assertion of humanity that turns the story of one community under threat into a plea for greater empathy for all. It's impossible to watch the scene where Russian thugs attack a Jewish wedding celebration, for example, without thinking of the racist riots happening in Britain today. Yet it does this very gently, its tone and impact conditioned by Tom Scutt's beautiful set, at once abstract and specific: a wheatfield emerging from the trees at the back of the stage, and a ramp also covered in wheat, flicking back like a hair-lick, curving over the action. It both shelters the magnificent band of musicians and gives Raphael Papo's fiddler a roof on which to walk. In fact, the use of the fiddler, who sits with Tevye as he indulges in his famous monologues with God, and then plays along with the keening clarinet of Tevye's daughter Chava (a lovely performance from Hannah Bristow) as she is turned from the family home when she elopes with her non-Jewish lover, creates some of the most resonant moments in the piece. The music seems to speak even when characters do not and every song is sung with full emphasis on the narrative impact of the words, as if they are being forged afresh. Fein also stresses the humour and bubbling life in the piece. The villagers sit around the action, reacting as events unfold. Tevye's three daughters and their suitors all have unusual exuberance and vitality; all create character from the smallest details. When the tailor Motel (Dan Wolff), all gawky arms and legs, imagines telling Tevye about his love for his daughter Tzeitel (dignified Liv Andrusier), he literally slips under a table in fear. Passionate Perchik and his love Hodel (Daniel Krikler and Georgia Bruce) whirr about the stage as they dream of changing the world. Tevye's dream is staged with the help of the entire village and a lot of lace bedsheets, a communicative comic masterclass. Here, as elsewhere, Julia Cheng's propulsive choreography is rich and detailed, full of naturalistic movement that creates powerful dramatic effects; her staging of Robbins' famous bottle dance cleverly builds the possibility that the bottles might fall before reaching its stirring conclusion. At the heart of all this is the quiet underplaying and resonant voice of Dannheisser, who turns Tevye not into a Topol-style caricature but into a wry, ironic man, buffeted by events he cannot control, yet always finding it possible to assert love. He is matched by Laura Pulver's Golde, full of emotion she doesn't often express, but finding tenderness in gesture and stillness. The show seems made for its open-air setting. Candles light a wedding procession in the falling twilight; the villagers leave their homes walking through the wheat into the dark, as the fiddle music slowly dies in the air. Absolutely terrific.

Time Out (****) Written by Tim Bano
There's an irony that 'Fiddler On the Roof' is being revived in the only theatre in London that doesn't have one. But Jordan Fein's joyous, then suddenly very sad production is all about uprooting traditions. So for the opening image – one of the most famous in musical theatre – where the fiddler would normally fiddle on a shtetl rooftop, here instead in Tom Scutt's superb design he stands among wheat sheafs on a strip of land uprooted and peeled back like skin to hang threateningly above the stage. It's a remarkable image in a production full of them; a production about reinventing a classic musical through small gestures and symbols, rather than radical high concepts. Famously, 'Fiddler' was criticised when it premiered in 1964 as 'shtetl kitsch'. We've got Tevye, the old wisecracker, and the increasingly untraditional marriages of his daughters; we've got the small Jewish community with the matchmaker and the slightly hapless Rabbi. But Fein, who co-directed 'sexy Oklahoma!' when it came to London last year and helped strip it of any hokey old associations, eradicates the kitsch here, too. Yes it's funny – Adam Dannheisser's Tevye still cracks jokes and talks to the audience, though he's more dad-funny than the kind of showman-comedian that Tevye often becomes – and yes it's faithful, but this is a serious production. Part of that is circumstance. There's something particularly charged right now about a piece of theatre set on Russian

land about a Jewish community. Even more so about a community being forced out by racist rioters. But partly Fein finds it in the material. When daughter Chava, a brilliantly defiant Hannah Bristow, marries outside the faith it's too much for Tevye. 'If I bend that much I'll break', he laments. He disowns her, and there's a heartbreaking instrumental duet between the fiddler (an incredible Raphael Papo) who's been haunting Tevye on stage the whole time, and Bristow, who comes on with a clarinet in hand, serenading her own demise. It's also one that finds joy where it can, mostly in the idea of community. Individually, there are some wonderful performances – Lara Pulver's Golde is a joy, staunch enough to make Tevye's jokes about his wife not seem too horrendously dated – but there's some underpowered acting and some imperfect voices, too. It's only when everyone comes together and sings as an ensemble that they blow the (non-existent) roof off. In fact, one of the most extraordinary things about this show is the way it embraces that lack of roof, using the sun almost like a design element. It's all gorgeous evening sunshine for the earlier, happier parts of the story, but the haunting wedding tune 'Sunrise, Sunset' is designed to kick in just as the light fades, and then the bleaker second half takes place under black skies. It's such a clever bit of staging, embracing the inevitability of evening, of darkness. And in a simple, stunning image at the end of the show, it's not the fiddler who stands on the wheat field roof; it's Chava, clarinet in hand, defiant as ever. Tradition!, the cast chant in that proud opening number. In Fein's thoughtful, hopeful take on the old classic, traditions change.

Evening Standard (****) Written by Nick Curtis
This is Fiddler as London has never seen it before: revamped, refreshed and al fresco. American director Jordan Fein places the stirring 1964 Broadway musical by Joseph Stein (book), Jerry Bock (music) and Sheldon Harnick (lyrics) about life in a Jewish stetl circa 1905, on an abstract set, where a ski-jump field of wheat seems to have peeled up from the floor and everyone is prey to the elements. His cast, led by Broadway regular Adam Dannheisser as Tevye the milkman and Lara Pulver as his wife Golde, use their own accents. Most of them have terrific singing voices and those that don't exude character. It's a liberating, exuberant and humane production where the great songs – Tradition; If I Were a Rich Man; Sunrise, Sunset – touch you to the core. It also feels sadly contemporary without even trying. Tevye's waning, orthodox paternal influence over his five daughters is a sign of the social and political upheaval looming across the world. Three girls make their own choices: of a poor man, a radical, and a non-Jew. Great: but the family story takes place amid pogroms against Jewish communities in a territory under Tsarist Russian control that is today part of Ukraine. You can't help but find echoes of Putin's aggression and the war in Gaza in the wider political frame. Or of recent racist riots across Britain in the "little, unofficial demonstration" that wrecks the wedding of Tevye's eldest daughter Tzeitel. The day before this show's opening night, videos circulated on social media showing a group of pro-Palestinian protestors apparently confronting audience members in a nearby Regent's Park café. But theatre can tell greater truths than snapshots on social or traditional media. Beliefs and territory are important here but it's humans that really matter. Dannheisser's Tevye is a warm, tender-hearted mule of a man, complaining about his lot to God while equivocating himself out of hardline positions. Pulver, the Sherlock star back in the UK after years in America, brings a wearied glamour and a commanding singing voice to Golde. There's a lovely, matching partnership between Liv Andrusier as Tzeitel and Dan Wolff as her suitor Motel, a man so diffident he almost melts into the floor. Hannah Bristow as Chava, the daughter who marries a gentile – a man who consorts with Cossack thugs – duets with and then supplants the titular fiddler as a symbol of precariousness. Fein worked with Daniel Fish on the revelatory, erotically-charged Oklahoma! that came to London in 2022. Designer Tom Scutt built the visual world of Cabaret at the Kit Kat Club. Their collaboration here is less radical, though a dream sequence involving wind and smoke machines and a giant skeletal apparition comes close. Still, this is a hugely moving, sensitively revised Fiddler, cursed by relevance.

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

OLD VIC

????THE CONSTITUENT by JOE PENHALL director MATTHEW WARCHUS costume/décor ROB HOWELL lights HUGH VANSTONE sound SIMON BAKER, JAY JONES voice CHARLIE HUGHES D'AETH with JAMES CORDEN alec, ANNA MAXWELL MARTIN monica, ZACHARY HART mellor

Time Out (***) Written by Andrzej Lukowski
Starring James Corden and Anna Maxwell Martin, Joe Penhall's drama about a backbench MP starts strong and loses its way. James Corden is a good actor. It may be galling to say that given his, uh, 'divisive' public persona. But the man's stage record is undeniable. He made his theatre debut in the original production of Alan Bennett's 'The History Boys' and conquered the world in his personal vehicle 'One Man, Two Guvnors'. And if it's unlikely to match up to the success of those last two, he very much does 'it' again with Joe Penhall's new play 'The Constituent'. In his most serious role to date, Corden plays Alec, a fraying Afghan War veteran struggling with the disintegration of the willfully normie life he built for himself after leaving the army. He settled down with a wife, kids and a dog. But it's all gone to hell thanks to his erratic, paranoid behaviour. Now he's going through the family courts in an effort to regain access to his children, although whether his children want this is unclear. Alec's great hope is Monica (Anna Maxwell Martin), his hardworking local MP, a diligent, Labour-coded backbencher who he went to primary school with and knows his mum. He is working as an electrician, and they reconnect when he instals a new security system for her, becoming convinced along the way that she might hold the key to restabilising his life. Speaking in long, fast, slightly syntactically askew sentences, Corden is both amusing and unsettling as Alec, a plain-speaking man with a core of likeability who has nonetheless become palpably unmoored from reality, whose anger and and unpredictability make it abundantly apparent why he's lost his family. And Maxwell Martin is terrific as Monica (who is also tremendously written by Penhall). She is, quite clearly, a deeply

caring person who wants to do right by her community and is prepared to put in the hard yards when it comes to her job. No splashy ministerial job for her - for much of 'The Constituent' she's dealing (at enormous length) with the fallout from the local lollipop lady being made redundant. She also really genuinely wants to help Alec, even when his behaviour starts to get palpably stalker-ish. And yet she's not a saint, not simply a nice normal lady doing her best - she has a lawyer's mind and often interrupts Alec with pedantic technical and legal points, or offers long-winded, complex explanations for things everyone else clearly wishes were simple. She cares. But she has a sort of technocratic distance that winds up Alec, who probably just wants a hug and to be told everything will be fine. Staged on a narrow traverse, with its scenes delineated by increasingly mangled shards of The Smiths' 'Last Night I Dreamt That Somebody Loved Me', it's not hard to see 'The Constituent' as a descendent of Penhall's most famous play 'Blue/Orange', which explored a white psychiatrist's responsibility towards a vulnerable Black patient. The jobs, ethnicities and specific vulnerabilities have changed. But both plays are thoughtful, probing dramas about damaged masculinity and the morality of British institutions. Where 'The Constituent' unfortunately goes off the rails is in the introduction of a third character. At first Zachary Hart's paranoid Brummie police officer Mellor seems like a reasonable addition to the story: Monica is getting increasingly worried about Alec's obsessive behaviour, but doesn't qualify for proper ministerial protection. But eventually Mellor's ludicrous behaviour blows up the whole play and unbalances the carefully wrought clash between Monica and Alec. Even when Mellor is out of the equation, Matthew Warchus's hitherto finely-balanced production feels trivialised and diminished. Penhall perhaps makes a couple of valid points about the British police. But really it feels like he wasn't sure where to take the story so decided to throw in Mellor as a very crude curveball. It's a decent play and opening in the middle of a general election campaign, it's nothing if not timely, and Corden and (especially) Maxwell Martin are great. It's not the era-defining blockbuster Corden's two previous stage outings were. But it proves he's an actor of range and substance, while there is simply no world in which 90 minutes in the company of Anna Maxwell Martin is a bad thing.

Guardian (****) Written by Arifa Akbar
Anna Maxwell Martin excels as a good MP, while James Corden's ex-soldier shows he can be dark as well as funny. A drama featuring a face-off between an MP and a constituent outraged by the failings of the system might be considered provident timing a week before election night. But Joe Penhall's drama is a very different animal from the quintessential political play, with no cynicism, spin or party politics, none of the brash polemics of David Hare nor the wide-ranging scope of James Graham. It is led by a single issue – or so it initially seems – about personal safety versus community responsibility, its themes overcast by the real-life murders of Jo Cox and David Amess. Anna Maxwell Martin is Monica, an opposition backbencher juggling a young family with political life. James Corden is Alex, an ex-soldier who served in Afghanistan, now in the middle of a messy divorce involving the family courts. When he first enters her constituency office as a handyman installing a panic alarm, they connect. But the bonhomie turns into a high-stakes clash. She fears for her safety when he shows signs of becoming violent and calls in a police protection officer (Zachary Hart). Played straight through at 90 minutes and resolutely focused on local politics, it becomes universal by being so specific. It could be a play of the last 14 years, every character bearing the brunt of a system that is broken, under-resourced and failing the nation. Alec responds to this with impotent anger, Monica with empathy, for good or bad. Corden's last stage role, the farcical Francis Henshall in One Man, Two Guvnors, was well within his comfort zone. His character here is far more complex, although given some great funny lines at the start, but that playfulness takes us unsuspectingly into darker psychological territory. It has shades of Penhall's play Blue/Orange, and Corden's character that of its psychiatric patient. He becomes more erratic, talking zealously about male victimhood but, even so, it steers clear of ever playing him as a flatly unhinged villain. Maxwell Martin is subtly brilliant, her character's body language changing, coiled in on herself as Alec becomes more intimidating, her voice cracking even as she hides her fear to her child on the phone. What is striking is that Monica strives to do good, speaking of mercy and compassion, even in the face of Alec's aggression. She sees grey in a black-and-white world, and this portrait of a good, honest MP seems so dissonant in the face of our representatives, betting-gate notwithstanding.
Directed by Matthew Warchus, the drama plays out on Rob Howell's spare stage, its sound set to the politically infused indie dirges of Morrissey and Billy Bragg, who are maybe voices of another era but sum up our current state of malaise. The outbursts of violence are few but they startle when they come; so are the sudden bursts of tears, which are moving. In the end, it is not the play you imagine it to be, with no binary equation of victim/villain. Each of these characters is a victim of the system, hanging on, just – even Hart's comical protection officer, whose outburst about his ground-down rights contains a sting. Monica is perhaps too perfect but, amid the recent political history of sleaze, untruth and subterfuge, the notion of the "good MP" is an important reminder for 4 July. 13 June – 10 August.

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

YOUNG VIC

????NACHTLAND by MARIUS VON MAYENBURG translator MAJA ZADE director PATRICK MARBER designer ANNA FLEISCHLE lights RICHARD HOWELL composer/sound ADAM CORK movement/intimacy EJ BOYLE fight YARIT DOR with JENNA AUGEN judith, GUNNAR CAUTHERY fabian, DOROTHEA MYER-BENNETT nicola, JOHN HEFFERNAN philipp, JANE HORROCKS evamaria, ANGUS WRIGHT kahl

Evening Standard (**) Written by Nick Curtis
Nachtland at the Young Vic review: a thorny, intractable issue, clumsily addressed. What a disappointment. Marius von Mayenburg's play about greed and anti-semitism is unsubtle and unresolved. What should we do with artworks created by monsters? That's the central question of this laboriously discursive play by Marius von Mayenburg, about siblings who inherit what appears to be an early painting by Hitler. It's also part of a wider

movement among German authors to foreground the Führer in discussions of the nation's guilt over the Holocaust. The disputed watercolour taints every character in Nachtland with greed, prejudice or perverse sexual behaviour. One finds his arm locked in a Nazi salute after he's scratched by the frame. Given a knowingly absurdist production by Patrick Marber, the play is less subtle than that 2022 Channel 4 show in which comedian Jimmy Carr debated whether artworks by Hitler, Picasso and Rolf Harris should be destroyed. Bereaved siblings Philip (John Heffernan) and Nicola (Dorothea Myer-Bennett – a late replacement after Romola Garai withdrew) are already bickering when the picture is discovered in their dead dad's loft. It triggers a wider conflict, particularly between Philip's Jewish wife Judith (Jenna Augen) and Nicola, who almost immediately compares the Holocaust to Palestinian suffering. Steadily, all the gentile characters are revealed to have troubling attitudes to Jews – ranging from outright antisemitism to sexual fetishisation – and towards Hitler. The point here is that the "kitsch" painting is only worth money if his name can be attached to it. So the siblings and a chilly, Teutonic art expert (Jane Horrocks) try to construct the kind of Nazi legacy most families would strive to deny. The debate between intrinsic worth and notoriety is stark in this case: but as Angus Wright's arrogantly bluff collector points out, everyone from Chaucer to Renoir held more or less abhorrent views. "There's hardly anyone left," whimpers Philip, as if European culture were on the brink of cancellation. It's a thorny, intractable issue, clumsily addressed. Most of von Mayenburg's characters have little interior life and instead parrot polar viewpoints, while Philip embodies pure weakness. No one attempts a German accent but the dialogue sounds stiff and alien (the English translation is by Maja Zade). Marber's production begins with the actors clearing Anna Fleischle's junk-strewn set as the audience files in and features deliberately jarring, Brechtian distractions. An oiled-up Wright dances to Iggy Pop in a pair of skintight pants slashed to reveal pale swathes of buttock. Judith sings David Bowie's theme to the 1982 film Cat People. There's a random hint of incest, an unexplained disappearance, mad moments when characters deliberately overact or bark like dogs. After 100 minutes the play fizzles out, unresolved. A disappointment. 20 February – 20 April

Time Out (***) Written by Andrzej Lukowski
A superb cast grapples with this challenging German satire about a pair of siblings who inherit a very unusual painting. What would you do if you found an 'original Hitler' in your late father's attic? That's the essential premise of 'Nachtland', and while you suspect an Anglo playwright might have turned in an acerbic but conventional dining room comedy, German writer Marius von Mayenburg has created something more difficult and confrontational than that. It begins with siblings Nicola (Dorothea Myer-Bennett) and Philipp (John Heffernan) bickering over the right to tell their late father's story. She's withering and highly strung, he's blithe and a bit feeble. Their pass-agg back and forth over their deceased dad is fairly innocuous… until Nicola's husband Fabian (Gunnar Cauthry) finds a painting in the attic, wrapped in brown paper. Nicola thinks the watercolour of an Austrian church is kitschy rubbish and wants to throw it out. Or she does until they see the artist's signature - A Hitler - and it becomes obvious who the artist was, something confirmed by Jane Horrocks's sinister Nazi art dealer Evamaria. The siblings start to see Euro signs - but Evamaria tells them they must prove the provenance of the painting and its connection to the family if they want to really rake in life-changing sums. So they set about establishing their family's Nazi connections with aplomb - much to the horror of Philipp's Jewish wife Judith (Jenna Augen), whose objections to the whole affair are met with withering disdain and low-level antisemitism from Nicola. It's weirder than all that sounds: things start to get really odd when Fabian is apparently infected with Hitler's spirit; then Angus Wright turns up as camply sinister art collector Kahl; then it just seems to leave the rules of physics behind and become a sort of wild allegory for post-War German character. As a wilfully uncomfortable play about contemporary Germany it certainly works. That's not to say Mayenburg doesn't have some smartly universal stuff to say about the constructedness of identity and the means by which racial prejudices take root. But it would be absurd to pretend this was anything other than a nationally specific story – and it's okay to stage stories about other cultures! Patrick Marber's production is atmospheric, drenched in the music of Berlin-era Bowie, with an evocative haunted house set from Anna Fleischle that looks like a rotting corpse. There are excellent performances: Heffernan is sublimely funny as the spineless Philipp, Wright and Horrocks are gloriously weird, and Myer-Bennett tackles the selfish Nicola with monstrous conviction (you'd not guess she joined the cast late, replacing Romola Garai, who dropped out during rehearsals). Still, there's something a bit draining about its abrupt shifts in tone, and its caginess about being out and out funny. It's a fiddly play, that frequently threatens you with a good time but it often feels like the cast and Marber are more interested in being funny than the text is. The English adaptation comes from German-Swedish dramaturg Maja Zade, and I do wonder if a British playwright who could have imposed a little of their own sensibility on it might have led to a funnier play that flowed better. Of course this could all be me being a philistine and demanding big laffs from a cerebral work with higher things on its mind. But it does feel like 'Nachtland' wants to be funny; it often is funny. Making it all go down a shade easier wouldn't sacrifice its integrity, but rather make its points hit home harder.

Guardian (****) Written by David Jays
The discovery of what could be a painting by Hitler leads to a moral quagmire in Patrick Marber's punchy staging of Marius von Mayenburg's play. Arrive early, and you'll see the cast tidy a load of junk: Nicola and Philipp are sorting their dead dad's stuff. When the play begins, the stage is clear – except for a watercolour stashed in the attic. It's a tame sepia view of a church with a signature that looks awfully like "A. Hitler". "The Hitler?" gasps Nicola's husband. Well, yes. In Marius von Mayenburg's snappy 2022 play, set in Berlin, the wrangling sibs (Dorothea Myer-Bennett and John Heffernan, both terrifically narky) and their spouses are flummoxed. They enlist an expert (a crisp Jane Horrocks in arthouse specs) whose grandpapa was Hitler's curator. She finds a mysterious buyer (Angus Wright) and her valuation eases the slide into fibs and filth. The family boasted anti-Nazi credentials ("not least for aesthetic reasons"), but must now boost the painting's backstory. Heffernan's faded T-shirt says "Faust" – he sells his soul without a struggle. Tripping everyone up through the moral quagmire is Judith, Philipp's Jewish wife (a bemused, affronted Jenna Augen), inconveniently discussing other aspects of the provenance. "Can

we not talk about art without bringing in the Holocaust!" harrumphs Nicola, but it isn't possible. Anna Fleischle's design patches the house with brick, tiles, blank windows – layers of history and denial. Patrick Marber's punchy staging often places people in square formation, swivelling to snarl in all directions. Characters fitfully turn to us to narrate, tetchily, or are pinned in Richard Howell's tight circles of light. Having begun in squabbles, the play gets stranger. Nicola's husband (Gunnar Cauthery), throbbing with tetanus and putrid with plum jam, embodies the tell-tale heart of national guilt. No one can discuss history without themselves getting antisemitic. History won't stay put in the past. Nachtland isn't a real word in German, but suggests something like nightscape, a place of darkness. In Maja Zade's spicy translation and with an excellent cast, it is all, as the buyer says, "pretty strong pepper". Von Mayenburg doesn't go deep, but prods modern Germany's sore spots with provoking vigour.

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

HAMPSTEAD

????DOUBLE FEATURE by JOHN LOGAN director JONATHAN KENT décor ANTHONY WARD lights HUGH VANSTONE sound PAUL GROOTHUIS with JONATHAN HYDE vincent price, IAN MCNEICE alfred hitchcock, ROWAN POLONSKI michael reeves, JOANNA VANDERHAM tippi hedren

Evening Standard (**) John Logan's frustrating new play is a pub quiz film round mounted on stage. It awkwardly Splices together Alfred Hitchcock's attempt to control and conquer Tippi Hedren during the filming of Marnie in 1964 and Vincent Price's fraught relationship with the young, doomed director Michael Reeves on Witchfinder General four years later. Logan has intelligent ideas about power dynamics between artists - one of his preoccupations - as well as image vs reality, and age vs celluloid immortality. But the characters are little more than stiff, emotionally inconsistent mouthpieces for these thoughts in Jonathan Kent's stilted production. The gripping moments - when Reeves reveals his darkest fears, and Hedren has a #MeToo confrontation with Hitch - are artificially engineered. For a play that's also about truth in art, it feels downright phony throughout, designed to make "the mob in the dark" (as Hitchcock calls audiences here feel smug when they decode a clever concept or an arcane movie reference. Brittle 24-year old Reeves (Rowan Polonski) hopes to coax greatness out of camp old horror ham Price (Jonathan Hyde). Hitchcock (lan McNeice), in physical and artistic decline, hopes to reshape ice-blonde model-turned-sort-of-actress Hedren (Joanna Vanderham) for his lens and his bed. Both encounters happen in an English cottage designed by Anthony Ward: Reeves's is on location, Hitchcock's a fake on the Paramount set. Occasionally the stories synch up or overlap but for the most part, one couple slowly performs a dumbshow - preparing dinner, looking at set designs - while the other pair go at it. Who will win and who will walk away? Who cares? Hyde doesn't attempt Price's mellifluous sneer but gives us a parody of a self-parody, a has-been drama queen caked in Max Factor no 17 ("Egyptian Gold"), clinging to his dignity. McNeice does Hitch's fussy imperiousness rather than his accent. Neither seemed entirely on top of their words on opening night. Vanderham and Polonski have almost impossible roles, each required to boomerang repeatedly from docile politeness to extremes of emotion. Vanderham must also embody and transcend Hedren's glacial beauty. It's impossible for any of the actors to find a strand of conviction in their characters, because there isn't one. Logan is a hotshot screenwriter (Skyfall, Gladiator, Penny Dreadful) who regards theatre as a more pure and rewarding medium, and surely understands the importance of timing. It's his misfortune that Double Feature opens in the wake of Jack Thorne's The Motive and the Cue, which covers some of the same territory with greater flair. His play probably looked on paper like a commercial hit, a way for Hampstead to make up for the loss of its Arts Council grant. It won't. And at a time when younger audiences feel alienated and priced out of theatre, I wonder if it's wise to programme something so squarely aimed at smug, film-nerd baby boomers.

Guardian (**) Written by Arifa Akbar
Two pairs of directors and actors zigzag on stage, talking across time and across each other. In each, one holds the power and the other attempts to wrest it. In 1960s Los Angeles, Alfred Hitchcock (Ian McNeice) is in an after-hours rehearsal for the film Marnie with Tippi Hedren (Joanna Vanderham), boasting of how he discovered her, controlling what she wears and commanding her into the bedroom. Alongside them, in a separate 60s bubble in a Suffolk cottage, is Vincent Price (Jonathan Hyde), instructing young director Michael Reeves (Rowan Polonski) to fall to his knees to beg him not to quit Witchfinder General, the film they are working on. There is synchronicity in their respective power play but John Logan's drama is out of sync as a whole despite some entertainingly punchy lines, albeit too many nudge-wink references. Theatre's not real, says one character. Film is immortal but dead, says another. Directed by Jonathan Kent, there is not nearly as much doing as saying, and it seems almost to come to a standstill as characters work out ideas in the script, rather than bloom into life. It might still have made for a brilliant verbal wrestling match if there was only more emotional underpinning and more intensity of focus in what it seeks to explore. The #MeToo themes of sexual predation and bullying are not done justice, and both stories are diluted by protracted discussions on the roles of the actor and director as well as displays of writerly insight into Hitchcock and Price's oeuvres. Plays about famous faces by their nature risk impersonation: McNeice looks the part but does not carry enough threat and Hyde is too campy, but Polonski does a better job of the hand-wringingly earnest and tormented Reeves. So does Vanderham as Hitchcock's tense, enigmatic muse, dressed in a superb ice-blue suit. But it amounts to less than the sum of its parts. The double nature of this feature is what distracts, one half undercutting the other. Both couples deserve space, and focus, for their own play.

Time Out (***)Written by Tom Wicker
In Jonathan Kent's production, both pairs weave obliviously around each other in the same detailed cottage set, which stands in for Hitchcock's recreation of a bit of Britishness in a Californi backlot, and the real place Reeves lived in while filming his cult classic in the UK. The script makes feature of certain items being in both. This is a

little confusing at the start, but Kent's inventive use the space - at one point, all four sit and eat in tense silence at the same table - is engaging. The counterpoint is a fascinating if not wholly enlightening device. Hitchcock's horrific treatment his women stars is given full airing here, as Ian McNeice's director switches between manipulativ avuncularity and a constant, 'cinematic' commentary on her body that objectifies Joanna Vanderham's exhausted Hedren, as he forces her to rehearse the psycho-sexual nastiness of 'Marnie'. Vanderham really makes you feel Hedren's despairing sense of the inescapability of it al While Logan gives her a retributive moment - when she turns that unblinking camera lens back o Hitchcock's psyche - it doesn't remove the discomfort. It also doesn't cast a sparkling new light the tension between the old-school Price - he of the knowingly arched eyebrow and iconic voice and the complicated Reeve, who, at 24, is disgusted by hammy horror and wants 'truthful' violenc Jonathan Hyde, as Price, and Rowan Polonski, as Reeves, are good at exposing their vulnerabilitie the same time they lunge to attack. They play cat-and-mouse over age, mental health and authenticity. Hyde, in particular, switches from disdain to suddenly crumpled and tired journeyma actor. Logan has a richly evocative way with language and ideas that slowly pulls you in. He has particularly fascinating things to say about the anxiety of influence in Price's conflict with Reeves including the possibility of finding common ground as the wheels of change grind into new positi in cinema's fickle landscape. There's rich dramatic territory here - a fertile look at art and audiences. including the possibility of finding common around as the wheels of change arind into new r including the possibility of finding common ground as the wheels of change grind into new positions in cinema's fickle landscape. There's rich dramatic territory here - a fertile look at art and audiences. I'm just not sure it finds its best framing in this play. The juxtaposition of these scenes with the inexorable, claustrophobic awfulness of Hitchcock's treatment of Hedren is awkward. At times, the play seems to draw an unconvincing equivalence. At others, it contorts itself into shared lines of dialogue between the two pairs that suggest a connective tissue where there isn't really any. These moments come off more cheaply than this production, at its most interesting, warrants. Two plays for the price of one isn't always a bargain.

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

DOCK X

????MACBETH by WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE adaptor EMILY BURNS director SIMON GODWIN décor/ costume FRANKIE BRADSHAW lights JAI MORJARIA sound CHRISTOPHER SHUTT composer ASAF ZOHAR movement LUCY CULLINGFORD fight KATE WATERS with RALPH FIENNES macbeth, INDIRA VARMA lady macbeth, BEN ALLEN ross, EWAN BLACK Malcolm, LEVI BROWN angus, JONATHAN CASE seyton, DANIELLE FIAMANYA second witch, KEITH FLEMING king duncan/siward, MICHAEL HODGSON second murderer/captain, LUCY MANGAN first witch, JAKE NEADS first murderer/donalbain, RICHARD PEPPER lennox, STEFFAN RHODRI banquo, ROSE RILEY menteith, REBECCA SCROGGS lady macduff/doctor, LOLA SHALAM third witch, ETHAN THOMAS fleance, BEN TURNER macduff, M'KYAH CALLENDER/DOMINIC MCLAUGHLIN macduff's son, SOPHIE DUFFIE/AMARI TADÉ macduff's daughter

Time Out (***) Written by Andrzej Lukowski
Ralph Fiennes and Indira Varma star in an accessible but dour take on Shakespeare's tragedy. As evidenced by his recent fretting about content warnings in theatre, Ralph Fiennes is an old-fashioned type of actor. And that cuts a couple of ways in terms of his performance as Shakespeare's blood-drenched Scottish monarch. On the one hand, he speaks the verse with pin-sharp clarity – of course Shakespeare can be hard to follow, but if you're paying even a modicum of attention you're going to have no problem deciphering Fiennes's beautiful modulated performance, which treats every sentence as something to be luxuriated in, every esoteric bit of verbiage as something with a meaning worth unlocking. On the other hand, his dedication to clarity doesn't feel matched by a clear interpretation of Macbeth's actions. As directed by Shakespeare stalwart Simon Godwin, Fiennes's antihero seems like a nice enough bloke, who receives a prophecy about his rise to the Scottish throne and allows his posh, pragmatic wife Lady Macbeth (Indira Varma) bully him into murdering the king… and then just kind of loses it. Whether that's through stress, paranoia or other mental health problems is never made clear. His behaviour is mercurial: at times Fiennes seems confused and vulnerable, perhaps even suggesting his Macbeth has dementia. But it hardly feels meticulously mapped out, and the general sense is that Macbeth has fallen into murderous madness because that's what it says he does in the script – David Tennant's malign recent Donmar Macbeth was comfortably more compelling. Still, it's a solid production. The commitment to clarity remains throughout. Frankie Bradshaw's set and Asaf Zohar's score are broodingly impressive. Varma is always great, and there's a wonderful moment where Macbeth orders the assassination of Banquo and clear as day you see Lady M's realise that this has gotten totally out of hand. Lucy Mangan, Danielle Fiamanya and Lola Shalam make for fascinating witches. Young, working class coded women who move in eerie sync with each other, there's something intensely compelling about the discomfort they cause the posh, uniformed men who they menace. Godwin also bumps up the role of Macbeth's servant Seyton (a nervy Jonathan Case). Treated as a mere tool by his employers, you can feel his soul shrivelling as he's asked to help with the paperwork for sundry atrocities. All very interesting… but an exact point about class never materialises. There's a feeling that nobody involved feels they have anything to prove – which I'd argue is not the case when it's the third major production of 'Macbeth' to come to London in under a year. A handsome spin on The Scottish Play, but not a remarkable one. 10 Februrary – 30 March 2024

The Standard (***) Written by Nick Curtis
The marketing of this Ralph Fiennes vehicle is the masterpiece here. Fiennes and Indira Varma have an easy chemistry but apart from the design and locations, this is a standard Scottish play. This is a calculated piece of event theatre. A solid, lucid production of Shakespeare's play is transformed into a happening by the heavyweight

presence and onstage chemistry of stars Ralph Fiennes and Indira Varma, and by the misleading implication we're taking part in something far cooler than a boring old play. Simon Godwin's sternly martial production opened in The Depot, a vast, hard-to-reach modern shed in suburban Liverpool this week. The path to it is lit with flaming torches; in the bar hung with fascistic banners, snatches of supernatural dialogue mix with light instrumental jazz; the audience is ushered into the cavernous auditorium via a wasteland where a burning car is guarded by dead-eyed soldiers. More soldiers surround the three-sided stage, as a wispy phrase from When You Wish Upon A Star plays on a xylophone. What actually takes place on the stage is straightforward, bordering on the pedestrian. Emily Burns has lightly edited the script, sprinkling the appearances of the witches - played here as refugees displaced and unhinged by war - throughout the action and excising the unfunny porter scene. Fiennes is a physically mannered, careworn, middle-aged Macbeth, seizing a late chance of advancement. There's an easy affection and attraction between the lead couple, and Varma subtly shows how Lady Macbeth's sharp-elbowed ambition for her husband decays into dismay, distrust and eventually madness. Godwin's production has a propulsive, coldly relentless quality and some nice touches: the wounded captain who announces Macbeth's early victory resurfaces as a murderer – a veteran who fell through the cracks of this fractured society. Ben Turner's Macduff and Steffan Rhodri's Banquo are strong, Keith Fleming's King Duncan misconceived as a dandyish warlord. Frankie Bradshaw's efficient design includes brutalist walls that bleed and a wardrobe for Varma that – apart form one awful Kate Middleton-esque batwing number – chicly offsets the drab suits and uniforms. After Liverpool the show transfers to similar venues – hopefully with less cramped seating – in Edinburgh, in London's Docklands in February, and then to the Shakespeare Theatre Company in Washington DC, which Godwin runs. The rave-style locations and the pre-show set dressing are designed to attract large, non-typical theatre audiences, even if the production they frame is less than revolutionary. But maybe it works. On opening night The Depot was packed. The teenager next to me had bought a ticket on a whim and almost yelped when Fiennes appeared. Godwin's production is effective if unthrilling: the marketing of it is a masterpiece.

London Theatre (***) Written by Olivia Rook

There are few roles as highly prized in the theatrical canon as William Shakespeare's Macbeth. Lauded actors including Sir Ian McKellen, Denzel Washington, James McAvoy, and — very recently at the Donmar Warehouse — David Tennant have all starred as the tyrannical king, and now is the turn of Ralph Fiennes at London's cavernous warehouse space Dock X, as part of a UK/US tour. The role should be perfect for him. Fiennes is no stranger to Shakespeare, and won a Tony Award for his performance as Hamlet on Broadway in 1995. But in Emily Burns's adaptation of Shakespeare's tragic play, his take on the monstrous ruler is neither ground-breaking nor particularly absorbing. He plays Macbeth as a befuddled older man who, at a stretch, appears to be losing his faculties. He gropes at Indira Varma's magnificent Lady Macbeth in one scene and she distances herself, framing him as slightly lecherous. While Fiennes masters Shakespeare's language with perfectly precise diction, eliciting chuckles from the audience with his wry humour, it's all a little one note, save for some Voldemort-esque moans in the play's denouement. Varma, best known for Games of Thrones and Noël Coward's Present Laughter opposite Andrew Scott, is convincing as Lady Macbeth, with a sharp tongue and natural authority on stage. In many moments she appears more mother than wife to Fiennes's unravelling Macbeth and she also plays up the dark, humorous parts of Shakespeare's script, such as when Macbeth sees Banquo's ghost at the banquet and she dryly states: "You have displaced the mirth." Fiennes criticised the use of trigger warnings in theatre earlier this week, arguing that audiences should be "shocked and disturbed" by the things they see on stage. The production, as a whole, is fairly pedestrian on that score, but the entrance to designer Frankie Bradshaw's set takes things to another level. Before reaching the stage space, audiences are greeted by burnt-out cars, piles of rubble, and rubbish cans alight with flames. It is a scene of complete desolation and the most obvious reference to the war zones that inspired Burns's modern adaptation. The effect is startling, and it is a shame that this same, brutally realistic detail is not continued in the main room, which instead houses an unremarkable, stripped-back stage. There are several interesting illusions, from the set pieces streaked in blood that show, for Macbeth, the writing is quite literally on the wall, to the horrifying appearance of Banquo's ghost, who is bathed in a pool of white light by designer Jai Morjaria. Disembodied hands claw at frosted glass doors and the soundscape created by Christopher Shutt, which evokes the sounds of war, reverberates around the space. The show is a faithful reproduction of Shakespeare's great tragedy and rattles along at an even pace. But, unfortunately, anything particularly innovative is left at the door.

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

NATIONAL

????THE GRAPES OF WRATH based on the novel by JOHN STEINBECK adaptor FRANK GELATI director CARRIE CRACKNELL décor ALEX EALES costume EVIE GURNEY composer STUART EARL original songs MAIMUNA MEMON lights GUY HOARE sound DONATO WHARTON movement director IRA MANDELA SIOBHAN music director OSNAT SCHMOOL fight director KATE WATERS intimacy coordinator KATHARINE HARDMAN for EK INTIMACY with ZOË ALDRICH elizabeth sandry/second agricultural officer, AFOLABI ALLI muley graves/floyd knowles/ensemble, RHYS BAILEY winfield joad, RACHEL BARNES band vocal/accordion, BRANDON BASSIR camp proprietor/first officer/second man/first man with club, LIN BLAKLEY granma joad, TOM BULPETT noah joad, MORGAN BURGESS band vocal/guitar/slide guitar/second officer/hooper ranch guard, RYAN ELLSWORTH willy/man going back/mayor of Hooverville/man in barn, AMELIA GABRIEL ensemble, CHRISTOPHER GODWIN grampa joad/contractor,

VALENTINE HANSON first agricultural officer/weedpatch camp director/camp guard/mr mainwright, GREG HICKS pa joad, HARLEY JOHNSTON gas station attendant/second man with club/willy's accomplice, CHERRY JONES ma joad, NATEY JONES jim casy, WILLIAM LAWLOR the man in the barn's son, MIRREN MACK rose of sharon, MAIMUNA MEMON band vocal/banjo/woman with guitar, MATTHEW ROMAIN band vocal/fiddle/deputy sheriff, ANISH ROY connie rivers, MICHAEL SHAEFFER uncle john, ROBYN SINCLAIR mrs knowles/agnes wainwright/ensemble, TUCKER ST IVANY al joad, EMMA TRACEY ruthie joad, HARRY TREADAWAY tom joad, CATH WHITEFIELD gas station owner/bookkeeper/mrs wainwright/ensemble

Evening Standard (***) Written by Nick Curtis

The Grapes of Wrath at the National Theatre review: the powerhouse cast led by Cherry Jones is compelling

Though this initially understated Steinbeck adaptation steers clear of pastiche, a melodromatic second half threatens to veer into parody. Despite a powerhouse cast led by Broadway legend Cherry Jones and our own Harry Treadaway, this adaptation of John Steinbeck's Depression-era odyssey by the late Chicagoan theatre-maker Frank Galati is enjoyable for all the wrong reasons. Carrie Cracknell's production tracks the impoverished Joad family's 2,0000-mile flight from Oklahoma to California in a series of picturesque vignettes, studded with folky music by Stuart Earl and Maimuna Memon, who leads the onstage band as they stroll through the action, strumming and fiddling. Everyone seems clean, healthy and philosophical, winnowed in the gym rather than hollowed by want, and largely untroubled by the fact that life on the road seems to be reducing their numbers one by one. So for the first half we watch beautifully lit and composed scenarios – including a sumptuously evoked river bathing scene – and splendidly understated acting, with little real sense jeopardy or of life at the edge. When a sense of desperation does ramp up in the second half, the melodramatic scenarios and the stylised dialogue threaten to tip over into parody. That's always a potential risk with Steinbeck: a harrowing birth scene during a thunderstorm and a flood is a case in point. Parallels with contemporary wealth inequality, suppression of workers' rights and forced migration (the latter spelled out in one of Memon's songs) don't really land. That it still works, and steers just clear of pastiche, is down to the elegance of Cracknell's direction and Alex Eales' set. They keep the Lyttelton as a big black box across which the Joads' overloaded van is laboriously pushed, and where tented Hooverville shantytowns are erected and struck following police raids. This is a tale of constant movement, but Cracknell often allowing exchanges between two figures on stage to unspool at unhurried length. The cast tend towards understatement too, and if it leaves the show lacking in drama they remain compelling to watch. Jones exudes the warmth and tenacity of old leather as the indefatigable Ma Joad, fiercely telling her family "we are the people that live", despite copious evidence to the contrary. Treadaway has a nice line in loose-limbed righteousness as her son Tom, a man "who don't take nuthin' from nobody". Natey Jones brings a contrasting garrulity and fire to Jim Casy, the former preacher who has lost his faith. Greg Hicks and Michael Shaeffer are highly watchable despite their characters, Pa Joad and Uncle John, being solely defined by defeated stoicism and guilty alcoholism, respectively. And there is a standout performance from Mirren Mack as Rose of Sharon, the Joads' pregnant daughter, who seems to burn with anxiety under Guy Hoare's lighting. She pulls off the show's final image, which could be woefully over the top, with affecting aplomb. Cherry Jones was given a Broadway-style bouquet on opening night and immediately passed it to her. 17 July – 14 September

WhatsOnStage (***) Written by Alun Hood

The undesirable underbelly of the American Dream has seldom looked as bleak as it does in this version of John Steinbeck's classic 1939 novel. Frank Galati's adaption won the 1990 Tony Award for Best Play and now arrives at the National with a new folk score by Maimuna Memon, whose soaring, plaintive vocals are a persistent motif throughout Carrie Cracknell's operatic, uneven staging. The tale of the Joad family's epic trek across Depression-era America in search of a better life in California, a story typical of so many bands of migrant workers of the period, isn't easy to sit through, and nor should it be. Steinbeck's sweeping narrative is a timely reminder of how the greed of the very few can lead to the destitution of so many, and along the way, we get violent deaths, stillbirth, flooding and starvation. Reducing a 600-page novel down to three hours stage time is an ambitious undertaking, but Galati has done a creditable job. While certain characters and plot developments have been excised, the sense of humans being tested to the limits of their endurance remains potent, as does a sense of wonder at the sheer scale of an America that can elevate or crush individuals, and where the dividing line between getting by and total despair is easily crossed. Cracknell's production has an enthralling, wordless opening section (movement direction by Ira Mandela Siobhan) that matches the beginning of the novel, with cast members, bodies splayed and taut at unnatural angles to the stage, railing desperately against the giant billowing dust winds that perished crops and spelled financial doom for farming folk. It's a rousing, terrifying scene setter, but its striking theatricality is seldom matched by anything that follows. Certainly there are unforgettable moments where Cracknell seems hellbent on staging the unstageable, such as a young woman giving birth in a barn in the midst of a fearsome thunderstorm while the men outside toil to build fortifications against a rising torrent of water, or the entire Joad tribe and all their belongings clinging on to their rickety vehicle as they drive off towards the great open sky. But there are also points where the ambition and scale of the work seem to defeat the creative team and we are left with interminable sections of flat, uninspired action. The return to the London stage of American acting royalty Cherry Jones, however, is a cause for celebration. She plays indomitable Ma Joad and is every inch the woman Steinbeck describes ("the citadel of the family, the strong place that could not be taken…if she swayed the family shook") in a selfless, still, utterly unsentimental performance of tremendous gravitas and truth. Although some of the accents aren't fully convincing, there's beautiful work from Greg Hicks as her husband,

Mirren Mack as her pregnant daughter and Christopher Godwin as the irascible, defeated patriarch. If Harry Treadaway's parole convict Tom suffers initially from the duel constraints of the inarticulacy of Steinbeck's character and the mammoth scale of the production, he eventually finds something simultaneously noble and wild in this troubled young man. Natey Jones is vividly tormented as the Christ-like former preacher who befriends him. Like the book, the play closes with the image of the young mother who has lost her baby breastfeeding a starving middle-aged man because her milk is the only nourishment available, which remains as ambiguous and troublingly intimate as ever. Is Steinbeck making the point that the poor will share the very last of what they have? Is it about survival? Perhaps wisely, neither play nor production try to provide a definitive answer. What this Grapes of Wrath ultimately leaves us with is the unmistakable sense of being in the presence of greatness, but of not having fully got to grips with its source material. For all the astonishing and sometimes beautiful stage pictures, the understated brilliance of Jones's performance, and the haunting musicality, I'm not convinced that this isn't a story that is better told on page or screen.

Guardian (***) Written by Arifa Akbar
swirling sandstorm and a bare, almost Beckettian backdrop perfectly capture the scorched-earth landscape in the opening pages of John Steinbeck's 1939 epic, which bodes well for this adaptation. But while Carrie Cracknell's drama is always big on atmosphere, it wilts into something less bold, more timidly documentary, in its effort to capture the large-scale sense of hope against despair in the US during the Great Depression. Adapted by Frank Galati, it features the Joad family's move west from dust-bowl Oklahoma, hoping to find work and survive. Instead, they face exploitation from landowners, hostility from police, migrant destitution and death along the way. The novel is gruelling and you certainly feel a relentless hardship here, but without Steinbeck's ability to bring a close-up and intimate humanity to these characters. Slow-paced and with a lack of incident in the first half, it feels more like a stately procession than a moving, breathing piece of theatre. A five-piece band is woven into the drama, and musicians stand among actors with guitar, banjo, accordion, fiddle and harmonica. But this brings yet more stilled atmosphere above action, along with the strains of singer-songwriter Maimuna Memon's deep rich voice. We go from the road to tent communities, pitched against the black depths of Alex Eales's set, but there are too many scenes showing nothing more than the onward march of the journey in the family's jalopy, which gets spun around the stage. You wish for more intimacy, and simply for more to happen. The leads seem more like dignified archetypes than flesh and blood people, though they are endearing, from Grampa (Christopher Godwin), who is adamantly against the trip to California, to Ma (Cherry Jones), steely in her desire to keep the family together, and the godless former preacher Jim Casy (Natey Jones). Tom (Harry Treadaway), who has just finished a jail sentence only to be caught in the prison of poverty, is a capable presence on stage, too, and the pregnant Rose of Sharon (Mirren Mack) is full of hopes and dreams that slowly fade. The production trains a cinematic kind of long lens on the characters so we see them, too often, from afar with dialogue lifted from Steinbeck's book, but little building of tension in the story and music cutting in to fill the gaps. There are some sharply felt moments, mostly later on: the conversation around God versus godlessness, good against sin, which seems so pointed in this shattered world; the women, dreaming of their new lives, from white houses to electric irons. There is the sense of a classic American road trip taking place with a back-screen showing a strip of sky that goes black at night and glows red with sunsets, reminding us there is beauty in the bleakest times. We see this family's poverty from the outside, too, in the cold appraisals of those they pass on their migration, whose words contain a dehumanising gaze. The second half brings more drama as the family contend with everything from childbirth to flooding. The final scene of the book must surely be one of the most difficult to pull off on stage, with its mix of horror and hope, the sense of life struggling against death, and sacrifice against survival. This, at least, is pulled off, emotional drama infusing the visual effect in a way that is too often missing from what has preceded it.

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

NATIONAL

????MNEMONIC conceived and directed by SIMON McBURNEY devised by the original company and reimagined in 2024 by KHALID ABDALLA, HISHAM ABDEL RAZEK (collaborator), THOMAS ARNOLD (collaborator), RICHARD KATZ, LAURENZ LAUFENBERG, TIM McMULLAN, KOSTAS PHILIPPOGLOU, SARAH SLIMANI, SOPHIE STEER (collaborator), EILEEN WALSH, ARTHUR WILSON (collaborator) décor MICHAEL LEVINE costume CHRISTINA CUNNINGHAM lights PAUL ANDERSON sound CHRISTOPHER SHUTT video ROLAND HORVATH for ROCAFILM

Guardian (***) Written by Arifa Akbar
Simon McBurney returns to direct his 1999 drama and it still fizzes, even if some of the images are more rewarding than the ideas. Remembering is not a neutral function but an imaginative act, Khalid Abdalla tells us in a lecture-style preamble. He might be speaking about the nature of this revival itself. Originally conceived by Simon McBurney in 1999 and revered as one of Complicité theatre company's greatest hits, Mnemonic is not replicated but reimagined by an 11-strong company of actors. McBurney again directs, this time with Abdalla as the lead, charismatic and hitting all the beats of his many parts. These include a charmingly scattered "memory DJ"; a bereft man whose partner, Alice (Eileen Walsh, excellent as always), goes missing while searching for her father; and a corpse discovered under ice which, it turns out, has been preserved for more than 5,000 years. References to Brexit, Covid, the war in Ukraine and the original 1999 show remind us this is not the neutral excavation of theatrical memory but an active, updated act of imagination. It starts out small and discursive but

blooms into scale in typical Complicité style. There is a chair (watch what magic happens with that) and a spotlight under which Abdalla stands to tell us about the function of the hippocampus, the ways in which pasts and futures are connected, and the synaptic connectivity of memory. Much of what follows gets your synapses fizzing: disappearances collide and create parallels. Real and recorded voices are overlaid so a present moment in time carries notes from the past. An audience participation activity feels briefly like an imaginative meditation into our own pasts. Moments of satire leaven the play's exploration of origins, and range from a fabulous panel talk between European experts who discuss the prehistoric iceman (which you wish would become its own play), to a joke among minor characters who are all migrants living in London's suburbs. Arresting visual effects give the impression of an odyssey unwinding before our eyes. Michael Levine's set turns a speeding train into bars, bedrooms and the Tirolean ridge from which the iceman is chiselled free. There is good work from video designer Roland Horvath (for rocafilm) too in creating kinetic effects across the stage. As a play of ideas, Mnemonic is whimsical and diffuse. It is as if, with all these exquisite parts, the production does not quite deliver on a promise of profundity in tying them together. In one image, where the iceman becomes us, and we him, there is a lovely visual circularity that speaks to the question of origins, but it is more original as a theatrical image than an idea. Alice's story takes a sudden lurch away from the quest that has motivated her and dovetails with the iceman story metaphorically. It is a convenient rather than convincing outcome to prove the point Abdalla highlighted: that memory is creative, that we can never know where we came from, that we are all connected. The reflections on origins, identity and migration themselves seem very current though, and the wit, when it comes, is well timed and entertaining. McBurney, in a 2010 interview with the Guardian, said the company was set up in order to "make theatre I couldn't see". Perhaps it is as a result of its own success that the show does not feel as much of a revolution of ideas and stagecraft as it did in 1999. It marks not only what Complicité did 25 years ago, but what they have done since: weaving together well-crafted meta-theatre with big philosophical questions and what seems like an overarching concern for humanity. 9 July – 10 August.

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

Simon McBurney's legendary theatre company Complicité basically has two modes: clever but fairly narratively conventional takes on difficult-to-stage classics, and brain melting experimental odysseys that'll rewire your cerebellum. Their 1999 play 'Mnemonic' - reimagined and redevised for 2024 - is very much in the latter camp, although to a certain extent the problem with brain melting experimental odysseys is that they can be hard to describe in a way that accurately conveys their appeal. Does a play that explores the parallels between the act of memory, the act of migration, the act of ancestry and the act of storytelling sound intrinsically thrilling to you? It doesn't to me. But it truly is. 'Mnemonic' begins slow, with actor Khalid Abdalla delivering a rambling, slightly Richard Curtis-y speech about the nature of memory, his personal background as a Brit born in Scotland with Egyptian ancestry, and the fact that Compicité is reviving its 25-year-old hit 'Mnemonic', with Khalid assuming the role director McBurney originally played. Eventually it unfurls into two separate strands: the mystery of what happened to Alice (Eileen Walsh), the wife of Omar (Khalid), who abruptly disappeared nine months ago after her mother's funeral; and a fictionalised version of the true-life mystery of a body discovered on the border of the Austrian and Italian Alps in 1991 due to a freak glacier melt, which was discovered to everyone's great surprise to have been 5,200 years old. It's essentially two mystery stories, staged side by side and then, audaciously, intertwined. One follows Alice on an odyssey through Europe as she haphazardly tries to track down the father she never knew, desperate to find a narrative to her existence now her mum has gone. The other concerns the 'iceman' - his discovery, recovery and the scrabble for the international scientific community to impose a narrative on his life. In the middle is Omar, who watches shows about the iceman late into the night while trying to understand what became of Alice, and starts to see strange links between the two. And this is the key to 'Mnemonic' - it is a play about how everything is interconnected, how the winds of migration and the freak Saharan winds that thawed the glacier are in their own way the same idea from a human perspective, how humanity is ultimately defined by its need to see the world through stories and how our reality is fundamentally a patchwork of unknowable things that fire up our neurons. Which possibly sounds dry, but at its graceful peak 'Mnemonic' is like coming tantalising close to the meaning of existence, like pulling back some veil that our minds aren't really yet meant to comprehend. Again, it could be dry but it isn't. The company-devised text has not been made aggressively contemporary but at the same time it has been reimagined almost root and branch for a different cast, and a world of Brexit, smartphones and the Russian invasion of Ukraine (maybe Omar's obsession with the iceman feels a little more esoteric in 2024 than in 1999, but there have been research developments since then). The Alice strand glows with humanity, the sudden, strange connections she meets with people as she travels through the European night. The iceman thread is a little more thesis-like, but it's beautifully handled, especially the late comic relief of the scene where a panel of experts each confidently say who they thought he was, each with a different, essentially unprovable opinion. And it absolutely wouldn't work without an extraordinary creative team: it's hard to pick out an MVP, but the dreamy movement – which deftly interweaves the story's strands and builds to a jaw dropping final scene – Christopher Shutt's deft, gracious, sound design and Michael Levine's gauzy sets picked out by Paul Anderson's silhouetting lightning design is the mark of creatives at the absolute top of their field. It starts slow, with the jocular lecture at the start maybe even a smidge irritating, but it builds into something luminous and huge and almost beyond comprehension. Its last few minutes feel like staring overwhelmed at the secrets of creation.

NATIONAL

????LONDON TIDE based on CHARLES DICKENS' OUR MUTUAL FRIEND adaptor BEN POWER songs PJ HARVEY, BEN POWER director IAN RICKSON décor/costume BUNNY CHRISTIE lights JACK KNOWLES composer PJ HARVEY music director IAN ROSS vocal arrangements PJ HARVEY, IAN ROSS sound designer TINGYING DONG, CHRISTOPHER SHUTT movement ANNA MORRISSEY video HAYLEY EGAN fight TERRY KING with BETH ALSBURY lavinia wilfer, JOE ARMSTRONG roger riderhood, CRYSTAL CONDIE miss potterson, LAURA CUBITT nancy, JONATHAN DRYDEN TAYLOR mr cleaver, BRAYDON GRACE charley hexam, MIYA JAMES ensemble, SCOTT KARIM bradley headstone, STEPHEN KENNEDY reg wilfer, JOSHUA LACEY inspector bucket, PENNY LAYDEN mary wilfer, BELLA MACLEAN bella wilfer, ERIC MOK ensemble, TOM MOTHERSDALE john rokesmith, LIAM PRINCE-DONNELLY ensemble, ELLIE-MAY SHERIDAN jenny wren, AMI TREDREA lizzie hexam, JAMAEL WESTMAN eugene wrayburn, PETER WIGHT noddy boffin, JAKE WOOD gaffer hexam, RUFUS WRIGHT Mortimer lightwood

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

Spine-tingling songs from PJ Harvey elevate the National Theatre's stark Dickens adaptation. 'Little fish, big fish/swimming in the water/come back here man/gimme my daughter' hissed a demonic 25-year-old Polly Jean Harvey in her 1995 hit 'Down By the Water'. That was a long time ago. But where so many middle-aged pop stars' forays into musical theatre feel like bored attempts to crack new markets, the cycle of 13 songs Harvey has written for the National Theatre's adaptation of Charles Dickens's 'Our Mutual Friend' slot seamlessly into her body of work. The imagery of water and drowning that flows through Ian Rickson's production of Ben Power's adaptation of Dickens's final finished novel feels of a piece with 'Down by the Water' and its iconic video. And where Harvey's most successful album, 'Stories from the City, Stories from the Sea' concerns itself with the Atlantic and with modern, gleaming New York, 'London Tide' is almost its negative, steeped in the mud of the Thames and the grime of old London, which is referenced again and again in the lyrics. 'This is a story of London, death and resurrection' howl the cast in the opening 'London Song'. 'London, forgive me' they keen in the closing 'Homecoming'. The show is billed as a play with songs: the tune count is a bit low for actual musical status, and there's a conspicuous lack of razzle-dazzle. Anna Morrissey's stylised movement peps up the numbers, but there's nothing like actual dancing here. Musically, the keyboard-led songs feel like a hybrid of the Harvey's eerie 'White Chalk' album and the most vocally strident 'Stories…': they're not her most oblique work, but they're not exactly showtunes. Nonetheless, Harvey's songs are integral. Not only are the lyrics co-written with Power and integrated into the story, but the poised drama they provide feels vital to a show which is bigger on storytelling than emotions and might have felt flat without its spine-tingling tunes. The story is a darkly satirical thriller that pivots on the disappearance of John Harmon, who disappeared – and apparently drowned – on the day he returned to collect his inheritance following the death of his wealthy father. It's a tad potboilerish - because Dickens basically invented this stuff - but it's the powerful moral dimension that rings out clearest: a story about people trying to better themselves, and succeed, with fascinatingly mixed results. The money ends up going to John's affable family servant Noddy Boffin (Peter Wight), who seems altogether more deserving of wealth than his master was. He also invites Bella Wilfer (Bella Maclean), the poor betrothed of the late John, to join his household; she leaps at the prospect of a new life, but feels stricken by guilt at how she despises her old one. Around them, a half dozen other sub-plots swirl. Maclean is particularly good as the conflicted Bella, not least because her voice comes closest to PJ Harvey's banshee wail, and she also gets the show's best song, the surging 'Holborn'. It's not a super 'actor-y' production: the 21-strong cast are there to tell a story first and foremost, to contain Dickens' sprawling plot in a 'mere' three hours 15 minutes. But Rickson's production and Power's adaptation do a fine job of this, and in the second half the performances palpably crank up a gear. If Harvey's songs are the secret sauce that add emotion and weirdness, then the other USP is the extraordinary set from designer Bunny Christie, in collaboration with lighting designer Jack Knowles. At first the performance space looks virtually unadorned. Soon though, the entire ceiling – or rather a series of poles the lights are attached to – starts to undulate, rising and falling like the tide. Eventually it's joined by the very surface of the stage, which ripples and heaves. The performance space becomes the Thames – the effect is majestic and disconcerting (I felt a bit seasick in places). There are surely easier ways to adapt 'Our Mutual Friend' into a stage production. 'London Tide' deliberately plays to non-traditional strengths, and would be greatly diminished without the songs and the set. But with all its parts combined, this story from the city is something special: Dickens's late class drama turned into a work both elemental and righteous. 10 April – 22 June

Independent (***) Written by Tim Bano

The National's moody Dickens musical is hamstrung by PJ Harvey's dirge-like songs. Ben Power's deft adaptation of Dickens's sprawling novel emphasises its brilliant characters and eternally relevant themes, but the bleak production and dour music wrestle with one another rather than cohering as a whole. espite his place in the history of literature, there hasn't been a huge amount of Dickens on stage in recent years. There's always Oliver!, of course, 700 adaptations of A Christmas Carol each year, and Eddie Izzard's one-person Great Expectations last year, but Dickens adaptations have mostly been TV ones of the Sunday night sit-down-and-watch-with-granny type. Ben Power's adaptation of Our Mutual Friend really doesn't want to be that. With its changed title and songs by PJ Harvey, the suggestion is of something far muddier, far murkier. Director Ian Rickson constructs a moody production to house Power's flowing script, and every so often it stops to allow for even moodier songs by Harvey. It's all a bit of an odd assemblage, those three elements trying to assert themselves individually rather than

cohering as a whole. It's Power's script that really sings, honing in on the River Thames as the emblem of the story. There are plenty of echoes for today, but Power doesn't overegg it. He manages to clip and condense one of Dickens's most complex stories into something manageable while keeping the essence of the characters. The plot takes a lot of explaining but essentially involves a man who's inherited a fortune pretending to be dead, while the children of the man accused of killing him deal with the fallout. It's full of typically memorably Dickensian characters, from Tom Mothersdale's skulking Rokesmith to Stephen Kennedy's utterly loveable Mr Wilfer. Ami Tredrea stands out as end-of-her-tether, self-sacrificing Lizzie Hexam, trying to help everyone but herself. There's a fantastic turn, too, from Ellie-May Sheridan in her stage debut as forthright Jenny Wren, a girl who makes dresses for dolls. And it looks spectacular. "Suffering's everywhere forever," says one character, and you feel that here; bleakness abounds. Designer Bunny Christie gives us a huge lighting rig dotted with 50 spotlights hanging over the stage in receding strips, each undulating slowly, giving the queasy impression of the river somehow reflected in the sky, rather than the other way around. Rickson keeps most of the action right up the front of the stage, leaving a huge empty space behind. It's eerie, especially under Jack Knowles's superbly ghostly lighting, sometimes greenish, sometimes pools of white, always leaving lots of darkness. That darkness is carried through in Christie's costumes, too, mostly black and white except for splashes of pale green, all the colours washed out, like they've been dredged up from the river. If that gives the impression of something grim and dour and slightly bleak, then yeah. Any leavening only comes from the fact that, eventually, Power lets some of Dickens's welcome sentimentality slip in towards the happy end. Harvey, on the other hand, doesn't. Her songs intrigue at first, their lyrics both blunt – "this is a story about Lundun" chant the cast in the opening number – and esoteric. But as the story gets more interesting and the characters richer, the songs remain the same – each character stands centre stage and sings out at the audience – until you can't help sighing a little when another one strikes up, knowing another dirge is on its way. Evidence, then, of why we get so few Dickens stage adaptations these days – massive plots, a million characters, dozens of locations – but still a strong case for more people giving it a go, if they can do it as deftly as Power. The stories are brilliant, the characters memorable, the themes still relevant. It's just that, here, as the story draws us in, Rickson's production wants to push us away. It's all cold and angular, sparse and colourless. The moments of joy and silliness that exist in the story try to break through, but they're stifled by all this moody coolness. Rickson seems so resistant to this being naff Dickens, and Harvey so resistant to this being a musical, that it risks capsizing the whole thing.

Evening Standard (**) Written by David Benedict
"Could I return to life? Could I be reborn?" So cries John Rokesmith (Tom Mothersdale) to the audience of London Tide and delivers an intriguing plot reversal. Which would be fine were it not for the fact that this is the very first sign of tension all night and it's in the final speech of the first half, approximately one and a half hours after the start. With its Lambeth setting and a central role for the river Thames which also conveniently flows past the National Theatre, Charles Dickens' Our Mutual Friend must have felt like a cunning novel to stage. Decades ago the Royal Shakespeare Company had a legendary hit adapting Nicholas Nickleby. And since Oliver Twist, The Pickwick Papers, Hard Times and more have made it to the musical stage, adding new songs by PJ Harvey must have seemed like another good move. If only. For those unfamiliar with the novel – hardly among Dickens' most popular – the plot (there's tons of it) concerns two interconnected families whose lives are changed by the mysterious arrival and death of a young heir. Ben Power, who turned another massive book into The Lehmann Trilogy, has drastically slimmed down the 884-page novel but the show still runs a leaden three-and-a-quarter hours and is peopled by director Ian Rickson's game 21-strong cast playing everyone from lawyers to lovers (sometimes both) with a good helping of ne'er-do-wells. Power has happily strengthened the women and re-focused the tale via young Bella (a nicely headstrong Bella Maclean) and Lizzie (Ami Tredrea) who chafe against male control and seek agency in their lives. But even they and Ellie-May Sheridan in an impressive professional debut as outspoken young Jenny Wren can only do so much when almost the entire evening is paceless exposition, the enemy of drama. Characters either narrate or play short scenes delivering event after event. Ceaseless plot works on the page; on stage, audiences crave subtext to glean and hold on to. Worse, where Dickens' contextualised writing allows coincidence to thrive, in dialogue as bald as this, the coincidences just feel contrived. The stars of the night are set designer Bunny Christie and lighting designer Jack Knowles whose flying of five lighting bars cleverly and counter-intuitively creates the rise and fall of the river above rather than on the floor of the mostly empty, dourly grey stage. With songs as (flaccid) commentary, this is a play with songs, not a musical. Harvey's ceaselessly repetitive, deadeningly slow rhythms and mostly stolidly unchanging harmonies – unhelped by Powers' flat, earnest lyrics – never make a case for songs being in the show whatsoever. Near the end, Rokesmith sings "Why, why, why, why, why…" Indeed.

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

NATIONAL

????NYE by TIM PRICE director RUFUS NORRIS décor VICKI MORTIMER costume KINNETIA ISIDORE lighst PAULE CONSTABLE choreographer STEVEN HOGGETT, JESS WILLIAMS composer WILL STUART sound DONATO WHARTON projections JON DRISCOLL with MICHAEL SHEEN aneurin 'nye' bevan, REMY BEASLEY gwen davies, MATTHEW BULGO mr orchard/mr francis, DYFAN DWYFOR speaker/luke williams/councillor williams, ROGER

EVANS archie lush, ROSS FOLEY clerk/ross Doherty, JON FURLONG herbert morrison mp/mr howells, DANIEL HAWKSFORD neil jones, BEA HOLLAND mrs jones/the cleaner, STEPHANIE JACOB clement attlee/matron, KEZRENA JAMES nurse ellie/arianwen, TONY JAYAWARDENA doctor dain/winston churchill, MICHAEL KEANE owen thomas/councillor morgan, NICHOLAS KHAN neville chamberlain/dr. frankie, REBECCA KILLICK lucy prichard/doctor voiceover, OLIVER LLEWELLYN-JENKINS ensemble/swing, MARK MATTHEWS mark smith/mr leslie/graham the porter, RHODRI MEILIR david bevan/councillor hopkins/doctor voiceover, ASHLEY MEJRI william jones/mr llywellyn/chris the porter, LEE MENGO jack stockton, DAVID MONTEITH mr fury, MALI O'DONNELL ensemble/swing, SARA OTUNG sara roberts/mrs lewis, SHARON SMALL jennie lee

Guardian (***) Written by Arifa Akbar
This life story begins at the end, with Aneurin "Nye" Bevan in a hospital bed, befittingly for the visionary political colossus who created Britain's National Health Service in 1948. As Bevan (Michael Sheen) is creeping towards death, flashbacks of memory bring a hallucinatory quality reminiscent of The Singing Detective: beds and ward curtains are woven into scenes of his childhood as a Welsh miner's son and a stammering schoolboy bullied by his headteacher. We follow his rise from local council politics to the House of Commons and high office under Clement Attlee (Stephanie Jacob, slightly sinister in a bald wig). Doctors and nurses morph into a bevy of characters from his past, the cast juggling this multiplicity adeptly, and there is a surreal song and dance breakout number as, one presumes, Bevan's morphine kicks in. In a production written by Tim Price and directed by Rufus Norris, there is some inspired stagecraft as the hospital curtains of Vicki Mortimer's ingenious set swish to reveal debating chambers and libraries. But the narrative is too long-reaching and schematic, its extensively researched material not fully absorbed dramatically. Co-produced with Wales Millennium Centre and running at over two and a half hours, Nye is a too full, yet too simplified, survey of the personal and political elements in Bevan's world, with some high-pitched moments accompanied by syrupy music. Bevan is presented as a renegade, Jeremy Corbyn-like figure of his day: both a thorn in the side of Winston Churchill (impersonated well by Tony Jayawardena) and the Labour party. There are council meetings, parliamentary debates, his first meeting with his wife, Jennie Lee (Sharon Small), the war and its aftermath. So much is packed in that the momentous invention of the NHS is tackled, as if in summary, in the last half hour. Only then do we hear how the nation's doctors were heavily opposed to Bevan's proposition. There are exchanges on a screen with an army of hostile medics who look like Minority Report holograms, but we whizz past this opposition, which has enough in-built conflict to be worthy of is own full-length drama. Sheen (grey helmet hair, chequered pyjamas) is well cast for his natural charm. He brings a curious fey playfulness and vulnerability but does not plumb the depths of his commanding character – or perhaps the busy script simply does not allow it. However, Bevan's limitations as a son to his dying father bring some emotional mileage as he is too busy caring for the nation's wellbeing to be there for him. Small is not given much room for manoeuvre either, and Lee is used for exposition purposes rather than dramatic ones. She talks of her open marriage, describing Bevan as a "rutting stag", which sits at odds with the cutely pyjama-clad man on stage. There are brief reflections on navigations between her career as Westminster's youngest MP – and one of only five women – and her marriage. Both she and Bevan hailed from working-class backgrounds and there is a moment when he talks about "impostor syndrome" in this hallowed space. She is unequivocal in her outsider status: "That's why this place needs us." Despite these feisty lines, she remains flat, which seems a crime – her character could have been far richer. Nye is still a vital play because Bevan is a vital man of British history. It succeeds in showing us just how high the hurdles he faced were. When he describes prewar healthcare – one service for the rich, one for the poor – it rings of today's two-tiered system. "I want to give you your dignity," he says, as the NHS launches. It is a rousing moment yet contains a terrible, tragic irony, given what is coming to pass with his precious legacy. 6 March – 11 May

Time Out (***) Written by Andrzej Lukowski
Michael Sheen is tremendous as NHS founder Aneurin Bevan, even if the play's fear of bio-drama cliches gets a bit much. The British, in case you hadn't noticed, tend to get a little sentimental about the NHS. So it's understandable that playwright Tim Price and director Rufus Norris are wary of dewy-eyed hagiography when approaching 'Nye', a new biographical drama about Aneurin Bevan, the firebrand Labour health minister who founded the service. With the title role played by the great Michael Sheen, there is a danger of going OTT in having the nation's favourite current Welshman star as the nation's favourite historical Welshman. And so Norris's production has a determinedly trippy quality intended to counter the cliches. Billed as an 'epic Welsh fantasia', 'Nye' is largely presented as the stream-of-consciousness of an older Bevan, who is a patient in one of his own hospitals. There for an ulcer operation, he drifts in and out of the present and into recollections of his past, unaware he is dying of stomach cancer – something his MP wife Jennie Lee (Sharon Small) has determinedly kept from him. Crowned by a truly uncanny wig, Sheen is a delight as the fiery but unassuming Bevan. He never at any point changes out of his red striped pyjamas, a pleasingly absurdist touch at the heart of Norris's stylish production, in which the green hospital ward repeatedly dissolves into the past to the sound of wheezing lungs. It's otherworldly in places, especially the scene where Tony Jayawardena's overbearing Churchill collars Bevan in the Commons and groups of teacup-clutching MPs try to eavesdrop, moving like insectoid predators under Stephen Hoggett and Jess WIlliams's unsettling choreography. Really, though, once you get past all the cool stuff, you're left with a fairly conventional drama, jumbled up. Bevan's memories of the past come at us in roughly chronological order. There's a definite artistic licence at work as we see schoolboy Nye - still played by Sheen - overcome a bullying teacher and absorb his local library, hungry to find synonyms for words that trigger his

stammer, setting himself on the path to becoming a great orator. But the meat of 'Nye' does lie with relatively factual accounts of incidents from Bevan's life - his scenes in Parliament are particularly riveting, as he is doggedly determined to criticise Churchill's wartime government, to the chagrin of his boss Clement Atlee (Stephanie Jacob). I understand the logic in, say, not having Sheen simply parrot Bevan's big speeches to rabble-rousing effect. But all the hopping around leaves 'Nye' somewhat lacking in connective material. It's never especially clear, for instance, why Bevan is so much more radical and uncompromising than his Labour colleagues. It sometimes feels like we're seeing his life on shuffle, when a straight playthrough might have said all the same things, but more clearly. Don't get me wrong, if it had been a balls-trippingly weird avant-garde odyssey I'd have doubtless been all over it. There's a big mid-show song and dance number that hints at a much weirder production. Unfortunately, this production never emerges. It feels like 'Nye' desperately wants to avoid looking like an Inspirational Drama About The Founder Of Our NHS, but doesn't have a clear formal plan beyond that. However, if the whole isn't quite there, most of the individual scenes are scintillating. And there's no sense of embarrassment from Sheen, who is magnetic as Bevan - a decent, even slightly bewildered man, who nonetheless feels pathologically drawn to doing the right thing, no matter the odds.

Evening Standard (***) Written by Nick Curtis
Michael Sheen's performance as the creator of the NHS Aneurin Bevan here is, fittingly, a triumph against the odds. The Welsh Labour MP known as 'Nye' faced down doctors, oppositional Tories led by Churchill, and sceptics in his own party to bring in our universal healthcare system in 1948. Sheen, by turn, is battling a lumpy and obvious script by Tim Price and the challenges of Nye's stutter, schoolboyish zeal and "f***ing stupid hair". He's also barefoot and in podgily unflattering pyjamas throughout, like a soft toy bought in haste in a hospital gift shop. Yet his charisma, along with goodwill toward the NHS, gets Rufus Norris's playfully earnest co-production for the National and Wales Millennium Centre over the line. Nye's in his jim-jams because we first meet him in 1960, in hospital for an op on an ulcer that turns out to be something more serious. The show unfolds as a deathbed flashback. Nye's challenges and triumphs are ticked off one by one. Guilt about his miner father dying of "black lung"? Check. Poverty and unemployment? Check. Becoming an autodidact, a campaigning councillor and a maverick socialist MP? Check, check, check. Bevan's exceptionalism shines through, but with so much history to cover the show feels skimpy at times. His role in the General Strike of 1926 is skipped over: the Second World War and subsequent Labour landslide are condensed into four minutes. The comparisons Price draws between self-serving, right-wing politicians then and now feel heavy handed, even to a knee-jerk lefty like me. "You don't need to steamroller everyone all the time," as Nye's future wife Jennie Lee (Sharon Small) tells him. Quite. On the plus side, the general air of reverence is frequently undercut with humour. Tony Jayawardena is a hilariously brazen Churchill. Stephanie Jacob's Attlee glides around the stage behind a motorised Prime Ministerial desk like a beady, centrist Davros. Nye and his rivals, and Jennie and his childhood friend Archie (Roger Evans), often descend into juvenile, sweary abuse. Norris and designer Vicki Mortimer also use the large cast rather than massive sets to invoke a sense of scale and scope. Legions of the impoverished and ranks of implacable, masked doctors are projected onto the hospital curtains that whisk back and forth across the stage. Nye is stalked by packs of opponents scenting blood and borne aloft by schoolmates and medics. It's all about humanity, and the story we choose to tell about ourselves as a nation. But it's also about one remarkable man. Tim Price may not have written the most subtle version of Nye, but Sheen fills him with zest.

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

NATIONAL

????DEAR OCTOPUS by DODIE SMITH director EMILY BURNS décor/costume FRANKIE BRADSHAW lights OLIVER FENWICK sound TINGYING DONG composer NICO MUHLY music director DAVID SHRUBSOLE with BESSIE CARTER fenny, PANDORA COLIN edna, BETHAN CULLINANE cynthia, KALYANI D'AMBRA/ARIELLA ELKINS-GREEN/ASHA STHANAKIYA flouncy, LINDSAY DUNCAN dora, KATE FAHY belle, TOM GLENISTER hugh, SERENA GUO/ISLA ITHIER/MOLLY JIN scrap, JO HERBERT hilda, BILLY HOWLE nicholas, SYAKIRA MOELADI laurel, AMY MORGAN margery, CELIA NELSON nanny patching, DHARMESH PATEL kenneth, ASHWIN SAKTHIVEL/TARUN SIVAKANESH/FELIX TANDON bill, MALCOLM SINCLAIR charles, NATALIE THOMAS gertrude

Time Out (***) Written by Caroline McGinn
Dodie Smith's '30s smash now feels like a period curio, but this production is beautifully done. When 'Dear Octopus' opened on the West End it was 14 September 1938, Neville Chamberlain was on his way to Germany to appease Hitler and Britain stood uneasily – if not yet knowingly – on the brink of war. Dodie Smith's comedy about 'the family, that dear octopus from whose tentacles we never quite escape, nor, in our inmost hearts, ever quite wish to' was lightweight stuff for heavyweight times. It was a smash hit. Gielgud starred in it, the King and Queen loved it. It ran for yonks, was revived many times and then sank, like so many other well-made inter-war dramas, into fairly well-deserved oblivion. Eighty-odd years later, the most interesting thing about it is its audacious authoress, Dodie Smith: the London shopgirl and showgirl who really found her stride with fiction, namely 'The Hundred And One Dalmatians' and, later, one of the finest and most poignant coming-of-age novels in English, 'I Capture The Castle'. Smith was a vividly romantic writer with candour, insight and verve, and she absolutely deserves renewed interest, and equal or superior credit to the languid men who dominated the interwar newspaper columns. But this classy but stolid revival of a soapy period comedy isn't going to make her case clear.

The action, such as it is, opens in the entrance hall of a slightly peeling family pile, painted a sad arsenic green by designer Frankie Bradshaw. A family is gathering for the golden wedding celebration of mater and pater Dora and Charles (Lindsay Duncan and Malcolm Sinclair). Families were bigger in the '30s. War and illness have cut out the eldest son and a younger daughter but even so, this one demands a huge cast of adults who are hard to distinguish from each other despite the handy stereotypes. The main business of the first half is to introduce them all: Eldest Son's Officious Widow, Grownup Grandson and Wife, Humorous Bachelor Son, Career Girl Daughter with OCD, Married Daughter Who Has Put On Weight, Flirty Son-in-Law and Lovelorn Ladies' Companion. Lindsay Duncan keeps them all busy in her charming, steely way, sending them out on numerous pointless 'little jobs' that have them running up the shabby grand staircase and out of the doors and back again. It's like a farce without the fun – or a Christie without the crime. There are kids to sort out too – three children and a baby. I don't know where the National gets its child actors from but they have an outstanding supplier right now. Young Felix Tandon is terrific as pre-pubescent badboy Bill. He, and the kids upstairs doing 'The Witches', are acting their socks off. The grownups had better pull theirs up: Duncan is icily splendid but not all the others can match her. The second half picks up and it's easier to enjoy the Britticisms once you've figured out what's what: 'You see nature in the raw at our golfclub,' drawls Duncan, to great guffaws. 'Dear Octopus' is a play that's mostly preoccupied with age, and how to age gracefully, in your thirties, forties or seventies. Ironically, it has not aged well. There are many creaky moments like the one when Bill greets a present from his rakish uncle with the less-than-immortal line: 'A paint box! O, you heavenly man!'. Despite the audience's hours of Downton training, disbelief cannot remain suspended. It's a period curiosity, basically. But this is a pleasant revival. Emily Burns directs with a lightness of touch and finds moments of charm and comedy. The darker depths of World War before and World War to come are unmined, just implied slightly by a few empty portrait frames hanging above the stairs. I felt by the end as if I had actually been a guest at a slightly boring, ultimately heartwarming family party – complete with some dodgy singing round the piano from granny and an overlong toast. Which is not something you necessarily need to go to the theatre for. When 'Dear Octopus' was revived in Windsor 30-odd years ago, the Queen Mother apparently wrote to the 92-year-old Smith to say how much she had enjoyed seeing it again. That's the spirit to approach this with: lashings of nostalgia, and a very stiff gin and dubonet.

The Standard (***) Written by Nick Curtis
Those seeking a gently witty, old-fashioned entertainment will be delighted by this stately revival of Dodie Smith's portrait of a family from 1938. Four generations gather in a gaslit rural home to celebrate the golden wedding anniversary of formidable Dora (Lindsay Duncan) and solid, supportive Charles (Malcolm Sinclair) – leisurely, luxurious roles that fit these actors like chamois gloves. Loss, age, and thwarted or budding romances surface through the Randolph clan's default air of warm exasperation, but there's not much plot. The tone and pace of the play are monotonous and Smith's wit is feather-light rather than stiletto-sharp. Though Emily Burns's production is impeccably cast and handsomely mounted it rarely provokes more than a a wry smile. Especially when a home that can accommodate ten adults and four children, plus a servant, nanny and a lady's companion, is described as "ordinary". That's sort of the point. Dora and Charles lost their elder son in the First World War, and one of four daughters in unspecified circumstances in Singapore. The cosy existence they've preserved for their grandchildren and first great-grandchild will soon be upended by another war, which Smith clearly saw coming. They're already moving slowly with the times: Dora realises love trumps morality when it comes to daughter Cynthia, who's stayed away for seven years out of shame. The Randolphs are not perfect, or perfectly happy. Dora is catty to Belle, her widowed sister-in-law and sometime rival for Charles: another daughter, successful estate agent Hilda, has what we'd now call OCD; surviving son Nicholas is an oafish ad-man, blind to the adoration of Dora's helpmeet Fenny (a superbly diffident Bessie Carter). All are acutely aware of passing time. Although everyone argues, the keynote of the acting is understatement, and Frankie Bradshaw's set and costumes duly feature muted pastel shades. The lighting, too, is soft, ostensibly from log fires and gas lamps. The play passes agreeably enough and it's a joy to watch Duncan draw out the delicate acidity of Dora, but also her goodness. And to see Sinclair's Charles, so used to shaping himself to his wife's will, actually slot himself into a niche by the piano when she's in full flight. There is a reason, though, that Dodie Smith is chiefly remembered for her novel I Capture the Castle and a certain story about a lot of Dalmatians, rather than for her eight interwar stage comedies. Dear Octopus was the most successful of these but despite the merits of Burn's revival, it feels incurably quaint and dated now.

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

NATIONAL

????KIN by AMIT LAHAV a GECKO PRODUCTION décor/costume RHYS JARMAN lights CHRIS SWAIN sound MARK MELVILLE original music DAVID PRICE devising performers LUCIA CHOCARRO, CHRIS EVANS, MADELEINE FAIRMINER, VANESSA GUEVARA FLORES, SAJU HARI, KENNY WING TAO HO, AMIT LAHAV, WAI SHAN VIVIAN LUK, MARIO GARCIA PATRÓN ALVAREZ, MIGUEL HERNANDO TORRES UMBA

Guardian (**) Written by Arifa Akbar
While the aesthetics are arresting, Amit Lahav's play lacks the specificity to create any emotional depth. A drama about the epic horrors that migrants have faced could not speak to the moment more keenly as the government fights over its own Rwanda bill and small boat crossings claim yet more lives. Created by Amit Lahav, whose grandmother's flight from Yemen to Palestine in 1932 is a central driver of the plot, it is a production that is ravishing and frustratingly esoteric in equal measure. Devised by physical theatre company Gecko and interweaving the migrant stories of its 10 performers, its drama is delivered through expressionistic movement, mime, music and dance, rather than words. What few are spoken come in a babel of Hebrew, Mandarin, Cantonese, Malayalam, Norwegian and Spanish, among others. This deliberate push away from reliance on

language is a clever way of mirroring the incomprehension that a migrant might feel in a host culture, and country, but it locks us out of characters' inner lives and the specificity of the stories being told. There are two – possibly three – families here, one dramatising that of Lahav's persecuted grandmother, while the others are of indeterminate origin. We see the repeated rejection, and humiliation, of characters at the hands of cartoonishly cruel border guards who kick, punch, spit and carouse. Repetition might be emphatic in conveying the sense of never-ending setbacks for these characters but the repeated cycles of similar scenes stays flat rather than building emotional layers. Families are shown separated and reunited, anguished and rejoicing, numerous times. One scene with an apparently Indian family appears to conjure a train which might refer to Partition-era India. Characters flail in lifejackets in what might be a reference to small boat crossings. Ultimately, too many stories are being told, too indistinctly and not saying quite enough. The result is a universalising of migrant experience that ends up feeling generic. It is a shame because the aesthetics are so arresting: anguished scenes emerge out of cinematic darkness. Sofas and tables are upturned in Rhys Jarman's set design and then come together to form a family hearth again. Puppetry is used to exquisite effect, and a haunting soundtrack, designed by Mark Melville, combines searing vocals with music from around the world. Best of all is Chris Swain's astonishing lighting design which creates stunning chiaroscuro effects and captures the lights of passing ships when characters appear to be engulfed in ocean waves. Sometimes they are turned towards the auditorium and blind us with their hostile glare. More often you admire these gorgeous effects rather than feel the drama in your gut. 12th-27th January 2024

Evening Standard (**) Written by Nick Curtis
Kin at the National Theatre review: this repetitive immigration story is good-hearted but won't change minds. This show is full of mixed messages and its harrowing ending is completely unearned. This physical theatre piece about immigration is visually striking, moving on a visceral level, and has its heart in the right place – if you're not Suella Braverman, that is. It's also garbled, repetitive and full of mixed messages. Created by British-Israeli director-performer Amit Lahav and nine international actors for his company Gecko, it features bold, expressive movement and a script using at least eight of the cast's native, adopted or inherited languages, including Norwegian and Cantonese. The resulting, Babel-like gabble, and the jagged choreography – more rowdy and imprecise than mime or dance – do not lend themselves to nuance. But nuance is precisely what's needed to counter the inflammatory language of the current culture war surrounding immigration. Kin opens with a scene of Hispanic-sounding officials in quaintly old-fashioned, quasi-military garb – kepis and belted tunics offset with frilly collars and cuffs – getting drunk and dancing. These violent boors are confronted by two waves of importunate immigrants. The first, apparently Mitteleuropean and Jewish, are abused and contemptuously painted with a broad yellow stripe down their backs but seem to assimilate, securing work and accommodation. They are then themselves besieged by the second wave, seemingly East or Central Asian, in turbans and Chitrali caps, desperate to get at the first incomers' TV and two-bar fire. The second group dances ingratiatingly for the audience but is then forced to wear whiteface, put on ties and flat caps and chink beer bottles with the oppressors, uttering a strangled "cheerz mite". One who refuses this deracination is made to disappear. Meanwhile drawling English speakers with Boris-style blonde mops are waved into the host nation's open arms. Issues of multiculturalism and integration, and the often thorny relations between different minorities in a dominant majority culture, are ill-served by such crass visual metaphors. The choreography also isn't subtle: the displaced cower and hold up crumpled ID papers only to be kicked or punched into oblivion, or have their petty bribes spat upon. The ensemble moments see the cast yearning upwards or forwards to sunlit uplands, only to crumple in despair or defeat. It's stirring the first time, even the second or third. But repeated over 80 minutes, to every wrenching musical style from klezmer to opera to what sounds like orthodox chant, it shows diminishing returns. Ditto the atmospheric use of spotlights, the cracking of the backdrop to reveal a boiling horizon, and the use of the revolve stage to show a character's progress or regression. The denouement, a stark reference to drownings among migrants using small boats, is harrowing but also completely unearned. This show has arresting, potent moments. But it coarsely exploits history and headlines to preach to the converted: people like me. It milks the harrowing experience of immigration without explaining to the unconverted why it might actually be a good thing.

Time Out (***) Written by Andrzej Lukowski
Ravishingly beautiful if somewhat one-note show about refugees and migration from physical theatre maestros Gecko. Physical theatre stars Gecko make their National Theatre debut with grimly perfect timing: 'Kin' is concerned with the plight of refugees and migrants, and opened its short Lyttelton run on the night the Conservative Party descended into (more) infighting over its preposterous Rwanda policy – I think Lee Anderson resigned while we were waiting for curtain up. In many ways, this all serves to add a sharpness that's otherwise lacking in 'Kin', which is ravishing, atmospheric and quite, quite beautiful but struggles for intimacy and definition. Indeed, most of the specifics come from the accompanying bumf: we are told that Gecko founder Amit Lahav's grandmother Leah made a hazardous migration from Yemen to Palestine in 1932, and that this show is inspired by his reflections on this. Whether or not Leah is supposed to literally in it I don't know, but visually there's a focus on a young-ish female character, who must negotiate a sinister, stylish nocturnal world of cramped little rooms and absurd, aggressive border guards, forever obstructing and belittling. There is a distinctly Kafka-esque quality, as the various refugees appear to get nowhere, stuck on an endlessly difficult journey with an opaque series of stops. It looks remarkable: Chris Swain's lighting – much of which is hand manipulated by the cast – is out of this world, and gives the show its real identity, the sense that these people are stuck in a perpetual night, illuminated only by unfriendly glares of electric light. The mushed-up babble of languages the cast speaks is intensely

evocative, as is Dave Price's soaring music, also pointedly inflected by a multitude of folk forms. The constant eerie tableaux of bodies is hauntingly weird. Still, while the rules are clearly different for movement-based physical theatre than text-based narrative – the show is part of the MimeLondon festival – I yearned for a bit more specificity over the course of its 90 minutes. Although there are more nuanced vignettes within the whole, the sum feels somewhat repetitive, a depiction of migration as a single nightmarish, geographically non-specific blur. Early on a couple of brief recordings of what might be Lahav's grandparents describing their experiences play out – it's a shame there wasn't more of this. I'm a grandchild of refugees too, and I'm not sure about the inference of relentless victimhood and lack of agency. I mean sure, my grandmother was literally deported to a prison camp in Siberia for a little while back there, but ultimately the experience had a happy ending. This is somewhat addressed at the climax of the show, where the company members introduce themselves individually and explain their own migrant backgrounds. But I do kind of feel that there's a danger of well-meaningly fetishising the vulnerability of refugees. Of course, Lahav and company have the right to tell whatever story they like, but the nature of the medium is that 'Kin' feels like it's trying to be a broad articulation of the refugee experience, and it ultimately feels beautiful but one note. Still, to restate the obvious, the context of 'Kin' premiering in the current political environment lends the show a moral forcefulness that makes up for shortcomings elsewhere.

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

ALMEIDA

????KING LEAR by WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE director YAËL FARBER décor MERLE HENSEL costume CAMILLA DELY lights LEE CURRAN sound PETER RICE composer MAX PERRYMENT movement IMOGEN KNIGHT fight KATE WATERS with HUGO BOLTON oswald, OLIVER CUDBILL duke of burgundy/curan, EDWARD DAVIS duke of cornwall, FRA FEE edmund, MICHAEL GOULD earl of gloucester, AKIYA HENRY goneril, GEOFFREY LUMB duke of albany, ALEC NEWMAN earl of kent, GLORIA OBIANYO cordelia, FAITH OMOLE regan, CLARKE PETERS the fool, STEFFAN RIZZI knight/captain, DANNY SAPANI king lear, MATTHEW TENNYSON edgar

Evening Standard (***) Written by Nick Curtis

At 53 Danny Sapani is even younger than London's last major Lear, Kenneth Branagh, but he's far more forceful and moving in the role. A big, raging bear of a man who is also capable of great delicacy and pathos, he inhabits a dream-like and disjointed staging by Yaël Farber. The South African director's productions tend to start at Force Ten intensity then go up to 11, and to run long. This Lear lasts 210 minutes but is modulated in pace and tone. The emotion rings true, though the milieu is unclear and the long absences of major characters from the action feels more glaring than ever. The show is stuffed with potent moments and images, not all of which make sense or coalesce. Lear's family and his Fool, played with lugubrious panache by Clarke Peters, are black and the rest of the cast is white, though this seems incidental rather than pointed. Early hints at an African setting - a gazelle skull, a game hunt - evaporate. Gloucester's bastard son Edmund (Fra Fee) is a muscular Ulsterman who heralds most of his entrances by picking out a tune on an increasingly decrepit piano. Two gypsy violinists periodically haunt the action. The stage is hung with curtains of fine chains and there's a constant drone or murmur on the soundtrack. The volatility of Sapani's King is flagged early when he kicks over microphones at the press conference announcing the bequest of his kingdom to his daughters. He's infuriated by the iron spirit of the youngest, Cordelia, and there's a hint of impropriety later in the way he traps his middle child, Regan, on his knee. Like all bullies, he's frightened inside. "Let me not be mad" is spoken with soft anguish. Throughout, he slaps, smites or raps knuckles on his head. The wicked sisters Regan and Goneril are overemphatically played and also enjoy a more physical relationship with Edmund than is normally shown on stage, but Gloria Obianyo's Cordelia is superbly strong, with a fine soul voice. There's more music and more queasy comedy here than is typical in Lear, too. This is a strange, imperfect but intriguing take on Shakespeare's play, in which Sapani triumphantly claims the central role. Almeida Theatre, to March 30; almeida.co.uk

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

Danny Sapani is excellent as a toxic ruler washed clean by an unnatural storm in Yaël Farber's exquisitely atmospheric production. As we found out to our cost last year, when Kenneth Branagh tried to bosh out a two-hour version, 'King Lear' is a play that resists being cut. It's too long and too weird with too many characters to work in compacted form – as a minimum it gets lost in the lengthy section in which the eponymous monarch is off-stage being mad. You really need to be in it for the long haul with this thing. Enter Yaël Farber. The South African director is by no means the first to rack up a three-and-a-half-hour 'Lear'. But her superatmospheric, wilfully poised style is perfectly suited to it. She simply has no fast setting – not even a medium one – and her heightened, nightmare-like aesthetic rises to meet the strangeness in Shakespeare's tragedy of insanity and old age. If you've seen a Farber play before, you'll recognise the hallmarks: the production takes place in a constant, doomy twilight, the night air chased by ominous violin drones and constantly filled with a light haze. Her second play for the Almeida – after 2021's excellent Saoirse Ronan-starring 'Macbeth' – starts off on a modern note, however. Danny Sapani's bearish Lear is dressed in a blue suit by his three daughters, and then hosts a press conference in which he gives his kingdom away in a detached voice heavy on mic reverb. The scene hints at some greater context to his abdication – usually Lear seems to stand down so he can go on a massive bender – but whatever the case, after the King and his daughters Regan (Faith Omole) and Goneril (Akiya Henry) stick to scripted comments, youngest Cordelia (Gloria Obianyo) goes rogue and turns down her portion of the kingdom,

prompting Lear to trash the conference in a vicious fury. Sapani's Lear has the air of a man who has never been told no, and expected this would continue after he stepped down. He treats his daughters coldly, like mere tools: even as they find their courage and turn against him, Regan and Goneril are clearly terrified of his anger. And yet we're never allowed to forget they're a family – the daughters get extra stage time to show how they weigh on their father's mind, present in his thoughts no matter how little he thinks of them. And there's a real sisterly chemistry between Omole and Henry in particular – even when they're trying to kill each other, a concern radiates through. From the near-naturalism of the press conference, things soon start to get distinctly more Farber-esque. And the move from natural to unnatural feels partially orchestrated by Clarke Peters' fascinating Fool. Wiser and certainly older than how the part is usually played: he has a Merlin-like air to him, a mystic and manipulator who pulls the strings that lead to Lear's mental decline – but also his rebirth as a gentler, better man. Perhaps he doesn't summon the storm in which Lear loses his mind – but he knows it's coming. Farber's stylistic approach finds its apotheosis during Lear's exile, with Max Perryment's slashing score, Merle Hensel's ash-strewn set and Lee Curran crepuscular lighting creating the sense that the King and his party have stepped through the veil into some subterranean realm, separate from the reality that he was part of only minutes previously. Sapani is not a big flashy Lear but he is a fine one, who steps up to the text's challenge: first a cold, vicious, toxic man; then a man who is seemingly purged by the unnatural storm, shedding his nastiness, but also much of his self. Still, for all the alluring otherness Farber brings to bear, nothing makes her 'Lear' tick as much as simply giving it all room to breathe. To put this into perspective, Branagh's version would have entirely fit into the first half of Farber's. And yet hers feels like less of a chore. The various political subplots to do with Lear's daughters, the villainous Edmund and his nice guy brother Edgar, the brutally mistreated Gloucester and more are just no fun if you try and whip through them to get back to the scenes with the king. Farber gives them all the room and respect they need. That's not to say it's actively slow, just that a character like, say the superb Fra Fee's malign, charismatic Edmund is treated as equally interesting as the title guy. In this respect I can't help but feel it's aided by the fact Sapani is less famous than most major Lears (he's probably less famous than Peters) - the production can be built with the knowledge the audience won't be jonesing for the megastar they paid for to get back on stage. Don't go making plans to do anything afterwards, but this is a gripping piece of entertainment. Farber has been guilty of going OTT in the past, but here she plays the tragedy's mix of druidic weirdness, human tragedy and hard-nosed realpolitik perfectly – 'The West Wing' by way of a Sunn O))) gig.

The set is a marvel, the performances are electric and the ending - with Lear raging and trembling in a hospital gown on the heath - is profoundly tragic. Yaël Farber is known for the unrushed, ritualistic pace of her plays, having directed Shakespeare's most feverish tragedy, Macbeth, at two and a half hours, to some critical consternation. But Farber has found her natural home in King Lear with this dark, doomy and epic production. It still feels more than its three-and-a-half-hour duration, but once in its elements, it takes out every last tragedy, from King Lear's unravelling to the fulminating rivalry between sisters Goneril (Akiya Henry) and Regan (Faith Omole), and the subplot of one brother Edmund (Fra Fee) betraying another Edgar (Matthew Tennyson). We feel the smallest sadness, even that of Kent (Alec Newman), who stays loyal to Lear and witnesses his final moments. Staged in modern dress, it looks like a high-end TV miniseries at first; a drama of family and political machinations, private and public power. Danny Sapani's Lear is groomed, presidential, with a smooth inscrutability as he invites public flattery from his three daughters at what appears to be a political rally, with microphones, before an audience. But signs of volatility and mental upset come quickly when Cordelia (Gloria Obianyo) refuses his command with a burst of unexpected violence. That strain of violence is seared into the play, with characters mauling and murdering each other in sudden, visceral ways. Aside from the eye-watering scene involving Gloucester (Michael Gould), there is shocking physicality here, from Edmund's viciousness to Regan and Goneril's thuggery - although alongside it is sex, sensuous and venal. Fee makes for a calculating villain and resists playing his part with cartoonishness, while Regan and Goneril are performed with enough complexity to make them ambitious alpha women with open sexual appetites, who are up for the contest for their father's succession. The Fool (Clarke Peters) is an observer, visibly grey - rather like Farber's witches in Macbeth - and melancholic with wisdom. Sapani has a natural chemistry with him, and Lear's touching sexual appetites, who are up for the contest for their father's succession. The Fool (Clarke Peters) is an observer, visibly grey - rather like Farber's witches in Macbeth - and melancholic with wisdom. Sapani has a natural chemistry with him, and Lear's touching relationship with the fool drives his confrontation with the "nothingness" that leads to his tragic downfall. The heath scene is not antic, but Lear's world really does feel like it is shaken to its core. He is drawn as a homeless man in a charred Beckettian landscape with disused tires and grit below foot. He is shirtless, shoeless, stripped to his underwear, the kind of man you might see in a park corner, with plastic wrapped around him for warmth. Merle Hensel's set in general is a marvel, the storm creating movement with swaying chains along the back wall and violin players who keen and roll on the floor as they play. Light showers the stage at times, and cuts the blackness with torch-light at others (design by Lee Curran), while the sound is just as arresting, blending heavy, modern, bass with violin notes that hover before becoming big aural rumbles (sound design by Peter Rice with composition by Max Perryment). Obianyo, meanwhile, brings both soul and steel to Cordelia - sometimes singing her lines. It is a supremely moving performance, among the most tragic King Lears I have seen. At Almeida theatre, London, until 30 March

????VISIT FROM AN UNKNOWN WOMAN by CHRISTOPHER HAMPTON based on the short story by STEFAN ZWEIG director CHELSEA WALKER décor ROSANNA VIZE lights BETHANY GUPWELL sound PETER RICE composer MAX PERRYMENT movement director MICHELA MEAZZA intimacy director LUCY FENNELL with JESSIE GATTWARD young marianne, NIGEL HASTINGS johann, THOMAS LEVIN stefan, NATALIE SIMPSON marianne

Guardian (***) Written by Arifa Akbar
Letter from an Unknown Woman is perhaps Stefan Zweig's best-known novella, published in 1922 and concerning a woman who declares her passion to a man she silently adores in an anonymous letter. This is not a faithful version of that story, as reflected in the title. Christopher Hampton's sleek but quizzical adaptation moves the drama to 1934, although it still takes place in the home of a bachelor, writer and Lothario, here called Stefan (James Corrigan). We hear how Marianne (Natalie Simpson) was the girl next door who began to watch Stefan's every move. There is something dangerous, and queasy, in her love, expressed as childhood curiosity at first. Under Chelsea Walker's direction, a chilling intimacy builds between the couple, with taut pacing reminiscent of the 1948 film adaptation, starring Joan Fontaine. This is all the more an achievement given the production's hiccup. Having been staged in Vienna, the press night for this English-language premiere was delayed after the lead actor, Thomas Levin, withdrew. Corrigan stepped in at the 11th hour and does a heroic job, performing off-book and inhabiting his part. But it is really Simpson's play and she delivers a well-pitched intensity. Hampton's decision to have Marianne tell her story, face-to-face, gives her more agency but the gender dynamics between the pair remain complicated nonetheless. Is she a stalker? It is never suggested in Zweig's story but this it is what we might call it today. Although the couple are from another era, the shadow of Baby Reindeer looms, as well as the cliche of the "bunny boiler". Is her testimony an act of self-assertion, a punishment or a tale of self-abnegation in life? It is hard to know. In some ways, the drama is a study of obsession: this is not only a visit from an unknown woman but a visit to an unknown man to whom she has given life, through fantasy and imagination. Hampton's shift in historical setting involves the conflation of the fictional Stefan's life with Zweig's own – as a Jewish writer, he was forced to leave Vienna in 1934 due to the rising threat of nazism. "This isn't a particularly easy time to be a Jewish writer," Stefan tells Marianne. Hitler is referred to as an "idiot" and a "moron" and Stefan talks about the prospect of having to flee. It is not clear if a parallel is being drawn between the spectre of this unknown woman and the bigger unknown political forces encroaching on Stefan's life. Either way it does not quite work, though it does add to the tension. The fear Stefan feels as an Austrian Jew, at this historical tipping point, seems like an underwritten detail, distracting from Marianne's story, and is too important an issue to lie in the background in the way that it does here. What is revealed at the beginning of Zweig's story comes as a twist at the end in the play, making sense of the surreal piles of rose petals in Rosanna Vize's stage design. It is an original and gripping take on an old story, however many loose ends it leaves.

Time Out: Written by Tim Bano
Stefan's got a problem. He doesn't remember the woman he slept with ten years earlier and now she's basically his stalker. That's the thrust of this strange, slight play by Christopher Hampton, adapted from the novella by Stefan Zweig. But despite its themes of obsession and mental illness, this is not 'Baby Reindeer'. It's far too arch, too stiff for that. The original novella takes the form of a letter written by a woman to a Viennese writer. She explains her obsession with him, how it's played out for many years, and some of the dire consequences. Hampton, who first adapted this for the Theater in der Josefstadt in Vienna where it was very successful, has had to fiddle with the structure and the timeline. Yes he has form with epistolary works turned into plays – 'Les Liaisons Dangereuses' is his biggest hit – and he knows that someone reading out a letter on stage probably isn't that interesting. But nor, especially, is this. First Stefan and the woman have a one night stand. She seems to know a lot about him. Then she comes back in some distress, and talks at him for ages. The unpeeling of the mystery keeps things interesting for a while, but the dialogue stays too stilted, like it's translated from another language (which it sort of is) and Chelsea Walker's production feels all cold and alienating, with a permeating bleakness that stops us from finding any heart, or any way of feeling for the characters. Rosanna Vize's set looks cold and ghostly. The flat is grey, full of hard surfaces. It's set within an even bigger, even greyer space where dead roses have accumulated - one of the play's most prominent motifs. There are a few little touches to try and make a very untheatrical piece theatrical, like having a third character (Jessie Gattward) haunt the stage, a younger version of the unknown woman, who moves like a dancer. In fact, Natalie Simpson's performance as the woman is weirdly dance-like. All her hand gestures seem very choreographed, very precise and rote, which prevents it from being entirely convincing. Fair play to James Corrigan as Stefan, he had to step in last minute and learn the role in a week after a cancelled press night and quick recasting. But Walker directs them to a place of stiffness that acts like an ice barrier between the world of the play and us. More fundamentally, it never becomes clear why Hampton has chosen to adapt this story, and why we're watching it now on this stage. He's had to rework the bones of it, shifting the chronology, and there's an inelegance to that new structure, a forced fitting to make it work on stage, that diminishes it. And what's the relevance? At a stretch you could argue something about stalkers or obsession. There's a sadness in the fact that the woman is tossed around in a patriarchal society. Hampton has pulled the period forward, so it's set in the thirties rather than the twenties. The fact that the protagonist is Jewish suddenly means there's an implicit danger, a creeping terror that Hampton makes reference to a couple of times. But that's it. Just a couple of mentions. Nothing plot-critical, nothing more than nods. It feels inconsequential to the character and to the piece. An awkward play, then, and a cold production, which never quite manages to justify itself.

*non-sub*SIDISED

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

BRIDGE

????GUYS&DOLLS based on the story and characters by DAMON RUNYON music/lyrics FRANK LOESSER book JO SWERLING and ABE BURROWS director NICHOLAS HYTNER choreographer ARLENE PHILLIPS with JAMES COUSINS musical supervisor/arranger TOM BRADY décor BUNNY CHRISTIE costume BNNY CHRISTIE, DEBORAH ANDREWS lights PAULE CONSTABLE sound PAUL ARDITTI orchestrator CHARLIE ROSEN with IROY ABESAMIS swing, OWAIN ARTHUR nathan detroit, KATIE BRADLEY ensemble, TANISHA-MAE BROWN ensemble, NIALL BUGGY arvide abernathy, CORNELIUS CLARKE lieutenant brannigan, FILIPPO COFFANO ensemble, EAMONN COX ensemble, KAMILLA FERNANDES ensemble, ALEX GIVEN ensemble, LUCIE HORSFALL swing, JONATHAN ANDREW HUME nicely-nicely johnson, GEORGE IOANNIDES sky masterson, CAMERON JOHNSON big jule, DOMINIC LAMB ensemble, TJ LLOYD rusty charlie, SIÂN NATHANIEL-JAMES ensemble, SAFFI NEEDHAM ensemble, RYAN PIDGEON benny southstreet, SOPHIE POURRET ensemble, TIMMIKA RAMSAY miss adelaide, JAMES REVELL swing, NATHAN RIGG swing, PIERCE ROGAN ensemble, SAMUEL ROUTLEY ensemble, CELINDE SCHOENMAKER sarah brown, TORI SCOTT general cartwright/good time charley bernstein, CHARLOTTE SCOTT swing/co-dance captain, HOLLIE JANE STEPHENS swing, DASHAUN VEGAS harry the horse, DALE WHITE swing/dance captain/fight captain

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

Nicholas Hytner and Bunny Christie's game-changing immersive production of the classic musical is simply astonishing. 'Guys and Dolls' is a musical with such a towering reputation – by all accounts Richard Eyre's ecstatically received 1982 revival all but saved the National Theatre – that I slightly struggled to see what all the fuss was about the last time it came to town, in a played-for-laughs 2015 revival. Yes, it was entertaining. I'm just not sure if it felt remarkable in the way the history books describe. Well, now I get it. Nicolas Hytner's Bridge production is a staggering achievement, a more or less flawless take on traditional terms that's turned into something transcendent by the staging, from Hytner and designer Bunny Christie. If the duo's excellent 'immersive' Shakespeare productions of 'Julius Caesar' and 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' were the dry runs, then 'Guy and Dolls' is their method perfected. fter decades of treating the great musicals of the twentieth century as museum pieces, there's a growing recognition in Western theatre that these classics will fall behind if not subject to some reinvention. Generally that means darker, more leftfield takes: witness the current West End productions of 'Cabaret' and 'Oklahoma!'. Unless you're going to struggle to stand for two-and-a-half hours, Hytner and Christie's version of Frank Loesser's 1950 classic is not a difficult or challenging one. Instead, it uses a stunningly choreographed and – crucially – incredibly fun series of rising and falling platforms to stage the show right in the middle of a standing audience that's deftly manoeuvred around by ushers dressed as NYC cops. It brings you incredibly close to the action: if you're inclined to stand at the front you'll usually be within a few inches of some performer or other. It's a lot more exciting than sitting, the difference between standing or sitting at a gig. And it should be stressed that it's only the stalls that have been taken out: there's plenty of seating, and there you're still getting an incredibly intimate experience that avoids the odd dodgy sight line that's inevitable if you're on the floor. To be clear, it's the same general idea as the two Shakespeare plays, but much bolder, busier and more dynamic, with an inevitable frisson gained from the proximity to world-class singing and dancing. With the staging duly drooled over, let's talk about 'Guys and Dolls' itself. Loessner's musical – with book by Jo Swerling and Abe Burrows – is an immaculately structured comedy bursting with deathless one-liners and wonderful characters that follows an assortment of lovelorn New York City lowlifes at the seedy height of Prohibition. The biggest name here is probably Daniel Mays, who seamlessly translates his natural geezer-isms into the New York equivalent, thoroughly loveable as shambolic Nathan Detroit, a small-time crook desperately trying to stage an illegal game of craps for the local wiseguys. There's a small fortune to be made: but he needs $1,000 to pay off the venue, and he is not the sort of guy who has $1,000. His biggest problem, though, is what to do about his longsuffering fiance Miss Adelaide (Marisha Wallace), who has been hitched to him for 14 long years. US performer Wallace is absolutely sensational: she's got the lung power and nuance to totally own standards like 'A Bushel and a Peck' and 'Sue Me'. But more to the point, she's got the acting chops to really do something with the character. Adelaide is traditionally played as an OTT light relief ditz, but here Wallace channels tremendous empathy into her: here, she's a woman who would seem to put up with Nathan not because she's an idiot, but because she actually loves him. Even her wild lies to her mother – who thinks they're married with five kids – feel like a desperate attempt to give bumbling Nathan space to sort himself out. Wallace gives the role a palpable dignity and presence: still fun, but much more soulful than usual. If Nathan and Adelaide are the beating heart of Hytner's production, then the romance between Andrew Richardson's suave career gambler Sky Masterton and Celinde Schoenmaker's missionary Sergeant Sarah Brown feels appreciably shakier. That's probably the point. Sky does, after all, only ask her out on a date (to Havana!) as a bet with Nathan. She's funny, strong, but ultimately fragile, unsure of who she is as Sky makes her seriously question her devotion to saving New York's sinners. He's interesting: yes, he has some great one-liners, but the lisp-voiced Richardson – in a great stage debut – plays him with a slightly mournful vulnerability. When the pair go to a bar in Havana and Sky dances with another woman… well here it's a gay bar, and it's not a woman Sky dances with. A bit of fun, for sure, but the inference is surely that Sky is struggling with his identity as much as Sarah is with hers; come the end their romance feels sincere, but fragile. Which is good: romcoms shouldn't have to end in total resolution. Choreography legend Arlene Phillips turns 80 this year, and is better known these days as a slightly cheesy telly figure. But her tight, pneumatic routines (co-choreographed with James Cousins) feel fresh as a daisy – the performing spaces are tiny, so there's not a lot of fancy stuff (the

entertaining brawl in the gay bar is an obvious exception), but such sequences as there are, crackle with energy. The staging is so innately exuberant that the production can get away with reining the show's hammier tendencies. As well as Wallace's more empathetic Miss Adelaide, Cedric Neal's affable take on gangster Nicely-Nicely Johnson is much less light relief than tends to be the way. His big gospel-style showstopper 'Sit Down, You're Rockin' the Boat' is still bags of fun. But in casting a Black actor – and a relatively restrained one at that – it sidesteps the usual 'joke' that a schlubby white guy has incongruously pulled a big churchy number out of the bag. As it turns out, it's still fun. It's strongly cast all over, but a special shout out to the ushers: they're doing a pretty weird job (I'm not sure if 'ushers' is even the right term) but they herd us around with good-natured precision: if they were less well drilled and tolerant of our occasional slowness on the uptake of where to go, it just wouldn't work. I appreciate I've been a bit giddy here, and yes, I have in fact seen other shows with interactive sets before. But what Hytner and Christie have done so brilliantly is seamlessly integrate this stuff into mainstream musical entertainment. Not every show is going to benefit from staging along these lines. But as the era of the proscenium arch draws to a close, it feels like most directors of musicals could learn something from this. 'Guys and Dolls' ends in a big dance party, the cast congaing through our midst, posing gamely for selfies, and just generally letting off a bit of steam for five minutes. It's a moment of pure joy, the last and best of a non-stop night of them. 9 March – 31 August

OLD REVIEWS Guardian (****) Written by Arifa Akbar
Frank Loesser's 1950 musical comedy about sin and romantic salvation might feel dated in its themes but Nicholas Hytner's production is a feat of innovative staging. The Bridge's auditorium has been radically rearranged for a promenading audience, with Bunny Christie's mobile stage continually remaking itself, its platforms rising up to reveal New York City's bars, clubs and street corners. This movement creates a distraction from the drama, to some degree, yet captures the spirit of Damon Runyon's original story and the unceasing bustle of his "Runyonland". It is a marvel to see worlds constructed before our eyes, accentuated by Paule Constable's lighting design. There is the option for some audience members to watch from an outer tier of the auditorium and, having chosen to sit, I felt regretfully distant from the immersive elements. It was clear that the promenading audience was experiencing the show differently. Luminous signs overhead accompany scene switches, from the club at which showgirl Miss Adelaide (Marisha Wallace, sensational as always) performs to the Save-a-Soul church mission of Sarah Brown (Celinde Schoenmaker). This signage, with its odd resemblance to that of the restaurant chain Ed's Easy Diner, is a clever method of signposting and the orchestra delightfully performs from a raised cubicle with theatrical lightbulbs around it. The musical's story and themes feel entirely unreconstructed against this bold staging, with Jo Swerling and Abe Burrows's book and its street vernacular sounding peculiarly stiff. While Daniel Fish's brilliantly reformulated Oklahoma! – currently in the West End – transforms both content and form, this production only achieves the latter and is an emphatically traditional enactment of the story itself, with period dress (costumes by Deborah Andrews) and exaggeratedly cartoonish characters. The performances are strong – especially the singing voices – even if there are few points of emotional connection. Wallace gives an entertaining rendition of Adelaide's Lament along with the witty duet Sue Me, shared with Adelaide's gambling fiance, Nathan Detroit (Daniel Mays). Schoenmaker and Andrew Richardson (as Sky Masterson) infuse I've Never Been in Love Before with romance. There is one potentially dangerous moment in that central romance between Sarah and Sky when, during their night in Havana, he is seductively pulled into a clinch with a man on a dance floor of male couples with bare chests and shorts. The suggestion that Sky just might be gay creates a thrilling spark of subversion but is an isolated moment, gone in a flash, as if a scene from a far more daring reconception. Maybe because of the ever-reconstructing set, the drama itself never quite sweeps us in, although there is a sweet dynamic between Richardson and Schoenmaker, as well as good comic chemistry between Wallace and Mays. The choreography (by Arlene Phillips with James Cousins) never quite flies, maybe owing to the slightly cramped size of the sets, but this show's formal effort of reimagining offers a lot to admire, even if I did so rather from afar.

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

CORONET

????GARE ST LAZARE IRELAND: THE BECKETT TRILOGY from the novels MOLLOY, MALONE DIES & THE UNNAMABLE by SAMUEL BECKETT text selection/text treatment CONOR LOVETT, JUDY HEGARTY LOVETT director/designer JUDY HEGARTY LOVETT lights SIMON BENNISON with CONNOR LOVETT

Everything Theatre (****) Written by Mary Pollard
An exceptional performance brings Beckett's peculiar trio of novels to the stage: immensely humorous and profoundly human. Samuel Beckett's work is not for everyone. Let's face it, it is often absurd and can take a little work to grasp. But this production from Gare St Lazare does its damnedest to make it accessible, revelling in the immense humour and profound humanity of Beckett's writing through an exceptional solo performance from Conor Lovett. The trilogy are adaptations of three novels: Molloy, Malone Dies & The Unnamable, written about the same time as Waiting for Godot, and intended to be read rather than staged. Under the precision direction of Judy Hegarty Lovett, Lovett brings them blisteringly to life, meticulously grappling with a multitude of tensions, certainties and uncertainties to movingly articulate their sense in more than just words. As Molloy begins, the character joins us from the audience. He's one of us. He's a man trying to tell his story but tripping from experience to experience, in an almost stream of consciousness fashion and where his control is questionable. We visit his mother, see him arrested for resting inappropriately on his bicycle, before running over and killing a dog. There's a constant sense of absurdity, shifting realities as Molloy forgets words, or where he's going. The narrative journey is uncertain, varied and unpredictable, like life itself. The only certainty is Molloy, who remains tangible and fascinating throughout. Lovett's storytelling is magnificent, crafting hilarious characterisation within impeccable timing. We're initially shown a kind of everyman in a plain coat (or is it two coats? Nothing is

straightforward here!), but he subsequently displays moments of theatrical statuesqueness that give grandeur and gravitas to the struggling character's strained existential deliberation. Lovett creates piercing dramatic tensions, holding them with supreme confidence. Understanding (and confusion) are communicated not only through spoken language but through the taut spaces in between speaking. We learn much about Molloy from what is unsaid, as questions are put and not answered, situations described but not explained. In Malone Dies, a visually similar man appears, but now wearing an odd hat. We learn he is on his deathbed, relating his own story, but also inventing new ones, culminating in an imagined almighty bloodbath. Again, the narrative is confusing, but here focuses quite intimately on the detail of one individual contemplating lives as lived and how they might be, describing existential uncertainty. Come The Unnamable, our character's ability to tell his tale almost fails entirely. Words and ideas flow relentlessly around, making sense in context more than through structure; enacting the iconic realisation of "I can't go on, I must go on, I'll go on." Throughout this piece an enormous shadow is cast on the backdrop, giving stature and illusory substance to a man who questions his life in fractured phrases, barely able to form sentences. He is ultimately diminished, his shadow shrinking as he leaves the stage. The lighting design throughout, by Simon Bennison assisted by Jonathan Chan, is impressive, fluctuating from subtle to striking; defining spaces where Lovett is utterly human, or immensely theatrical. Each abrupt exit backstage leaves a light which becomes an entrance for the next, giving a sense of inexorable cyclicality. Beckett's writing is ironic, funny and inspired as the language ranges madly from the obscure to the obscene, the lyrical to the intellectual: it encompasses all human possibility. There's an underlying challenge of an authoritarian system gaslighting the everyman, and he throws out moments of startlingly poignant, wise revelation from unlikely characters, such as Molloy's "Can it be we are not free? It might be worth looking into". Bringing such iconic text from page to stage via this extraordinary, marathon performance gives it a viscerally engaging quality that is truly remarkable. 20-22nd June.

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

CORONET

????L'AMORE DEL CUORE (HEART'S DESIRE) by CARYLL CHURCHILL director LISA FERLAZZO NATOLI company LACASADARGILLA italian translation LAURA CARETTI, MARGARET ROSE sound/décor ALESSANDRO FERRONI lights OMAR SCALA costume CAMILLA CARÈ images/video MADDALENA PARISE with TANIA GARRIBBA, FORTUNATO LECCESE, ALICE PALAZZI, FRANCESCO VILLANO and TESSA BATTAIOTTO

Guardian (****) Written by Arifa Akbar

This gnomic production of Churchill's 1997 play, about a couple awaiting their daughter's return, is packed with confusions and curveballs. n Blue Heart, a pair of one-act plays first staged in 1997, Caryl Churchill interrogated language and playwrighting with especially brute economy. This Italian production, directed by Lisa Ferlazzo Natoli, takes one of the plays, throws in stylised commedia dell'arte elements and verbalises stage directions to extract any remnants of naturalism. What remains is a gnomic piece of theatre which might leave one half of the auditorium hungry for more and the other with indigestion. Either way it is an enticing and peculiarly profound hour. A couple waits tensely for their daughter to return home from Australia. A contained domestic fractiousness between Brian (Fortunato Leccese) and Alice (Tania Garribba) occasionally bursts to the surface with Brian's sister, Maisie (Alice Palazzi), caught in the middle. Produced by the company lacasadargilla and presented in a translation by Laura Caretti and Margaret Rose, with English surtitles, the story is a series of stop-starts, numerously repeated, with characters speaking into dangling microphones and moments of amplified or echoey sound. As Churchill's self-proclaimed "anti-play" with distinctly Pirandellian characters, it might be a metaphor for the playwrighting process or the blocked playwright – you can almost see the paper being screwed up as characters are forced back to the beginning. Or it might be an aggressive game played by the playwright on the play itself which insists on being nothing and everything at once, careering from kitchen sink drama to absurdist fantasy with the entry of a giant Ionesco-style bird, and then on to potential horror as a cinema screen blinks awake and Brian relays a fantasy of self-cannibalisation. The hand of the playwright is more nakedly visible in this staging which features a character (Francesco Villano) reading stage directions as God-like commands. We see the tiny flinches and grimaces of characters as they are forced into repetition, playing out conflict, dashed hope and pain over and over, sometimes at horribly comical double-speed or with words missing. The surtitles move rapidly at times so that you can easily miss lines which is a frustration but adds to the deliberate confusions and curveballs. Churchill has said her intention for Blue Heart was their conceptual "destruction" but Heart's Desire does not self-destruct. A trapped grief builds and the characters, full of intensity in the performances here, are Beckettian, forced into a perennial loop of waiting for a Godot-like daughter. There are intense monologues, a beautifully expressed fear of death, a buzzing existential dread in the air. It is both anti-drama and proof of the powerful drive towards story-making. Within these fragments is a tale itching to find its meaning. Even in the knocking down of drama, something is being built, by us if not by Churchill. 13-15 June.

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

CORONET

????CHITTEN THEATRE COMPANY: GOOD-BYE director MOTOI MIURA based on GOODBYE by OSAMU DAZAI music KUKANGENDAI décor ITARU SUGIYAMA sound BUNSHO NISHIKAWA lights YASUHIRO FUJIWARA costume

COLETTE HUCHARD with SATOKO ABE, DAI ISHIDA, MASAYA KISHIMOTO, SHIE KUBOTA, ASUKA KUROSAWA, YOHEI KOBAYASHI, KAZUKI MASUDA

Broadway World (***) Written by Cindy Marcolina
Japanese experimentalism comes to London in an astonishing celebration of author Osamu Dazai. Even our theatre scene has felt the recent rise in popularity of Asian culture. While anime and manga have always had their superfans in the West, the genesis of the current wave of entertainment perhaps started when K-Pop became a prominent topic among the younger generations a few years back. Most recently, a few musical adaptations of beloved comic book series have hit the West End, with the next one planned for April. Now it's time to see the real thing: Japanese experimentalists Chiten Theatre Company have brought the Japanese avant-garde to London. Based on Osamu Dazai's works and accompanied by Japanese rock band Kukangendai, GOOD-BYE follows a man who's planning to kill himself. It's a piece of existential gig-theatre moulded with a cynical celebration of one of Japan's most renowned authors. Presented in Japanese with surtitles, the experience is unlike anything that's being staged at the moment (and probably won't ideal for the average commercial theatregoer). The script is characterised by linguistic and dialogic fragmentation, shaping the show into a one-sided conversation between Dazai and the audience. It transcends narrative, gender, and language, challenging the typical dramatic structure and establishing a system that thrives in its crafted agitation. The text is full of surprises and once the coping mechanisms to survive life are in place, Dazai's sociopolitical critique emerges with bold confidence. The actors immediately become vehicles for the writer's musings, straying away from the classic notion of characters and roles. It's a fascinating method that allows the company to explore a number of philosophical strains while mourning the consequences of a loss of faith and investigating the very meaning of life. The nihilists, the absurdists, and the relativists will find plenty to chew on here. Directed by Motoi Miura, the project keeps twisting and turning, even dipping its toes into the politics of suicide and the accusations that come with it. Miura connects the direct invective against war with the constant depiction of addiction, creating a riveting juxtaposition between survival and self-destruction. Scenically, the production is relatively still in visuals, but bubbles with energy. The performers (Satoko Abe, Dai Ishida, Masaya Kishimoto, Shie Kubota, Asuka Kurosawa, Yohei Kobayashi, Kazuki Masuda) sit at or stand or crouch at a long bar lined with empty bottles covered by a white chalky paint that gives an ethereal feel to the set (Itaru Sugiyama) in contrast with Yasuhiro Fujiwara's vibrant lighting design. Above them, slightly removed towards the back on a different level, the band controls the action: when they cyclically stop playing, the chorus below deflate and restart their rhythmic litany. These changes in pace and flow not only match the variations in subject and delivery, but also make the facilitated stream of consciousness very human. As everyone gets progressively more drunk, Dazai's collection of thoughts explores his reasons to abandon the world with sardonic observations. After a dark joke, an opinionated tangent, and an emotional recollection of a memory or two, you'll leave the theatre with a newfound cynicism peculiarly followed by a unique appreciation for life itself.
5-9 Mar

*emptyspace*STUDIO

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

CHISWICK HOUSE GARDENS

????AVALON by GIFFORD CIRCUS writer/director CAL McCRYSTAL décor/costume TAKIS musical director JAMES KEAY choreographer KATE SMYTH lights IAN SCOTT sound JAMES MARSH live music THE GIFFORD CIRCUS BAND with MAXIMILIANO STIA merlin the magician, NELL O'HARA queen guinevere, TYLER WEST cuthbert, NICK HODGE king arthur, DYLAN MEDINI sir lancelot, ASIA MEDINI lady morgan le fay, PATRICK HARRISON sir dagonet, PIP ASHLEY the priestess/lenore, LATOYA DONNERT the lady of shalott, PONY kelpie, STEEDS llamrei/hengroe, MORGAN ASHLEY BARBOUR isolde/damsel of the ring, SERHII NIEMTSEV sir escanor the large, ANDRIY MOSKVA sir galahad, NIKITA OSTROVSKYI sir bedevere, VOLODYMYR POTAYCHUK sir gwaine, DANY RIVELINO barold the page, DENISE igrayne

Evening Standard (****) Written by Nick Curtis
Arthurian legend proves a fitting theme for this charming new show from Giffords Circus, a troupe that's built on romance and somehow manages to be both thoroughly international and English to its core. Writer and director Cal McCrystal, the go-to guy for physical comedy, uses the yearning of clown Cuthbert (charismatic Tyler West) for a place at the Round Table as a framing device for a series of lovingly presented big top skills. So King Arthur (American Nick Hodge) performs a rope act and turns himself into a human gyroscope, spinning around in big metal hoop called a Cyr wheel. Lancelot and Morgan le Fay (Italian siblings Dylan and Asia Medini) execute a daredevil rollerskating routine plus solo balancing and hula hoop acts. Guinevere (Brit Nell O'Hara) belts out nerd-triggering pop hits from the 60s to the 2000s in front of a six-piece band. Okay, the chivalric theme gets a bit lost somewhere between the dog act and gravity-defying Ukrainian acrobats The Godfathers. The latter group and the Medinis are the standout turns, along with aerialists Morgan Barbour and Victoria Sejr, who carve elegant shapes while dangling on high, sometimes literally hanging on by the skin of their teeth. It's the sheer dedication to perfecting pointless skills that I love about circus. To be honest not everyone on the bill operates on the level of excellence we've come to expect from mega-troupes like Cirque du Soleil. But Giffords exudes far more warmth, heart and family feeling, from the pre-show music in the mobile bar to the ending when the performers invite the audience to dance with them on stage. Tyler West, who is 4'3", has a great rapport with the crowd, and enlists children to pull Excalibur from a stone after adults have failed, proving "it's not about size, it's about belief". On

opening night in Chiswick, he chose sisters called Isadora and Ariadne. That's west London for you. West also forms neat double-acts with fellow clown Dany Rivelino and magician/escapologist Maximiliano Stia, including an eye-watering pastiche of the Medinis' skating antics. Bittersweet lore is part of the Giffords story. Nell Stroud ran away from a sprawling, boho-artsy family to join a series of circuses before forming her own in 2000 with husband Toti Gifford and writing several books about it. Her sensibility, embracing village greens, horses and carnivalesque generosity, survives in Giffords despite her death from breast cancer in 2019 at just 46. But that's morbid talk, and the great thing about circus in general and this one in particular is that it's death defying. Not because it involves ravening animals (the largest beast here is a Shetland Pony) or because there's no safety net for the perilous acts. Above all, Giffords celebrates the joy of being alive in a human body, capable of wonderful things. 6 – 23 June

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

JERMYN STREET

????PRIDE & PREJUDICE by JANE AUSTEN adaptor/director ABIGAIL PICKARD PRICE décor/costume NEIL IRISH lights MARK DYMOCK sound MATT EATON movement director AMY LAWRENCE with LUKE BARTON mr bennet/mr darcy/mr wickham/mr collins/mrs reynolds/lady catherine de burgh, SARAH GOBRAN mrs bennet/jane bennet/charlotte lucas/mrs gardiner/caroline bingley, APRIL HUGHES lizzie bennet/mr bingley

The Stage (****) Written by Dave Fargnoli

Full of wit and warmth, this playful adaptation by Abigail Pickard Price is a bracing waltz through Jane Austen's beloved regency romcom. Price – who also directs – treats the source material with loving irreverence, retaining the classic novel's empathy and satirical spirit while cranking up the humour with a breakneck performance style. Here, three actors share out the story's many roles, switching between characters with tremendous fluidity. Price sets a frenetic pace, skimming through scenes so quickly that some pre-existing familiarity with the plot and characters may be necessary going in. But the rapid tempo – and the breathless delivery of Austen's deliciously intricate dialogue – is an asset. Price convincingly captures the passion and confusion that Elizabeth experiences, as she gets to know the wealthy bachelors whose arrival throws her country life into a whirlwind of flirtations, proposals and dramatic confessions. Despite the propulsive staging, the actors never allow their transitions between roles to feel rushed – great care is taken to give each character a clear physicality and unique vocal quality. Movement director Amy Lawrence masks these shifts with swirling dance steps, keeping the performers breezing about the compact stage as they whip costumes on and off: riding jackets, silky ribbons, elaborate bonnets. The set, by Neil Irish, is dressed with velvet-upholstered chairs and a gleaming, polished writing desk which doubles, in one memorably intimate scene, as a piano. As the story jumps from town to country, from London to Pemberley, framed oil paintings depicting cottages and stately homes are displayed, elegantly establishing each new location. Sarah Gobran provides much of the production's humour, playing a particularly snide and acerbic Caroline Bingley, and an amusingly overbearing Mrs Bennet, flashing frosty, false smiles and eloquent looks of disdain with crisp comic timing. Luke Barton gives an especially nuanced performance, bringing intriguing new depths to several iconic characters. As Darcy, Barton is suitably proud and taciturn, but has a sense of vulnerability, too – Darcy's standoffishness feels rooted in social anxiety as much as in overweening superiority. Doubling as the imperious Lady de Bourgh, Barton takes on all the haughtiness and severity you would expect, but subtly implies an aching loneliness. And as Elizabeth, April Hughes skilfully walks the line between sincerity and satire, balancing earnestness, inner strength and hints of mocking mischievousness to ensure that her complex, intelligent character never feels diminished when delivering stinging one-liners or knowing winks to the audience. A sequence in which Hughes wordlessly excuses herself from an unwanted marriage proposal is uproariously funny, but also drives home the extremity of Elizabeth's feelings. It's exactly this mix of humour, heart and insight that makes this production feel fresh and genuinely romantic. 19 August – 7 September

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

JERMYN STREET

????LAUGHING BOY by STEPHEN UNWIN based on the book JUSTICE FOR LAUGHING BOY by SARA RYAN director STEPHEN UNWIN décor SIMON HIGLETT lights BEN ORMEROD sound HOLLY KHAN video MATT POWELL with JANIE DEE sara ryan, LEE BRAITHWAITE owen, ALFIE FRIEDMAN connor, CHARLIE IVES will, FORBES MASSON rich, MOLLY OSBORNE rosie, DANIEL RAINFORD tom

Guardian (***) Written by David Jays

Sara Ryan's book about justice for her son, who died in an NHS unit aged 18, has been turned into a play with campaigning passion. In a church down the road from this theatre you can see a quilt, a loving tribute to Connor Sparrowhawk, who drowned in a bath in an NHS unit in 2013 aged 18. Each square was made by someone touched by Connor's death and his mother's campaign to uncover what happened. Sara Ryan's memoir Justice for Laughing Boy has been adapted by writer-director Stephen Unwin. The show itself is a bit of a patchwork quilt – heartfelt, colourful, bitty – held together by campaigning zeal. Connor was autistic and had learning disabilities, and many charged with his care never saw beyond his diagnosis. On stage almost throughout, Alfie Friedman gives him a rockstar quiff, quizzical eyebrow and radiant sense of curiosity. He's often cradling a big red London bus – Connor loved buses, not to mention coaches, lorries and laughter. The condescension shown towards Connor by experts extends towards his family too – Ryan is routinely addressed as "mum" – and swift, brief scenes detail the ways he was failed. Faced with Connor's turbulence as a teenager, the family hope a dedicated unit near their Oxford home will help. Instead, he died at Slade House (now closed) and a report concluded that his death could have been prevented. On a curved white wall behind the tiny stage, video designer Matt Powell throws up blurry street scenes, texts and messages, documents and buzzwords, and damning phrases from the

reports that finally vindicated the battle for justice. In Unwin's unvarnished staging, the four actors playing Connor's convivial siblings also embody the medics and bureaucrats who fumble his care and then disclaim responsibility. In some ways a smart choice – casting youngsters as figures who lack empathic maturity – the faux-fruity accents and pomposity are jokey but rarely funny, and can't meet Janie Dee's level of fury as Sara. Dee – paired with a rumpled Forbes Masson as her partner – has a voice husky with distress, eyes sore with loss. Sara is targeted by the defensive Southern Health Trust. "When the shit hits the fan," she says wearily, "they blame the mum." If indifference can kill, the play insists on recognising and championing individuality, bright and loud as a Routemaster bus. 25 April – 31 May 1, 2024

Standard (***) Written by Nick Curtis
Shocking social care drama feels hideously timely. This tragic true story is powerful as an act of representation and testimonial, even if it's a flawed show. Connor Sparrowhawk, nicknamed Laughing Boy by his adoring family, was an 18-year-old with autism and epilepsy who drowned unsupervised in a bath in a Southern Health Trust unit in 2013. This stage adaptation by director Stephen Unwin of a book by Connor's mother Sara Ryan is powerful as an act of representation and testimonial, even if it's a flawed piece of drama. Given the current crisis in social care and signs of more austerity programmes to come, it feels hideously timely. Initially, we gain a mosaic picture of Connor through snippets and snapshots of his life presented by his four siblings, his mother (Janie Dee, fluently running the gamut of emotion) and her partner Rich (Forbes Masson). Connor loved trains and lorries and visiting London, and newcomer Alfie Friedman captures his buoyant, eager-minded charm, and his special maternal bond. At 18, though, strong and tall, he became aggressive, abusive, sometimes violent. Despairing, his family placed him in Slade House Assessment and Treatment Unit where, after 107 days of poor communication and negligence, he died. The joy Connor brought to life is supplanted by grief and then by rage: the second half of this 100-minute play details the quest by Ryan, her family and a growing army of online and in-person supporters to get "justice for LB". It is a shocking story, not just for the obvious reasons. Healthcare professionals patronisingly address Ryan, an Oxford professor, as "mum", and it's clear that responsibility and blame for care is shunted onto mothers. Learning disabilities are seen as a blessing ("special") or a curse. Alas, the love, frustration and anger that fuelled Ryan's book translates on stage into a black-and-white tale of righteous crusaders fighting cartoon monsters. The doctors and managers are all hissing ghouls or arrogant arse-coverers (a carer, at least, says sorry). Lawyers are drawling pillars of condescension. Though Dee and Friedman stay in character, the five other cast members double up countless roles, often resorting to caricature. The ever-nuanced Molly Osborne is the exception. Several lines were fumbled on opening night, and the ending is a mess. Most unfortunately, though Friedman's Connor remains on stage after his death, he becomes increasingly marginalised and mute. For long periods it becomes the story of the cause rather than the individual. On the plus side it's efficiently staged by Unwin against a curved white cyclorama, on which images of family life, media coverage and artworks posted online by "LB" activists are projected. Social media, so often reviled, was weaponised for justice in this case, although Sara Ryan's furious blog was used against her in court. Above all, Laughing Boy forcefully reminds us that those with learning (or other) disabilities are not a homogenous "problem" to be solved, or more likely shelved, but individuals that any civilised society should respect and make provision for.

The Stage (****) Written by Dave Fargnoli
In 2013, 18-year-old Connor Sparrowhawk died in an NHS Assessment and Treatment Unit. The young man, who was autistic and epileptic, and had a learning disability, drowned during a seizure while bathing unattended. Following Connor's death, his mother Sara Ryan – an autism specialist at the University of Oxford – spearheaded a social media campaign, while simultaneously advocating for an inquest. It would be another two years before that inquest finally found that Connor's death had been preventable, and that a litany of institutional failings had contributed to it. Directed and adapted for the stage by Stephen Unwin, this moving, sentimental, often enraging story can feel sluggish and overstuffed, but it packs in a lot of material. Informative descriptions of the convoluted legal processes in which Ryan became embroiled are set against joyful recollections of Connor's life – his boundless enthusiasm, quirky humour and love of buses. Unwin's staging is deft, carefully balancing the procession of grim, galling details against humanising, light-hearted moments. The cast has evidently worked to develop a deep, affectionate rapport, constantly sharing supportive gestures and playful interactions. Heading the ensemble, Janie Dee gives an impeccably pitched performance as Ryan, maintaining a calm, restrained composure that cracks only under the greatest stress, revealing the tremendous depth of her grief and anger. Alfie Friedman provides a sensitive, well-judged depiction of Connor, conveying an effusive personality, infectious humour and sudden, explosive outbursts of frustration. he remaining cast members work hard in multiple roles. Lee Braithwaite makes a host of characters distinct with diverse, believable accents and clear body language, while Molly Osborne portrays the doctor in charge of Connor's inadequate care as monstrously, callously indifferent, staring blankly at her phone during consultations, offering only a condescending smirk when questioned directly. Video clips, designed by Matt Powell, reflect the bewildering over-saturation of information that Ryan's family faces. We glimpse a collage of grainy photos, redacted emails and textured backdrops that suggest some of the locations where the action takes place – blurry London streets shot from a moving bus, peeling paintwork in the underfunded unit where Connor spent his last days. This flurry of confused images is projected on to the bare, concave wall of Simon Higlett's sparse set, a spartan expanse of off-white flooring dotted with a few wooden chairs. Though much of Ryan's ire is directed, appropriately, at the institution that so grossly failed her son, the play methodically describes numerous factors that compound the challenges of caring for people with complex needs: the inaccessibility of adequate services, lack of transparent communication, and an absence of viable community-based alternatives. Ultimately, it succeeds both as a tribute to Connor's family, and as a galvanising call for deeper compassion and greater support.

JERMYN STREET

????THE LONELY LONDONERS by SAM SELVON adaptor ROY WILLIAMS director EBENEZER BAMGBOYE décor LAURA ANN PRICE lights ELLIOT GRIGGS sound TONY GAYLE costume ANETT BLACK movement NEVENA STOJKOV assistant director PALOMA SIERRA-HERNANDEZ with TOBI BAKARE lewis, GAMBA COLE moses, SHANNON HAYES agnes, GILBERT KYEM JNR big city, CAROL MOSES tanty, AIMEE POWELL christina, ROMARIO SIMPSON galahad

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

A tremendous cast capture the hope and despair of life in the 'mother country' in this powerful adaptation of the 1956 novel. Lyrical and loosely structured, Sam Selvon's 1956 British Caribbean novel does not readily lend itself to the stage. It is also a tricky proposition to bring his "big city" tale to life in a space as snug as this subterranean venue. So the power of this production, adapted by Roy Williams and directed by Ebenezer Bamgboye, is all the more startling. Selvon's sprawling story about Windrush-era arrivals in London is given a small-scale expressionist treatment with a cast of seven sitting across the stage, postcodes flashing up in a glare of lights. The stripping down is counterintuitive but inspired. We follow a posse of outsider immigrants, who come to the "mother country" to realise they are not welcome. There is the unemployed, despairing Lewis (Tobi Bakare), newcomer Galahad (Romario Simpson), the desperate Big City (Gilbert Kyem Jr) and the sad, central voice of Moses (Gamba Cole). Their camaraderie and loneliness are piercingly evoked. There is also the fantastically haughty Tanty (Carol Moses), Lewis's wife Agnes (Shannon Hayes) and Christina (Aimee Powell), a haunting from Moses's past. The female characters are vivid but peripheral because this is really a study of Black masculinity, including its toxic effects on the women in the men's lives, and it seems like a miniature companion piece to Ryan Calais Cameron's For Black Boys Who Have Considered Suicide When the Hue Gets Too Heavy. Williams gives Selvon's rambling structure a tighter shape and characters speak in monologues, sometimes facing up to hostile invisible forces. It is not always clear to whom characters are speaking if you have not read the book, but it does not matter because their words carry immense drama. Sometimes there is sultry song (by Powell, who has a rich, honeyed voice), and characters speak against the strum of a guitar, skitter of drums or more jagged sounds, thrillingly designed by Tony Gayle. The theatricality is slightly overplayed in the movement (from slo-mo to dance) but where this might have become too stiffly stylised, it adds to the sense of emotional storytelling. Lights and music are used to intensify the story's psychological undercurrents. There is little of the comedy we see in the Windrush-era musical The Big Life, currently revived at Theatre Royal Stratford East, but the same sense of radical joy in the characters' lives, from Agnes and Tanty's dancing to the banter and horseplay between the men. The cast are tremendous, capturing the hope, innocence and betrayals of immigrant life. Each actor makes their character real and likable, but with no hint of sentimentality. There are many searing moments, from the painful way in which Agnes and Lewis's relationship turns abusive to Galahad, beaten and bloodied, seeing himself as Black as if for the first time. Every element of the show hypnotises, capturing the pained romance of the city, and these lonely Londoners in it.
29 Februrary – 6 April

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

A bold and timely post-Windrush drama. The show crams seven characters, a large swathe of social history and a lot of rage, pride and hurt onto the tiny stage. The harsh challenges faced by post-Windrush Caribbean immigrants in the capital are brought vividly to life in this adaptation of Sam Selvon's 1956 novella. Playwright Roy Williams has filleted and shaped the book's mostly plotless 160 pages but preserved its (radical, in those days) patois narrative voice. Young director Ebenezer Bamgboye crams seven characters, a large swathe of social history and a lot of rage, pride and hurt onto the tiny Jermyn Street stage. His use of design, music and dance to make a piece of total theatre don't always come off, but his production is as bold as it is timely. The story revolves around manual labourer Moses (played with easy charisma by Gamba Cole), who moved from Trinidad 10 years before. Moses is the primary source of practical survival tips and free cigarettes for his old friends Lewis and Big City, and a string of newcomers represented by breezy Galahad. The men have fun "liming" – hanging out and chatting nonsense – but the "mother country" of England is cold and hostile. Abuse and physical assault, which we experience through their reactions, are common. Mystified by the hostility he encounters, Galahad almost comes to hate his own skin. Jobs, food and emotional solace are scarce: they survive by eating pigeons and frequenting white prostitutes (both in copious supply in Hyde Park, near their Bayswater digs). Neither Selvon nor Williams romanticises the men: Lewis becomes a spousal abuser, while Big City is saved from a life of crime only by incompetence. They share the narrative with Lewis's strong-willed wife and mother, and the woman Moses left back home (Aimee Powell, expressing their romance through song and movement). Yet there is something celebratory in the men's camaraderie and their enduring love for London, even though it seems to scorn them. The actors sit, impressively impassive, upstage when not performing in the foreground. Behind them are batteries of lights which spell out London postcodes, flash red in moments of high tension, and pulse to rock riffs and feedback, or songs by Bob Marley and Michael Kiwanuka. These anachronistic touches are more effective than the endless, fussy deployment of cigarettes to remind us that we're in the 1950s. Bamgboye draws passionate, full-throated performances from his cast. If anything, the emotion could be usefully dialled back at times. He and Williams clearly have enormous love and respect for Selvon's novel, along with a transformative vision of how it could work on stage. It's not always totally successful, but it's an exciting piece of theatre about Londoners who were, and often still are, shamefully misrepresented and mistreated.

KING'S HEAD THEATRE

????TURNING THE SCREW by KEVIN KELLY décor LAURA HARLING costume MICHELLE TAYLOR-KNIGHT sound PAUL GAVIN music BENJAMIN BRITTEN additional composition RUDY PERCIVAL lights VITTORIO VERTA with GARY

TUSHAW benjamin britten, LIAM WATSON david hemmings, SIMON WILLMONT peter pears, JO WICKHAM imogen holst, JONATHAN CLARKSON basil coleman/policeman/judge, SAM McHALE the boy, DICKON FARMER bbc news reader

The Stage (***) Written by Paul Vale

Timid examination of the unorthodox relationship between Benjamin Britten and the child David Hemmings. It is no secret that composer and conductor Benjamin Britten was inspired by young people. Several of his operas, including Death In Venice, The Little Sweeps and, notably, The Turn of the Screw attest to this fascination. His obsession with young boys caused consternation to those close to him, not least his life partner, the lead tenor Peter Pears. Kevin Kelly's new play, directed by Tim McArthur as part of the King's Head Queer Season, draws on the tensions that erupted in the process of Britten adapting Henry James' supernatural novel. Britten casts the 12-year-old chorister David Hemmings as Miles, takes the boy into his home and develops a close relationship with him while preparing him for the role. Kelly lays out plenty of facts that help frame the social context of Britten's private life. Homosexuality was still a criminal offence in the UK and, despite Britten's fame, it was necessary for him to hide his sexual relationship with Pears from prying eyes. His attraction to young boys, and Hemmings in particular, was less discreet (testimony has confirmed that in fact there was never anything sexual between them). Kelly observes how Britten's obsession might have led to his downfall, had he not been supported by Pears and those around him who saw his behaviour as a pattern. Hemmings was not the first; the moment his voice breaks, he is banished from Britten's life as swiftly as he entered it. Under McArthur's robust direction, Kelly's play has moments of genuine power, utilising original recordings of Britten's music to amplify the mood. However, the playwright seems understandably nervous about the implications of its subject matter. Kelly prods sympathetically at Britten's story but fails to bring together all the strands to any satisfactory conclusion. Gary Tushaw's Britten is a conflicted genius, petulant perhaps, and emotionally desensitised to the needs of those close to him. This is exemplified in his relationship with Imogen Holst (Jo Wickham), whom he suggests enters a lavender marriage with Pears to divert suspicion. Simon Willmont is a solid, reliable Pears, and the play is at its most powerful when he confronts the cocky, self-assured Hemmings. Elsewhere, Liam Watson proves problematic and curiously ineffective as the child who artlessly flirted his way into Britten's affection. Despite issues in the play's construction, it's a fascinating study of the balance of power within the creative process. McArthur's staging makes good use of the space, while Vittorio Verta's atmospheric lighting design captures the sense of danger that hangs over Britten and Pears as they negotiate the draconian law of the time. 14 Februrary – 10 March

British Theatre Guide: Written by Howard Loxton

It is late 1953 and composer Benjamin Britain is behind schedule in composition of the opera which has been commissioned by the Venice Biennale and is due to première in September 1954 in the city's historic Teatro La Fenice. He is having problems writing for a central character, Miles, a young boy dismissed from his boarding school for unnamed misdemeanours. The opera is, of course, The Turn of the Screw, based on Henry James's novella in which ghostly apparitions of a dead valet and governess seem to exert a sinister influence over the boy and his young sister. Kevin Kelly's play follows the relationship between Britten and twelve-year-old David Hemmings, the boy cast as Miles, from the auditions when he was chosen, through his training for the role up to its Fenice performance and the situation when Hemmings goes to live in close proximity in the Aldeburgh home that Britten shares with his partner, the tenor Peter Pears, who will sing valet Quint in the opera. It was a situation that would raise eyebrows now (could training become grooming?) and this was happening when some high profile prosecutions saw the authorities harshly enforcing the law against homosexuality, and Britten and Pears's relationship was hardly a secret in the world they moved in. Britten and Pears had separate designated bedrooms, but Pears is well aware of the ways the police might seek for evidence of sexual activity, and Britten's obsession with young David could be too easily confused with the subtext of James's novella. Kelly makes him explain it as an attraction to an angelic innocence just before the pubertal transition to manhood, but Pears can't help feeling jealous, though reassured of Ben's love. Kelly gives Britten his own nightmares; their acting out is a jarring feature of Tim McArthur's fluid, simply-mounted production, but jarring they would be. He suggests Pears should get married, which would give them a 'beard', and propositions Imogen Holst as a potential bride, though she, who had sidelined her own composing to support him, thinks this is asking too much. The Britten-Pears partnership is effectively presented, and one get a strong sense of the protective cocoon that Britten's associates seemed to build round him, but at the heart of this play is the Britten-Hemmings relationship. Hemmings always denied that anything improper ever happened, and with this production beginning with him looking back years later (which solves the problem of casting an adult who doesn't then have to sing a fake treble), that is the line it appears to take but not without question. At auditions, it isn't Hemmings's voice that makes such an impression on Britten (who is confident he can teach him to sing the role), it is his rough-edged personality. Gary Tushaw (as Britten) and Liam Watson (as Hemmings) present a fascinating picture of their interaction with Simon Willmont warily watching as Pears. The opera's director Basil Coleman becomes the nearest to an outside observer. He had directed previous work by Britten, but there seems a slight sense of a falling out. Is that why Jonathan Clarkson also plays his nightmare nemesis? As it happens, I worked with the English Opera Group on this production of Britten's opera, though a year or more later when they took it to Paris and Aldeburgh, when Peter seemed even more protective of a more nervous Britten, and a very knowing teenage David sometimes a disruptive handful, while lovely Imo was a touch more eccentric than Jo Wickham makes her. These are actors creating characters not impressionists. They create their own world, but seeing Imo teaching David the piano variation, I remembered my

amazement at his keyboard skill, and the ominous sound of James Blades's fingers on drum-skin for those final moments still gives me a shiver. The quotes from the score that are used here have their own resonance, but I learned things too. The opening words of "a curious story" being a contribution from Hemmings, the suggestion that the meanings of Malo, the Latin grammar mnemonic that Miles sings, are doubled with sexual slang terms, and amusingly that the boy whose audition followed Hemmings's was the young Michael Crawford. Kevin Kelly has packed a lot into just under 90 minutes. Peter Pears was worried about rumours. Turning the Screw doesn't entirely scotch them, but it gives us a picture of a mutual fascination that helped to create a musical masterpiece.

Ham & High (****) Written by David Winskill
Set in 1954, Kevin Kelly's Turning the Screw finds the great composer Benjamin Britten at the height of his creative powers, but woefully behind schedule in delivering his new opera in time for the Aldeburgh Festival. He and his long term partner Peter Pears are also attracting the attention of a paranoid police force intent on rooting out "high profile homosexuals". To counter "unpleasant" rumours he suggests that Imo, his musical PA (and the daughter of Gustav Holst) marries Peter: a brutish and insensitive suggestion to make to a woman of a "certain age" which she turns down with dignity. Britten (a superb Gary Tushaw) hasn't yet heard his work sung, so holds auditions to recruit a voice to carry the role of Miles in The Turn of The Screw. On instinct, he picks chorister David Hemmings, the future movie star, who sings like and angel but talks like a costermonger. He becomes infatuated with the 12-year-old, even sharing a bed with him during a thunderstorm, assuring Pears that "nothing happened". Fortunately, he is supported his small group of friends and Peter (perfectly played by Simon Willmont) all love him and protect him. As his obsession with Hemmings grows, they counsel discretion and distance, but are rewarded by Britten's brutish, narcissistic behaviour. Under Tim McArthur's deft direction both cast and script are magnificent at untangling difficult questions of power imbalance, manipulation and paedophilia, getting the tone and emphasis absolutely right. The most challenging role is Liam Watson's Hemmings. It was never going to be easy for a 20-something, well-muscled adult to play a knowing 12-year-old Cockney urchin. Unfortunately, the temptation to occasionally channel Norman Wisdom was too strong, but Turning The Screw is otherwise a must for theatre and music lovers alike. The brand-new King's Head theatre is now a welcoming if subterranean space: with delightful staff and an excellent auditorium with perfect sightlines and acoustics. But the overall feel of the place needs some TLC, as the route-march from front-door to seat made me feel like an urban explorer in a decommissioned Slough office block.

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

STAGE DOOR THEATRE

????MARRY ME A LITTLE songs by STEPHEN SONDHEIM director ROBERT MCWHIR musical director AARON CLINGHAM décor DAVID SHIELDS lights RICHARD LAMBERT graphic design STEVE CAPLIN with SHELLEY RIVERS woman, MARKUS SODERGREN man

Theatre Weekly (****) Written by Greg Stewart
As a brand new off-west end theatre in the heart of Covent Garden, the Stage Door Theatre has a lot riding on its opening production, Stephen Sondheim's one act musical Marry Me A Little, which was last seen in London in a sell-out run at the St James Theatre (now The Other Palace). In Marry Me A Little, the two central characters are separated and alone, each in their own New York apartment, they never actually 'meet', instead imagining what they would say to each other, and the secrets they would share if they ever were to cross paths. The plot itself is fairly fluid. Previous productions have imagined them as going through a break-up, others see them as potential lovers. There have been same sex versions, and the song list of entirely sung through numbers also seems to be at the director's discretion. What allows this flexibility is the fact that the musical is comprised of a collection of 'trunk' songs; numbers which were cut from the final productions of other Sondheim musicals, there are several from Follies, as well as A Little Night Music and A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum, and the title number comes from Company. In Robert McWhir's production the songs are given prominence, under the musical direction of Aaron Clingham, and the audience are allowed to create their own story around them. The female character shows signs of optimism, while the male character is all but defeated, packing his belongings into a cardboard box with an eviction notice lying on the coffee table. In the fairly intimate space of this new theatre, it's not possible for the two leads to be separated in a physical sense, which somewhat takes away that element of the musical, however, it's been cleverly done so that both occupy the same space, while (comically at times) never coming face to face. The cast of two are fantastic, and apart from a sense they were holding back a little, Shelley Rivers and Markus Sodergren deliver those complex Sondheim numbers as if they've been doing it for years. Rivers performs an astonishing version of 'There Won't Be Trumpets' and Sodergren's 'Bring on the Girls' is a delight. Running at just over an hour this is Sondheim up close and personal. Marry Me A Little, has a wealth of fantastic tunes, and at the new Stage Door Theatre, we get to see them performed in a much more raw and intimate way. The future looks bright for this new space in the heart of the theatre district. 28 February – 13 April 2024

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

STAGE DOOR THEATRE

????THE TAILOR-MADE MAN by CLAUDIO MACOR director ROBERT McWHIR décor DAVID SHIELDS costume JANET HUCKLE original composition AARON CLINGHAM lights RICHARD LAMBERT video STEVE CAPLIN with HUGO PILCHER william "billy" haines, GWITHIAN EVANS jimmie shields/e. mason hopper/roderick, PETER RAE howard strickling/victor darro, SHELLEY RIVERS miss marion davies, OLIVIA RUGIERO miss carey/miss pola negri/miss carole lombard, DERECK WALKER louis b. mayer

The Stage (***) Written by Paul Vale
Simple but striking. Enjoyable love story with a twist. The story of William 'Billy' Haines' time in Hollywood is one of pride and resilience. Claudio Macor's engaging biopic was last staged on the London fringe in 2017 and garnered enough critical acclaim to be optioned as a viable screenplay for Thames Television. This production, directed by Robert McWhir, is a natural fit for the modest Stage Door. The traverse staging is a risk, but it heightens the intimacy of Haines' story. As an up-and-coming leading man, Haines' career in movies in the 1920s and early 1930s draws to an abrupt end when he is caught in bed with another man. He has always privately been open about his homosexuality, protected by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer's publicity machine, and is in a long-term relationship with Jimmie Shields. Refusing to toe the studio line, Haines rejects the idea of a lavender marriage to Pola Negri and ends up being fired by MGM. Haines turns his career around by rebranding himself as an interior designer. Armed with natural good taste, a practical partner and a host of high-profile friends who become clients, he thrives. Macor's disarming piece manages to catch the human story amid the Hollywood hoopla. Larger than life characters such as Negri, Marion Davies and Carole Lombard cut through the glamour to reveal the hedonism of early Tinseltown. Haines' commitment to Shields hits a few rocky patches, but they are a devoted couple, and Macor paints their relationship in simple but striking tones.

British Theatre Guide: Written by Howard Loxton
Back in the day, William "Billy" Haines was one of the biggest of Hollywood stars, but you may never have heard of him. I hadn't until I saw an earlier production of this play, which tells his story. Discovered in a talent competition run by Goldwyn Pictures in 1922 and put under contract, Haines at first only got minor roles, but his personality and 'boy next door' good looks saw him become a star and, with the help of elocution lessons, succeeding in talkies, but, though as MGM's PR man Howard Strickling tells his bosses Billy is tailor-made to please the ladies, there's a problem: he is gay and doesn't sufficiently hide it. Though in a live-in relationship with Jimmy Shields, a young man he met in New York, that doesn't stop Billy from cruising Los Angeles' Pershing Square, and, after being caught in the YMCA with a sailor he picked up there, his career is at risk when Louis B Mayer delivers an ultimatum. The first act of Macor's play maps Billy's career and features his Hollywood friends. On the one hand, we have Strickling (Peter Rae) at work keeping unwanted comment out of the papers, while screenwriter Victor Darro (Peter Rae doubling) is rehearsing Billy and co-star Marion Davies in a duologue that amusingly satirises the awkward transition from silent movie style to talkie. On the other, we see Jimmy left bored at home, living he says "in a golden prison" and wincing at Billy's infidelities, each guiltily followed by the gift of a watch. (What does Jimmy do with them all?) Hugo Pilcher gives Billy such charm and well-formed chest that you see why audiences like him, and Jimmy forgives him. The second act sees Gwithian Evans making a stronger statement as Jimmy and taking on more narration. Billy is now confronted by an irate Mayer (Dereck Walker convincingly explosive), with Olivia Ruggiero as Pola Negri, whom MGM wants Billy to marry: she is as OTT as the real one. Carole Lombard (another cameo from Olivia Ruggiero) is one of the friends who, as she moves in with new man Clark Gable (with whom Billy also claims to have had a fling), helps set Billy on a new career beside Jimmy. Marion Davies helps out after Billy and Jimmy are attacked by KKK homophobes. What Mayer meant to be extinction removed Haines from Hollywood history until 1986, when Ted Turner's purchase of MGM freed his films from oblivion. "Look what happened to Billy Haines" may not be as effective a warning to stay in the closet as it used to be, but The Tailor-Made Man is a reminder of just how strong homophobia can be, and Robert McWhir's intimate staging gives it firm focus. 9 May – 31 July

London Theatre 1 (****) Written by Terry Eastham
A question for all those film buffs out there. How many of you have heard of an actor called William Haines? I'm guessing not that many. And yet why? Haines was a top-five box-office star from 1928 to 1932 successfully transitioning from silent into the talkies. The 1930 Quigley Poll, a survey of film exhibitors, listed Haines as the top box-office attraction in the country. Then all of a sudden, he and his films vanished, never really seen again. If you want to know why, then get yourself to the Stage Door Theatre where Lambco's latest production. The Tailor-Made Man offers more than a glimpse into this sordid Hollywood tale. 1922 and William 'Billy' Haines (Hugo Pilcher) is a winner in the Goldwyn Pictures' "New Faces of 1922" contest which includes a film contract with the studio. Publicist Howard Strickling (Peter Rae) begins the publicity campaign around the young star to be. A house, car, clothes, and a back-story that, combined with Haines good looks and natural charm, will delight the female audience. However, like most things in Hollywood, not everything is as it would appear. And Billy, far from being the ultimate ladies' man looks in totally the opposite direction for his romantic encounters. That's fine with Strickling as long as whatever he does, not a word gets out to the general public. To that end, the studio wants to arrange a sham lavender marriage to faded starlet Pola Negri (Olivia Ruggerio). Unfortunately, with Billy's rather voracious sexual appetites, that's not as easy as it seems until he meets Jimmie Shields (Gwithian Evans), an artistic young man with whom Billy builds a relationship. Unfortunately, and to the consternation of Jimmie, and friends like Marion Davies (Shelley Rivers), Billy has trouble being monogamous and finally has one sordid encounter too many for studio head Louis B. Mayer (Dereck Walker) who, no spoilers, does not react well. I'd

often read about the old Hollywood studio system and the power they held over their actors but never fully appreciated just how all-encompassing that power actually was. Playwright Claudio Macor really brings it to life. From Billy's first encounter with Strickling, through to the end of his film career, you really appreciate that for the studios, actors were simply another resource, like lights and scenery to be used as needed. Macor has really penned a fascinating play about a dark time in Hollywood and the story of Billy's rise and fall really is compelling. While the play starts slowly, and I will admit, it took me a little while to really get into it, by the end I was totally hooked and invested in finding out what happened to Billy and Jimmie, and really shocked that while he disappeared from view, the mere whisper of Billie's name was enough to keep actors closeted for generations. I loved the staging of the show, a sort of bespoke in the round set up with the main action taking place in the centre of the room and separate stages on opposite corners. This worked well although I noticed that the people sitting on the same wall as the monitor, didn't seem to initially realise it was there so missed the date/location changes shown on it. Richard Lambert's lighting created nice spaces which made the entire performance area feel larger than it was. David Shields' design and Costume Supervisor Janet Huckle gave the space and the actors an authentic 1920s/30s feel, dropping the audience into that world in style. So, let's move on to the performances. Hugo Pilcher really looks and sounds the part as Billy. A great mix of cocky arrogance and bravado but with a young man seeking something special buried inside. Pilcher really looks the part of an early cinema heartthrob and has a real sexuality that builds a lovely chemistry with Gwithian Evans' Jimmie making the two characters really believable as partners for life. Peter Rae was excellent in his two extremely different roles, the ultimate corporate man Victor Strickling and a gay British author Victor Darro and really shone in both. In fact, I loved all the cast and Olivia Ruggerio, Shelley Rivers and Dereck Walker are to be heartily congratulated for their fine performances. Overall, I loved The Tailor-Made Man. The story was fascinating and brought to life beautifully by the cast. It's a wonderful insight into the Studio System and how lives can be altered because those in charge disapprove and have the power of total control.