THEATRE ROYAL HAYMARKET

*****THE SCORE by OLIVER COTTON director TREVOR NUNN décor ROBERT JONES lights JOHANNA TOWN sound/additional composition SOPHIE COTTON fight director TERRY KING with BRIAN COX bach, NICOLE ANSARI-COX anna, PETER DE JERSEY voltaire, JULIET GARRICKS emilia, STEPHEN HAGAN frederick, JAMIE WILKES carl, CHRISTOPHER STAINES quantz TOBY WEBSTER benda, MATTHEW ROMAIN graun, JAMES GLADDON helstein, WILL KERR soldier, JORDAN KILSHAW soldier, REBECCA THRONHILL maidservant, GEOFFREY TOWERS von meckelsdorf**

Blanche Marvin Critique
This was an interesting piece in which Bach is made clearly the hero of a battle between himself and the king. The first half is very slow and not until the second act when Bach actually confronts the king and the battle between them and the creation of an ingenious piece is created. Enclosed are other critic's reviews.

British Theatre Guide Written by Howard Laxton
The Score presents a fly-on-the-wall account of a piece of musical history: the events that led to Johann Sebastian Bach writing his Musical Offering. It starts in 1747 as Prussian troops overrun his home town of Leipzig, creating havoc for its citizens, when he receives a call to attend the court of King Frederick II in Potsdam. Bach is loath to go: he is horrified at the behaviour of Frederick's army and has a sick child but his wife Anna urges him on his way. So it is that we witness the meeting between autocrat Frederick the Great and the great composer in a world where the walls seem to have ears and a word out of place could call down retribution, a meeting that risks turning into a confrontation, especially after the King tells Bach to speak freely. At the heart of the action is a trick to catch Bach out. With the help of three of his court composers, the King devises a theme for Bach to turn into an improvised three-part fugue—a task they will bet is impossible. Bach's son Carl, already a court composer (but one who complains he is paid much less than the others), has faith in his father and takes on that wager. A ruler staging a war to regain territories claimed to be historically Prussian and collateral civilian damage has contemporary resonances, but Trevor Nunn's production is set in its period with Robert Jones's design making a contrast between the Bachs' simple home and plain harpsichord with the Potsdam court's exuberance, opulent costumes and ornamented keyboards with a revolve that feeds the fast flow between scenes. Oliver Cotton's text doesn't dig deeply into the arguments his protagonists present, and he uses Peter de Jersey's deliciously flamboyant Voltaire largely for comic relief, but nevertheless, there is definite drama in the clash between Prussian power and Bach's humanity, and Brian Cox as Bach and Stephen Hagan as Frederick give stunning performances. Cox gives us a man well aware of his own musical eminence but who has deep feeling for others and a strong faith, aware of "a moment of divine inspiration". He subtly suggests the energetic 62-year-old's fear of sight loss and is touchingly discomforted at being comically caught by the King in his underwear in a portrayal delivered with power and conviction—and a clarity that will reach the whole house. Hagan's atheist Frederick is a man damaged by his father's brutality: regular beatings as a boy and later, after trying to flee with a friend, being caught and forced to watch that friend's (some

say lover's) beheading. This King has a cold carapace but gives a suggestion that Bach has got beneath that. There is a strong cast including Nicole Ansari-Cox as Anna Bach, underused but beautifully paired with her husband (as in their real life), Juliet Garricks as the servant Emilia, bringing warmth to court life, and Jamie Wilkes as Carl Bach. The Score, which comes to the West End after premièring in Bath two years ago, misses something, but its production and performances make it worth seeing.

Time Out (***) Written by Andrzej Lukowski
While it would be pushing it to say Frederick the Great loomed large in my childhood, he probably loomed larger in mine than yours. Aside from the fact my family is Polish – Frederick is well up there on our national shitlist – my dad is a lecturer in eighteenth century European history with a habit of bitching about the Prussian monarch as if he were a hated work colleague. Oliver Cotton's The Score essentially sets Brian Cox's grouchy, loveable and deeply devout JS Bach against Stephen Hagan's capricious atheist Frederick. It's a fictionalised account of their real 1747 encounter, wherein the Prussian king asked the legendary composer to improvise a fiendishly tricky fugue for him. While I'm sure Cotton has done his homework, he's surely betting that the average British audience is unlikely to have any real opinion on Frederick. His play contents itself with an antagonist who is a sort of vague mish mash of biographical exposition, Blackadder-style toff-isms, and bits where Frederick's warmongering is unsubtly paralleled with Putin's invasion of Ukraine. I'm not saying there's any need to be totally historically accurate in a work of fiction. But Cotton's king feels like a half-hearted collection of tyrant tropes rather than a credible character. It's hard not to see The Score as a distant relative of Peter Shaffer's Amadeus, but it's simply not in the same league in terms of characterisation. Still, we're here to see Brian Cox's Bach, and the Succession star gives it heart, guts and soul as a genius whose grumpy old manness is offset by an unshakeable belief that God speaks to us all through the world. In a sense he's more like an ahead-of-his-time hippy than a religious bore: his ultimately unshakeable belief that the world is a remarkable place stands in contrast to Frederick's insecurity-driven realpolitik. And after an exposition-heavy opening act, Cotton's play settles into a decent groove, with Frederick's challenge to Bach to improvise a fugue portrayed as a deliberate trap set up to humiliate the old man. Spoilers – although you'd have to be clinically dead to not see this coming from a mile off – but Bach aces the whole thing and proceeds to give the flabbergasted Frederick a piece of his mind. It's somewhat clunky, yee-haw fist pumping stuff, but theatre isn't actually obliged to be stingingly sophisticated.
I wonder if a more interesting director might have given Cotton's text a bit more spark and depth. Cox lends his scenes an air of gravitas and profundity. But elsewhere, Trevor Nunn's production keeps things simple, sometimes excruciatingly so – the bits where Cox mimes playing the harpsichord look genuinely terrible.
The Score is solid enough commercial entertainment, but really it's a second tier show built around one top tier cast member.

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

HAROLD PINTER THEATRE

******MACBETH by WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE director MAX WEBSTER décor ROSANNA VIZE lights BRUNO POET sound GARETH FRY movement/intimacy director SHELLEY MAXWELL composer/musical director ALASDAIR MACRAE with DAVID TENNANT macbeth, CUSH JUMBO lady macbeth, CAL MACANINCH banquo, NOOF OUSELLAM macduff, RONA MORISON lady macduff, ROS WATT malcolm, BENNY YOUNG duncan/doctor, BRIAN JAMES**

O'SULLIVAN donalbain/soldier/murderer/musician, MOYO AKANDE ross, JATINDER SINGH RANDHAWA the porter/sevtan, ANNIE GRACE musician/ gentlewoman, KATHLEEN MACINNES the singer/ensemble, ALASDAIR MACRAE musician/ensemble, NIALL MACGREGOR macbeth/banquo cover, JASMIN HINDS lady macbeth/gentlewoman cover, ROB ALEXANDER-ADAMS duncan/doctor cover, MARTYN HODGE macduff/malcolm/porter/donalbain cover, GEMMA LAURIE lady macduff/ross cover, CASPER KNOPF macduff's son/fleance/young siward, RAFFI PHILLIPS macduff's son/fleance/young siward, THEO WAKE macduff's son/fleance/young siward

Blanche Marvin Critique
The Macbeth with headphones actually causes an intake of the play in a subtle exchange of recognition. The action happens in the head as if you are witnessing the murderous actions closely. The switch of Lady Macbeth from murder to terror of her action is defined here… Lady Macbeth in white to counter Macbeth's black. He grows blacker and she sustains the white. He becomes obsessed with murder, she eventually destroyed. Language, poetic and brazen plays second to observing action via the ear. The experience is unique, the language of Shakespeare holds all of its strength. Enclosed are other critic's reviews.

Time Out (****) Written by Andrzej Lukowski
This review is from the Donmar Warehouse, December 2023. 'Macbeth' will transfer to the Harold Pinter Theatre in October 2024 with David Tennant and Cush Jumbo returning. I wouldn't quite say David Tennant has been upstaged by a pair of headphones. But as the two-time Doctor regenerates into Shakespeare's murderous Scottish monarch, you can't seriously attend the Donmar's new production of 'Macbeth' and say that Tennant – or for that matter big name co-star Cush Jumbo – feels like the defining element of Max Webster's production. Instead that's the binaural sound design by Gareth Fry that requires all audience members to wear headphones throughout, an unusual and somewhat distracting experience, or at least until you acclimatise. In essence, the use of headphones achieves two things. One, it allows a constant stream of 3D sound to be relayed to your ears: the screeches of birds, music from musicians in the mic-ed up glass chamber at the back of Rosanna Vize's stark, monochrome set, and most impressively a 'three sisters' who are wholly physically absent, just disembodied voices whose location we feel we can 'see' thanks to the pinpoint design. And two, it allows the actors to talk, not project, using casual or even quiet registers that would normally never work on stage - it was geekily fascinating to take the headpieces off now and again and see exactly how low a volume some of the dialogue was. I'm going to be honest, for about half an hour I hated it, or was at least very unsure. The constant stream of sound effects and new agey music feels gimmicky – as much as anything, you don't need headphones for this stuff: there's absolutely no reason you couldn't just have a regular live band and somebody regularly pressing the 'raven' sound effect. Jatinder Singh Randhawa's Porter probably wasn't the actual turning point for me. But his extremely enjoyable, audience-address speech – delivered in contemporary language – contains the memorably droll observation 'this is just watching a radio drama isn't it?'. It feels like it punctures a certain tension – perhaps diffusing the idea that we're supposed to be in absolute awe at the sound design. The main thing that happens is your ear

acclimatises and you start to get what's being achieved with the different speech registers. As evidenced by his Donmar 'Henry V', Webster is very good at politics in Shakespeare. And Tennant in particular is one of the most nuanced, charismatic actors out there. He plays Macbeth as a hard-nosed political operator with little of the hesitancy or guilt the character is typically saddled with. As the bodies start to pile up, there's a chilling casualness to his behaviour – his intimate suggestion to the two assassins that they murder Banquo and his son Fleance is offhand and matey, like he's asking them to do something a little naughty as a favour. He makes it sound so plausible. Once I'd gotten into it, I found Tennant utterly gripping, and so too his relationship with Jumbo's Lady M. It's a cliche that Macbeth usually dithers over the murder of King Duncan and she is more ruthless, the evil woman who eggs him on. Here Jumbo feels more like an enabler than a ringleader – Tennant shoots her looks of askance when contemplating his first murder, but it's clear he actually wants to do this. Being able to speak more quietly takes the bombast out of her language - she's not ordering him to kill Duncan, just affirming his instincts. What's really interesting is that Lady M soon becomes consumed by guilt – especially once child murder comes into the equation – while Macbeth experiences almost none. One way of looking at it is that this is simply dispensing with the idea of a dithering Macbeth pushed into murder: he was a ruthless bastard from the start. Meanwhile Lady M's humanity is bolstered by having her visit Lady MacDuff shortly before the latter's murder, in what's clearly a fit of conscience (she takes the lines of the minor character Ross, an idea the Almeida's recent production also hit on). Another way to look at it is that Webster is showing the black-clad Macbeth and white-clad Lady Macbeth to be parts of the same whole, with the increasingly horrified Jumbo coming across less like Tennant's wife, more the vestiges of his humanity. His behaviour gets more depraved as she gets iller (or vice versa – she gets sicker the worse he behaves). It's a really fascinating idea, Combined with the restraint of delivery inherent to the format, and it's hugely compelling a take about a ruthless politician who pushes his ambitions so far that he loses his humanity, something that feels inextricably bound up in the eventual loss of his life. It's also worth saying that effectively using sound instead of sets means there are no real scene changes, so the production can go at a monumental clip – 'Macbeth' was always pacey, but there are absolutely no longeurs here, just thrilling set piece after thrilling set piece, the whole thing blasted out in under two hours. I think there is a slight distancing effect to the headphones that never really goes away, which perhaps holds this production back from Big Star Does Famous Role And Gets Awards territory. There is unavoidably a note of curio to it. But the nuance the actors can bring nonetheless makes it a (literally) quiet revelation, that brings tremendous, subtle performances out of its whole cast.

WhatsOnStage: Written by Tanyel Gumushan

The West End transfer of Macbeth starts performances this evening. Max Webster's production plays at the Harold Pinter Theatre, with David Tennant and Cush Jumbo returning as the regicidal titular duo. It will see audiences don headphones to intimately hear what's going on (and sometimes not going on) on stage. Joining Tennant (Macbeth) and Jumbo (Lady Macbeth) are Rob Alexander-Adams, Moyo Akandé, Annie Grace, Jasmin Hinds, Martyn Hodge, Brian James O'Sullivan, Casper Knopf, Gemma Laurie, Cal MacAninch, Kathleen MacInnes, Alasdair Macrae, Niall MacGregor, Rona Morison, Noof Ousellam, Raffi Phillips, Jatinder Singh Randhawa,

Theo Wake, Ros Watt and Benny Young. It received a glowing review from Sarah Crompton for its premiere at the Donmar Warehouse, being described as "striking deep chords" and being led by two "wonderfully observed" performances. Tennant went on to win the Critics' Circle Award for Best Shakespearean performance. Macbeth is designed by Rosanna Vize, with lighting design by Bruno Poet, sound by Fry, movement by Shelley Maxwell, composition and musical direction by Macrae, fight direction by Rachel Bown-Williams and Ruth Cooper-Brown of Rc-Annie Ltd and casting direction by Anna Cooper.

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

NOËL COWARD

****DR. STRANGELOVE based on motion picture directed by STANLEY KUBRICK screenplay STANLEY KUBRICK, TERRY SOUTHERN, PETER GEORGE based on book RED ALERT by PETER GEORGE adaptors ARMANDO IANNUCCI, SEAN FOLEY director SEAN FOLEY décor/costume HILDEGARD BECHTLER lights JESSICA HUNG HAN YUN sound/composer BEN RINGHAM, MAX RINGHAM projections AKHILA KRISHNAN illusions CHRIS FISHER movement LIZZI GEE with STEVE COOGAN dr. strangelove/captain mandrake/president muffley/major tj kong, GILES TERERA general turgidson, JOHN HOPKINS general ripper, OLIVER ALVIN-WILSON jefferson, PENNY ASHMORE vera lynn, BEN DEERY general staines, RICHARD DEMPSEY frank, MABLI GYWNNE swing, MARK HADFIELD faceman, TONY JAJAWARDENA russian ambassador bakov, TOM KELSEY ensemble, DANIEL NORFORD ensemble, DHARMESH PATEL lincoln, ADAM SINA ensemble, ALEX STOLL sergeant, BEN TURNER colonel bat guano**

Blanche Marvin Critique
Dr. Strangelove will be very successful. The probability of Steve Coogan's performance and his vigour considering that if he wasn't actually on stage he was doing a fast change to get back on stage as yet another character. The play was exceptional in its design (Hildegarde Bechtler) and its technical accomplishments (Akhila Krishnan) with excellent performances from all of the cast, but it will succeed on the popularity of its leading man and the indulgence that audiences will bring to see this performer's masterful West End stage debut. The adaptation was well done and there were modern references to dubious presidential results and gender identity (the Bunny Girl in the film was replaced by a slightly camp trolley dolly) and did the film no disservice even though the general ethos was more entertainment than enlightenment making the tone of the evening much lighter. It's not a play but a good night out if you can afford the ticket.

The Telegraph (**) Written by Claire Allfree
"Steve Coogan steals the show but can't save it"

"Sean Foley's knockabout adaptation of Kubrick's era-defining film is marked by a consistent refusal to take its subject seriously"

"You wait years for Steve Coogan to appear on stage, and he turns up in four roles at once."

"Foley, who as a former member of The Right Size has a background in physical comedy, serves up a knockabout production marked by a contrasting refusal to take its subject seriously. With Coogan on full power, this is not necessarily always a problem."

"Yet if Foley's production isn't willing to recreate the film point by point (and how could it?), then what is it instead? It's a question the show never adequately answers, trapped between the film's formidable legacy and an inability to recreate it anew theatrically."

"Like a stealth bomber, Coogan leaves all other performances in his wake - not even a misused Giles Terera, as the brawny chump General Turgidson, can compete"

"... the film is less a satire of geopolitical circumstance than a deadly ironic comedy of human fallibility. The laughter should come at sickening cost. Foley, by contrast, just wants you to have a good time."

The Financial Times (***) Written by Sarah Hemming
"Steve Coogan is terrific in Dr Strangelove at the Noël Coward Theatre"

"The London stage adaptation of Stanley Kubrick's 1964 classic is faithful to the original but doesn't quite hit all the right buttons"

"When Foley and Iannucci began work, they saw Kubrick's nightmarish story of accidental extinction as a dramatic metaphor for political impotence in the face of threats such as global warming. A few years on and the temperature has changed: Vladimir Putin has threatened the use of nuclear weapons, the shadow of global conflict looms and the possibility of some extremist pushing everything over the brink seems all too plausible."

"All this makes the show feel disturbingly timely. Yet that very context also presents a problem. Paradoxically, it makes satire hard work: it's difficult to compete with the daily dose of madness that confronts anyone scrolling through their phone. Perhaps it's that framework that makes this something of a hit-and-miss evening."
"…. Coogan is terrific, making each of Sellers' roles his own with honed comic timing. He's particularly good as Mandrake, his mild manner and plummy English accent masking his rising desperation, and he's spectacularly sinister as the ex-Nazi nuclear scientist Dr. Strangelove."

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

GIELGUD

*****JUNO AND THE PAYCOCK by SEÁN O'CASEY director MATTHEW WARCHUS décor ROB HOWELL lights HUGH VANSTONE composer CLAIRE VAN KAMPEN sound SIMON BAKER with EIMHIN FITZGERALD DOHERTY johnny boyle, AISLING KEARNS mary boyle, J. SMITH-CAMERON juno boyle, LEO HANNA jerry devine, MARK RYLANCE 'captain' jack boyle, PAUL HILTON 'joxer' daly, JOHN RICE sewing machine man, CAOLAN McCARTHY coal block vendor,**

CHRIS WALLEY charles bentham, ANNA HEALY mrs maisie madigan, INGRID CRAIGIE mrs tancred, JACINTA WHYTE first neighbour, JESSICA CERVI second neighbour, SEÁN DUGGAN 'needle' nugent, BRYAN MORIARTY young man (irregular mobilizer), CAOLAN McCARTHY first furniture removal man, BRYAN MORIRATY second furniture removal man, SEÁN DUGGAN first irregular, JOHN RICE second irregular

Blanche Marvin Critique
The famous tragicomedy of Juno and the Paycock is one of my most beloved plays. The Paycock pretend she's a captain who is so filled with his own aura that the family and its problems are left entirely as a burden upon Juno. As it turns out their two children have been overlooked by Paycock. His son is involved politically with the revolution that is happening in Dublin and is in life danger. His daughter pregnant and unmarried has been turned out of the house by Paycock. The resolution of the family in the end is tragic in that the flat has all its contents removed with Juno moving to her sister with her pregnant daughter to whom they will devote their family life. The actual life at that period in time is so exquisitely reconstituted in this play and the characters are so vividly written. Mark Rylance as the Paycock gave one of his introverted portrayals which was not up to his usual quality of work. The play is an indomitable piece of work that will never be dependent on the performances alone, it stands so solidly strong. The production reaches moments of endurance that strike the heart. The play of Juno and the Paycock outlasts any production in the strength of its credibility. The strength of Seán O'Casey outlasts any production. Enclosed are other critic's reviews.

The Guardian (***) Written by Arifa Akbar
Rylance is entertainingly Chaplinesque as a dissolute husband in Seán O'Casey's 1924 tragicomedy, but Succession's J Smith-Cameron is its heart and soul as the long-suffering wife. A volley of gunshots at the start signifies the violent backdrop to Seán O'Casey's 1924 tragicomedy, which takes place during the Irish civil war of 1922-23. But it is a distant sound, and musical hall-style comedy and drunken shenanigans take prominence in this production. The second in O'Casey's Dublin trilogy, Juno and the Paycock dramatises tenement life for the Boyles, whose breadwinner, Jack (Mark Rylance), prefers drink to work while his wife, Juno (J Smith-Cameron), is left to earn their keep. Crotchety comedy takes the lead. Jack is irked by Juno's bossiness; Juno is peeved with their daughter, Mary (Aisling Kearns), for striking from work and with Jack for his malingering. Their son Johnny (Eimhin Fitzgerald Doherty) watches on twitchily until the plotline involving republican vengeance snaps into play. Director Matthew Warchus has gathered a talented cast, from Smith-Cameron as a formidably watchable presence to Rylance as her peacocking husband. They are never less than entertaining but the show does not stretch them, and the drama of the first two acts is a little too ambling and creaky, with the broad Irish accents and comic dissolution. Jack, who proclaims to have been a sea captain, is as much a fantasist and self-mythologiser as Jerusalem's Rooster, it seems, and Rylance is delightfully Chaplinesque in the comic physicality of his drunkenness. He makes an entertaining double-act with Paul Hilton as Jack's wastrel friend Joxer, but even when the latter is not around, he seems like a comic duo in one, staggering more than walking and playing glintingly to the audience for laughs. O'Casey's trilogy contains strong women

and Juno is one of them, although she is not romanticised. Smith-Cameron really is the heart and soul of this production, for all of Rylance's charisma. Juno is the foil to Jack's clownishness and when the tone flips to tragedy, Smith-Cameron is tremendous. Kearns does wonders with her part as Mary too, although Johnny feels rather insignificant. There are songs and music when the Boyles begin their carousing after the promise of money from a relative's will. Beneath the bonhomie are O'Casey's poetry, and the family's craving to be somewhere they are not known, but this production does not dwell too long on these. The war outside enters the home through Rob Howell's set, which looks as if a strip has been torn out of it, and has blood-soaked red light above a sketched house below. The family's poverty is conveyed through the sparseness of their furnishing at the start, with a table, fire grate and, importantly, a dangling crucifix to which characters speak beseechingly or in accusation over their terrible losses. When the plot turns dark, the stage cracks open to an expressionistic setting and it is a magnificent moment. The tragedy feels late but it is impressive in the impact of its turning point. "Take away this murdering hate," Juno says in front of the crucifix when the war reaches her home, and her prayer sounds all the more tragic for the decades of Ireland's sectarian hate yet to come. 4 October – 23 November 2024

Time Out (****) Written Andrzej Lukowski

Mark Rylance is at his most divisively virtuosic in this revival of Sean O'Casey's classic play. Just when you think Mark Rylance had Mark Rylance-d all he can, the man finds whole new ways to Mark Rylance. I'd be intrigued to know what Succession star J Smith-Cameron was expecting when she signed on to play the eponymous hard bitten wife and mother in Sean O'Casey's classic 1924 drama set in the tenements of Civil War Dublin. Was she entirely clear about the extent to which human special effect Rylance would upstage her and, indeed, everyone else? While Matthew Warchus's revival of Juno and the Paycock is grounded in realism, Rylance's take on Juno's drunken layabout husband 'Captain' Jack Boyle is coming from someplace entirely different. Presumably inspired by a throwaway line mentioning Charlie Chaplin – a startling reference to a glamourous world beyond the violence gripping Dublin at the time – Rylance has gone full vaudevillian. Looking for all the world like the shambolic Irish cousin of Chaplin's Little Tramp, he rocks a toothbrush moustache, a penchant for dazzling extremes of physical business, and a tendency to directly address the audience or look bewildered out of the corners of his eyes as if he can't work out why he's trapped in a play. For the first half he's so dazzlingly strange and doing so much more than anyone else – much of it inscrutable – that it's hard to focus on the other actors. I found it brilliantly, bizarrely funny, the sort of auteur performance that no other actor alive would so much as think of giving. I suspect reviews will be divided on whether it makes any sense in the wider context of the production. But you know, if somebody offered me a Picasso I wouldn't fret that it didn't go with the furniture. And while showman director Warchus is perhaps not able to articulate this perfectly, Rylance's turn does make sense in the context of the devastating change of tack O'Casey's play makes late on. For three quarters of its running time Juno and the Paycock functions as a boisterous society comedy about the ludicrous Jack inheriting a fortune from a distant, disliked cousin. The war is alluded to, but barely noticed. But in the final furlong the family's improbable hijinks are ripped to shreds as a series of terrible but far-from-unlikely calamities overtake them. Rylance's early performance is

as a man who can barely believe any of this is happening – by the hauntingly deranged final scene he's not casting cute looks at the audience any more. The pitch into seriousness aids the rest of the cast. It's not that the likes of Aisling Kearns as Jack's straitlaced daughter Mary or Paul Hilton as his opportunistic best friend Joxer aren't good. But up against Rylance's showy weirdness they're simply not on an equal footing, the Spiders from Mars to his Ziggy Stardust. But that changes as things get darker, and Smith-Cameron in particular finally gets her moment with a biblical late monologue. There will definitely be those who think Rylance has totally overstepped the mark here, but sometimes I think we're a bit precious about allowing for genuinely weird, virtuosic acting in classic plays. At the end of the day, Mark Rylance gotta Mark Rylance.

Evening Standard (***) Written by Nick Curtis

Succession star J. Smith-Cameron is splendid. Despite the actress's great performance, Sean O'Casey's tragicomedy has dated badly and the production plays it strangely like a black-and-white slapstick film. First things first: Sean O'Casey's tragicomedy set in civil war-torn Dublin in 1922 has dated badly; Succession star J. Smith-Cameron is splendid in it as tenement matriarch Juno; Mark Rylance, a quicksilver but collegiate actor at his excellent best, sadly continues his recent slide into mannered self-parody as Juno's feckless husband 'Captain' Jack Boyle. The play was radical in its time, depicting the battle for Irish independence through working-class lives. Today its juxtaposition of broad humour with sectarian violence and poverty jars, as do the thick-as-stout accents. Director Matthew Warchus accentuates the strangeness by giving his production the veneer of a black-and-white slapstick film, the cast in white pancake makeup and kohl-rimmed eyes. Rylance even sports a toothbrush moustache like Charlie Chaplin, Oliver Hardy or, um, Hitler. His drunkenly slurring performance is as broad as his 'tache is narrow. Captain Jack is a workshy, vainglorious "paycock" (peacock) of a man, spinning endless tales of a nonexistent seafaring career in pub snugs to his mate Joxer (Paul Hilton, uncomfortably miscast). Jack has a tendency to mutter asides to himself or to the Almighty, represented by a crucifix hung over the forestage. Rylance therefore treats the role as an extended in-joke between him and the audience, full of familiar tics: the side-eyed bravado, the abashed shiftiness, the guilty stutter. It's entertaining, but strangely selfish towards his fellow cast members. Smith-Cameron, meanwhile, convinces utterly as Juno, who is single-handedly keeping from penury her useless husband, a radical daughter who's on strike, and a son maimed in the independence struggle. Although the character often switches improbably from rage to docility, Smith-Cameron – a Broadway veteran before she became the mighty Gerri in Succession – maintains a steely, beady inner truth. You can't take your eyes off her, even when the focus inevitably reverts to Rylance. Jack, already ridiculous, becomes even more preeningly absurd when he hears of a possible inheritance from the smooth Bentham, a schoolteacher and theosophist (the discussion of Bentham's beliefs has also aged like milk). Young Mary Boyle (Aisling Kearns, strong) foolishly chooses Bentham over her comrade Jerry Devine, while her brother Johnny's fear of reprisals from his IRA comrades ramps up. Oppression, religion, politics and poverty conspire to destroy them. Like Joyce, O'Casey sees Ireland as an old sow that eats its young. But though the play has historic value and potent moments it feels hopelessly over the top in this staging. The comic locals who initially interrupt the action are increasingly augmented by dour

gunmen and grieving mothers. The interludes of song are frankly bizarre. In the third act, Rob Howell's impressionistic tenement set is torn apart to reveal a massive marble pieta, Mary mourning the dead Christ. Rylance hurls everything from the bannisters to the floorboards at Jack's final appearance. I wish Warchus had reined him in. And perhaps found a less rickety star vehicle to ferry Gerri – sorry, the theatrical grandmistress J – into the West End, great though it is to have her here. She shines – and outshines Rylance.

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

SOHOPLACE

******KYOTO by JOE MURPHY, JOE ROBERTSON director STEPHEN DALDRY, JUSTIN MARTIN décor MIRIAM BUETHER costume NATALIE PRYCE lights AIDEEN MALONE sound CHRISTOPHER REID video AKHILA KRISHNAN composer PAUL ENGLISHBY with STEPHEN KUNKEN don pearlman, KRISTIN ATHERTON germany, JENNA AUGEN shirley, OLIVIA BARROWCLOUGH secretariat, JORGE BOSCH raúl estrada-oyuela, NANCY CRANE usa, ANDREA GATCHALIAN kiribati, TOGO IGAWA japan, AÏCHA KOSSOKO tanzania, KWONG LOKE china, DALE RAPLEY bolin/gore/santer, RAAD RAWI saudi arabia, FERDY ROBERTS uk/houghton, DUNCAN WISEBY fred singer**

BLANCHE MARVIN CRITIQUE

Kyoto tackles quite brilliantly the very complex issue of climate change. Not exactly what one would normally think of as a subject for a play. It does so by using a villain as a protagonist, the US lawyer Don Pearlman, a lobbyist for a group of oil companies known as the Seven Sisters who is there to disrupt the climate negotiations. The plays covers the numerous conferences that took place between the countries of the world that led up to the signing of the Kyoto Treaty in 1997; the first treaty about climate change which was ultimately superseded by the Paris Treaty in 2015. The pettiness and nastiness of the negotiations is on full display often with comedic result as various country representatives argue about the use of a word or a punctuation point. Joe Murphy and Joe Robertson have written a piece that is fascinating and staged marvelously by Stephen Daldry and Justin Martin. It is an important and worthy production to see. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

TIME OUT (****) Written by Andrzej Lukowski

Kyoto, by Joe Murphy and Joe Robertson, is so indecently entertaining it almost feels like the result of a bet to choose the dullest, worthiest subject imaginable and make it as fun as humanly possible. The duo's second play together – following 2017's The Jungle – is about the Kyoto UN climate change conference of 1997, at which every country on the planet eventually agreed to curb its greenhouse emissions. It doesn't make you a climate-change skeptic to think that sounds boring. But the secret is that Kyoto is actually a play about a total bastard. Don Pearlman was a real oil lobbyist whose finger prints were all over climate conferences in the '90s. Rather brilliantly, Murphy and Robertson have made him their protagonist: it's not a worthy play about well-meaning people trying to stop climate change; it's about one man and a shady oil cartel's efforts to make sure nobody does anything about it. US actor Stephen Kunken is terrific as Pearlman, who we first meet in a scene set at George HW Bush's

inauguration. A junior official for the Reagan administration, lawyer Pearlman has vague plans to go on an extended break with his long-suffering wife Shirley (Jenna Augen), but is instead approached by a shady cabal of black-robed oil executives representing the so-called Seven Sisters, who warn him that an environmental pushback against Big Oil is brewing. Skeptical at first, Pearlman attends some sleepy late ’80s climate conferences and concludes the Sisters are right, and that he can do something about it. Though clearly money is a factor, what makes Kunken’s Pearlman so truly compelling is how personal this feels. Yes, he does have a sort of cranky Republican nihilism that makes him distrust the noble aims of climate scientists and their advocates. But he is also a passionate believer in America – as he explains at one point, he believes that expecting Americans to curb their consumption is an affront to everything America stands for, and he is earnestly convinced that America will simply be able to innovate its way through climate change. The first half of Stephen Daldry and Justin Martin's tremendously zippy production – which casts us all as delegates, with most of the action taking place on Miriam Buether’s giant conference table set– is not in fact about Kyoto at all, but rather the decade leading up to it. Pearlman moves through an endless string of climate conferences like a shark in a koi pond, his boundless cynicism, endless lawyer’s tricks, and willing partner in Saudi Arabia allowing him to effectively sabotage most of them, fostering international disagreement or bureaucratic quagmires. It’s only at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 that he’s given some pause for thought, noting with alarm determination to do something about climate change is becoming worryingly fashionable. The second half is a gleeful retelling of Kyoto itself, that’s partly about Pearlman, partly about the psychology of consensus – victory is snatched from the jaws of defeat, in large part because Argentine conference chairman Raúl Estrada-Oyuela takes a crafty nap and then more or less abducts the other, sleep-deprived delegates. Ultimately it’s not so much a play about what Kyoto achieved climate-wise as about the miracle that consensus was achieved at all – it’s a drama that both celebrates that and looks at the strange psychological sleight of hand that was required to bring it about. With its clippy, globe-hopping storytelling, entertaining barrage of factoids, dizzying array of historical figures in cameo roles (Angela Merkel! John Prescott!) and arch fourth-wall breaking, the vibe is definitely not a million miles away from a James Graham play. Which is a good thing. Murphy and Robertson aren’t quite as accomplished at being James Graham as James Graham is – but they’re close enough, and he can’t write about every single historical event. While betting big on Pearlman is in many ways the masterstroke, there are a couple of bumps as a result. There are moments where his presence does teeter close to feeling like a rhetorical device, simply there to snarl angrily as the Good Guys do some winning. And for such an unsentimental figure, you get the impression Murphy and Robertson are perhaps excessively fond of him, with a somewhat overlong, slight naff monologue from Augen serving as his eulogy. It’s not perfect, but it is a total thrill ride. Murphy and Robertson have said they want this to be the first in a trilogy of plays about climate conferences, which seems like a genuinely insane ambition, but there is no denying that they’ve got off to a rip roaring start.

VARIETY Written by David Benedict

As urgent and vital as it is, an investigation into international angles on climate change doesn’t sound remotely theatrical, let alone a race-to-the finish thriller. But

that is precisely what directors Stephen Daldry and Justin Martin achieve with Joe Murphy and Joe Robertson's strikingly smart "Kyoto." Plays with as much necessary information as this — it covers ten years of increasingly vexed negotiations climaxing in 1997 at the third COP (Conference of the Parties) — require a heavy degree of information delivery, usually handled via a narrator. And in a wearyingly earnest version of a story about the state of the planet, that narrator would be a heroic character predictably preaching to the choir about how an agreement to curb the behaviour of wicked fossil fuel companies was reached. Murphy and Robertson's masterstroke is to banish all such expectation and instead have the story narrated by a villain. Political with both a lowercase and capital P, this is the fierce story of how the very first global treaty in which countries large and small agreed to reduce CO_2 emissions came to pass. It's not told not by the good guys; it's delivered to us by Don Pearlman (Stephen Kunken), an American lawyer and ex-government strategist working for the "seven sisters" — the major oil company head honchos — who are aiming for a very different outcome. With twenty minutes deftly shorn from it since its Stratford-upon-Avon premiere last year at the Royal Shakespeare Company, the increasingly lickety-split pacing makes it even clearer that the play's focus is not the details of the argument. Yes, this is a play focusing on climate change, but its real subject is the perilous journey from fixed beliefs to necessary compromise. Horse-trading, ends vs. means, and how understanding and movement can be effected are what it is really all about. This isn't about the environment: it's cut-throat diplomacy. On Miriam Buether's raised, circular set — doubling as a conference table at which international delegates (and members of the audience) sit and a multi-location acting arena — key players are swiftly introduced, examined and given, literally, space to reveal their positions. But although that suggests flat exposition, the hallmark of the production is its dynamism. It could all be horribly schematic but once the playwrights have set up each country's lead representative, sparks begin to fly. As Don states near the opening, covering ten years of negotiations turned into two-hours-and thirty-five minutes of drama means dialogue, discussions and personalities have necessarily been changed. Character, excitingly in opposition to one another, begin to emerge. Nancy Crane is magnificently waspish as the oh-so-reasonable, power-wielding US representative (an amalgam of real-life figures), all sculpted hair and faux sincerity. Aïcha Kossoko brings simple gravitas to the Tanzanian representative, Kristin Atherton has fun with a sharp-tongued Angela Merkel, and Dale Rapley switches between Al Gore and a truth-telling journalist (and more) with delightful ease and weight. An all-seeing Jorge Bosch is wholly convincing as the long-suffering Argentinian chairman who, at the end of his tether and to everyone's astonishment, vanishes in desperation from the climactic discussion. He's been guided by Ferdy Roberts as the famously blunt UK minister John Prescott, who is one of many characters who bring unexpected wit to the production. Indeed, the the production's least likely and most welcome element is the laughter it evokes. The growing absurdity of everyone's behavior is, surprisingly, extraordinarily funny, best of all in the late stages. Everything turns joyously surreal as all the delegates hurls one-liners at each other in a hilarious, fast-paced fantasia on the absolute high-seriousness of every conceivable piece of punctuation within a single paragraph. Although the play is bookended by Don and his family, as represented by his wife (a plainspeaking and gently touching Jenna Augen), the fact that his trajectory through the talks has an unexpected conclusion puts a unique twist on what might otherwise be seen as straightforward documentary.

Transferred into London's @Soho Place in-the- round theater for a limited run after its well-received premiere, it looks wildly likely to continue its journey, in every sense, across continents. As urgent and vital as it is, an investigation into international angles on climate change doesn't sound remotely theatrical, let alone a race-to-the finish thriller. But that is precisely what directors Stephen Daldry and Justin Martin achieve with Joe Murphy and Joe Robertson's strikingly smart "Kyoto." Plays with as much necessary information as this — it covers ten years of increasingly vexed negotiations climaxing in 1997 at the third COP (Conference of the Parties) — require a heavy degree of information delivery, usually handled via a narrator. And in a wearyingly earnest version of a story about the state of the planet, that narrator would be a heroic character predictably preaching to the choir about how an agreement to curb the behaviour of wicked fossil fuel companies was reached. Murphy and Robertson's masterstroke is to banish all such expectation and instead have the story narrated by a villain. Political with both a lowercase and capital P, this is the fierce story of how the very first global treaty in which countries large and small agreed to reduce CO_2 emissions came to pass. It's not told not by the good guys; it's delivered to us by Don Pearlman (Stephen Kunken), an American lawyer and ex-government strategist working for the "seven sisters" — the major oil company head honchos — who are aiming for a very different outcome. With twenty minutes deftly shorn from it since its Stratford-upon-Avon premiere last year at the Royal Shakespeare Company, the increasingly lickety-split pacing makes it even clearer that the play's focus is not the details of the argument. Yes, this is a play focusing on climate change, but its real subject is the perilous journey from fixed beliefs to necessary compromise. Horse-trading, ends vs. means, and how understanding and movement can be effected are what it is really all about. This isn't about the environment: it's cut-throat diplomacy. On Miriam Buether's raised, circular set — doubling as a conference table at which international delegates (and members of the audience) sit and a multi-location acting arena — key players are swiftly introduced, examined and given, literally, space to reveal their positions. But although that suggests flat exposition, the hallmark of the production is its dynamism. It could all be horribly schematic but once the playwrights have set up each country's lead representative, sparks begin to fly. As Don states near the opening, covering ten years of negotiations turned into two-hours-and thirty-five minutes of drama means dialogue, discussions and personalities have necessarily been changed. Character, excitingly in opposition to one another, begin to emerge. Nancy Crane is magnificently waspish as the oh-so-reasonable, power-wielding US representative (an amalgam of real-life figures), all sculpted hair and faux sincerity. Aïcha Kossoko brings simple gravitas to the Tanzanian representative, Kristin Atherton has fun with a sharp-tongued Angela Merkel, and Dale Rapley switches between Al Gore and a truth-telling journalist (and more) with delightful ease and weight. An all-seeing Jorge Bosch is wholly convincing as the long-suffering Argentinian chairman who, at the end of his tether and to everyone's astonishment, vanishes in desperation from the climactic discussion. He's been guided by Ferdy Roberts as the famously blunt UK minister John Prescott, who is one of many characters who bring unexpected wit to the production. Indeed, the the production's least likely and most welcome element is the laughter it evokes. The growing absurdity of everyone's behavior is, surprisingly, extraordinarily funny, best of all in the late stages. Everything turns joyously surreal as all the delegates hurls one-liners at each other in a hilarious, fast-paced fantasia on the

absolute high-seriousness of every conceivable piece of punctuation within a single paragraph. Although the play is bookended by Don and his family, as represented by his wife (aplainspeaking and gently touching Jenna Augen), the fact that his trajectory through the talks has an unexpected conclusion puts a unique twist on what might otherwise be seen as straightforward documentary. Transferred into London's @Soho Place in-the-round theater for a limited run after its well-received premiere, it looks wildly likely to continue its journey, in every sense, across continents.

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

SOHOPLACE

*****WHITE RABBIT RED RABBIT by NASSIM SOLEIMANPOUR with NICK MOHAMMED, MATTHEW BAYNTON, JILL HALFPENNY, MICHAEL SHEEN, DAISY EDGAR JONES, PEARL MACKIE, BEN BAILEY SMITH, JASON ISAACS, OLLY ALEXANDER, KATE FLEETWOOD, ALFRED ENOCH, JOHN BISHOP, TONIA SOTIROPOULOU, JONATHAN PRYCE, KEITH ALLEN, RICHARD GAAD, OMARI DOUGLAS, ALAN DAVIES, SALLY PHILLIPS, CATHERINE TATE, FREEMA AGYEMAN, JULIE HESMONDHALGH, JOE DEMPSIE, CALLUM SCOTT HOWELLS, HARRIET WALTER, TOBY JONES, STEPHEN MERCHANT, NAOKO MORI, TANYA REYNOLDS, ANDJOA ANDOH, RALF LITTLE, TRACY-ANN OBERMAN, MATT LUCAS, KATE PHILLIPS, MIRIAM MARGOLYES, PALOMA FAITH, STOCKARD CHANNING, SANJEEV BASKHAR, SHEILA ATIM, RORY KINNEAR, LENNY HENRY, MINNIE DRIVER, AMBIKA MOD, DOUGLAS HENSHALL, KATHERINE PARKINSON, DENISE COUGH**

Blanche Marvin Critique

It's been described as the play nobody's allowed to talk about. White Rabbit Red Rabbit. All you know going in, is this: it was written by an Iranian playwright named Nassim Soleimanpour who, at the time of writing, was unable to leave his country. He had refused to complete his mandatory military service – wanting to focus on his career instead – and so was denied a passport. Rabbit was his response to being denied his freedom to leave. To roam. White rabbit destroys red rabbit. He was a young man when he was trapped by the government. This piece has travelled over 20 years and is yet another revival. Michael Sheen plays the interpreter. Enclosed are other critic's reviews.

Time Out (***) Written by Caroline McGinn

As Nassim Soleimanpour's 14-year-old cold read smash transfers to the West End it remains compelling but mercurial. If you want to grab one of the few remaining tickets left for this show you should ignore my rating and go along with an open mind. Maybe don't read this review either. Of course I will avoid spoilers but it is probably better to know as little as possible. Still here? OK, I'll explain. White Rabbit, Red Rabbit is a play in an envelope. Each night a new actor arrives onstage. The actor has never seen the script before. On my night it was Ghosts star, Mathew Baynton (pictured in theatre). But maybe you'll catch Minnie Driver or Michael Sheen. Whoever they are, they must open the envelope and read. Iranian playwright Nassim Soleimanpour wrote the script 14 years ago and it was first performed around the time of the Arab Spring. There are some references to Iran which feel a bit different

now - although similar themes are in play in our current moment of history. The play is really a moral fable which raises interesting questions like: how much of life is scripted for us by others or by our context? How much choice do we really have about how to live and therefore how to die? When asked to do things we may not want to do, how far will our obedience go? And yes - that last question does imply that there will be audience participation and plenty of it. Claps to the long list of great actors who take on this challenge. And to the willing victims from the audience too. On the night I went, it felt like everyone was eager to see an intimate acting masterclass. Baynton is a fantastic light comic actor and he made it funny. I can't tell you exactly how, but his ostrich impression is banging. Other actors might be more grave, get into the tragicomic vein. There's no director but if anyone from the production team is reading this, then how about giving the actor more help from the lighting? The performer is super-exposed in every way, on a three-sided stage under lights that never dim, that give them nowhere to lurk or to gather a mystery and menace. As well as laughter, there are shadows in the play. I'd like to have seen more of them.

London Theatre (****) Written by Holly O'Mahony

The play I'm reviewing here is not the one you'll see if you book for this latest revival of White Rabbit Red Rabbit. How can it be, when the show famously has a different actor performing every night and no one steering the production from the director's chair? That's part of the magic of Nassim Soleimanpour's 2011 play: each performance is a daring, one-off theatrical experience that relies on its sole actor not having read the script beforehand – and the audience (and reviewers) not giving away its secrets. It's a thrilling piece of experimental theatre with the potential to burrow down an infinite number of interpretive holes each time it's performed. On press night, it's actor-comedian and Ted Lasso star Nick Mohammed who strides onto the stage, met by conspiratorial, expectant cheers from the audience. He furrows his brow performatively before launching into a script designed to tease and ridicule whoever's hand it is in, as well as challenging them to think on their feet. Over the next 65 minutes, we watch him interact with pre-placed props and rope in audience members while delivering a text that, through allegory and a recurring motif involving the titular rabbits, explores obedience and control. While the story on the page is top secret, the one behind Soleimanpour's first 'cold-read play' – a formula he's expanded on in subsequent works – is now legend: he wrote it from Iran, his birth country, while refusing to do the compulsory two-year military service that would have granted him a passport. It's since been translated into more than 30 languages, performed at 235 theatres (as well as in classrooms, prisons and war bunkers), and by over 3,000 actors – many of whom are celebrities. Whoopi Goldberg, Cynthia Nixon and Nathan Lane are among a number of household names who have given it a go. And a big part of the appeal of catching a performance is watching your celebrity of choice be put on the spot, tackling the play's material in real time – and, arguably, living out every actor's nightmare of appearing on stage having not learned their lines. Among the 46-strong line-up performing in this current West End run are national treasures Michael Sheen, Lenny Henry and Catherine Tate, as well as rising stars Daisy Edgar-Jones, Olly Alexander and Baby Reindeer's Richard Gadd. How will they take to it? Only those watching on the night will know. White Rabbit Red Rabbit is protest theatre, but Soleimanpour's script employs classic Brechtian 'spass' to balance dark with light. Intimidation techniques are masked as games, and people are substituted for animals

to lend their plight a sense of whimsy. Mohammed nails both the humour and the sorrow. He takes the script at a lick, for the most part, but when one anecdote takes a particularly dark turn, he falls silent and walks for several paces against the slowly rotating stage, giving the revelation a moment to fully resonate. Tomorrow night's actor will respond differently, as will whoever who picks up the envelope after them, and the actors who bravely sign up to future revivals in years to come. It's a cleverly timeless piece, echoing authoritarian oppression the world over. Still, catch this rabbit while you can – who knows when it will next hop onto a stage near you.

The Guardian (***) Written by David Jays

Nassim Soleimanpour's experiment in live theatre has a different performer discover the script for the first time each night – but Sheen is especially well suited to its mix of bunny-themed whimsy and rousing exhortation. assim Soleimanpour's 2010 play has been performed in more than 30 languages and, like many of the Iranian theatre-maker's projects, it's a cold-read show – delivered by someone who hasn't seen or rehearsed the script. There is a frisson when a performer relying on their wits and an audience unsure of what to expect encounter a text for the very first time. This theatre is in the round, so there is an unhurried revolve – the only flourish for a show that unfolds under unchanging light, on a stage that is bare save for two glasses of water on a red metal table, and a chair holding a large red envelope. Every show has a different performer pull the script from the envelope. I see Michael Sheen, who takes a comically deep breath as he turns the first page. He boggles slightly at some of the stage directions – and yes, he will be asked to impersonate an ostrich – but although it sounds like an ordeal, Soleimanpour isn't out to get the guest performer. Olly Alexander, Miriam Margolyes, Adjoa Andoh and Paloma Faith will all follow in this starry Soho run. Each will undoubtedly bring their own qualities but the work suits Sheen's gift for whimsy, indignation and rousing exhortation. He also navigates an eager-beaver crowd projecting a giggly, almost protective energy towards him: there are no shortage of volunteers for audience participation. A weave of rabbit-based fables, the piece is "not so much a play as an experiment", Soleimanpour has explained. What does it investigate? We're asked to consider risk, complicity and conformity, but ultimately White Rabbit Red Rabbit explores the laws of live theatre – the way in which an audience let disbelief ebb and flow; our pleasure in watching an event take shape even without rehearsal. And if there's an unforeseen accident – well that only heightens our pleasure. Now based in Berlin, Soleimanpour wrote the play, his text says, in the city of Shiraz in 2010. It is moving to ponder the journeys of this text sent out from a repressive state. Perhaps inevitably, performed in the heart of London's entertainment district, it skews playful rather than grave – it can't quite manage the high stakes it invokes.

*sub*SIDISED

CURRENT – NEW **London Theatreviews**

ARCOLA

*****THE DOUBLE ACT by MARK JAGASIA director OSCAR PEARCE décor SARAH BEATON, costumes KATHERINE WATT, lights MATT HASKINS, sound designer DAN BALFOUR Movement director SIAN WILLIAMS with NIGEL BETTS Billy, NIGEL COOKE, Cliff, EDWARD HOGG Gulliver**

Blanche Marvin Critique
A surreal and macabre exploration of revenge and its consequences, with quite a few laughs along the way

'Billy & Biddle' were a relatively successful comedy duo in the 60s and 70s. Unlike their contemporaries Morecombe & Wise these two toured the northern club circuit with material that would never have found its place in mainstream family entertainment. The traditional relationship of Bully and Clown continued on stage and off until an incident with an air pistol in a dressing room resulted in the Clown (Cliff) losing the sight in his right eye. The partnership foundered and the Bully (Billy) went on to achieve greater success, and greater opprobrium.

The story begins for us in a grotty seaside flat were Cliff after several court appearances for sexual misconduct and severe mental problems, is looked after by "an angel" called Gulliver who seemingly found him crying in the streets of Saltmouth and the ex-partner (Billy) has arrived with Gulliver's consent, after decades apart, to see how Cliff is surviving. The trio of actors gives masterful performances with a text that is peppered with double entendres, red herrings and surreal gothic overtones. Nigel Cooke as 'Cliff' has the hardest role and manages to handle all the twists and turns which reflect his mental instability and anxieties, with great aplomb. Billy played by Nigel Betts begins the play full of pomposity, ego and filth, in a spectacular white suit and finish the play on the settee clutching his ex-partner, trembling with fear. He carries all the prejudices one would expect and so his material is composed of the clichés of sexism, foreigners, looney leftists and of course anti- Brexitiers. Gulliver, the "angel" admirably played by Edward Hogg, with a camp, psychotic frenzy, turns out to be an instrument of revenge having harboured resentment against the comedians after his family was all killed on a trip to see their show. He begins the piece as a caring friend and ends as a demented devil.

The script is full of excellent one-liners and repostes, and references all the other comics of the era like Bobby Davroe and Freddie Star. Every theme of our present society is touched on: racism, woke, climate change, homophobia, et al and this reduces rather than heightens the dynamic of the piece. And despite the fact that come the apocalyptic end you are glad to get away from these sad and dangerous madmen, it was a pleasant two hours of informed entertainment where one was able to laugh at remarks that in a stand-up routine would have been offensive.

The Stage (**) Written by Tom Wicker**
Directed by Oscar Pearce, this is journalist Mark Jagasia's second full-length play at the Arcola Theatre, after his debut, Clarion, in 2015. It is very much in the vein of Steve Pemberton and Reece Shearsmith's TV comedy-horror series Inside No. 9. But this gleefully weird slice of seaside Gothic about an embittered comedy double act has post-Brexit Britain firmly in its sights. Middle-aged comedian Billy (Nigel Betts) has long left behind his days as part of late-1970s comedy duo Biddle and Bash. He is busy relishing his social media resurgence as "Britain's Third Most Offensive Comedian". So, he's hugely reluctant to find himself in the rundown home of his former comedy partner, Cliff (Nigel Cooke), in the faded seaside town of Saltmouth, during a tour of his show. He's there at the behest of Cliff's lodger and superfan Gulliver (Edward Hogg) and is worried about dark secrets from the past resurfacing. Double acts are rich dramatic territory, and Jagasia has huge fun laying waste to an era of comedy rife with hair-raising bigotry, including cringing callbacks to the likes of Jim Davidson as Billy rails against "political correctness". The ignoble past is

suffocatingly present in the sheer weight of references that Billy and Cliff fling at each other. The play cannily draws connections between 1970s comedy and the ugly, post-Brexit rise of far-right TikTok stars who hide behind 'plain-speaking'.The play's feverishly ludicrous tone and plot twist may not be for everyone. But the nightmarish way that both Jagasia's writing and Pearce's production mimic the rhythm of Billy and Cliff's era of comedy skewers its grotesqueness more effectively than playing it straight. It's a cracked vision of Britain as a degraded sketch show – one whose awful social legacy has become a reality again.This sense of cultural collapse pervades Sarah Beaton's set. Cliff's flat is a scuffed, shambolic and mausoleum-like shrine to the tat and the tack of the past. As the fluid hues of Matt Haskins' lighting design drop us somewhere between memory and reality, there's great sound design from Dan Balfour, as we hear a growing storm and every creak of Saltmouth pier. Betts perfectly inhabits Billy's bullying, sciatica-stricken bluster, while Cooke plays Cliff like a broken toy; at one point, he appears dressed as Noddy. They're like human wreckage, washed up together. Hogg, meanwhile, nearly steals the play as Gulliver, gliding around the flat and slyly insinuating himself into their squalid relationship, his true motive for being there hidden in the guise of a supporting role. Behind the knowingly pitched campiness of his delivery is someone mocked and abused, waiting to strike back.

The Telegraph (*****) Written by Lindsay Johns

The 19th-century French novelist Stendhal famously dedicated his books "to the happy few" – those he supposedly felt would understand them. Watching The Double Act, one gets the impression that former journalist turned playwright Mark Jagasia is writing for a similarly self-selecting, enlightened demographic, one that relishes complexity (and rejects the facile Manichaean labels that society often attaches to people), and humour too. In this brave, intelligent, darkly funny mixture of gothic satire, revenge tragedy and existential thriller, Billy Bash and Cliff Biddle, a 1980s comedy double act, are reunited after long, bitter years of estrangement when Billy returns to the decaying Northern seaside resort of Saltmouth for the final night of his sell-out national tour and visits his former partner. Following their acrimonious split 40 years ago after a cocaine-fuelled accident left him blind in one eye, Cliff now lives as an unhinged recluse in a shabby maisonette, whereas Billy has gone on to pursue a lucrative solo career. Ostensibly a play about the purpose of comedy, what is deemed to be offensive and the appalling, real-life human consequences of racist or homophobic humour, it also offers a profound meditation on good and evil ("God and the Devil – the original double act"), damnation, redemption and retribution alongside some intense metaphysical speculation. With strong shades of Osborne's The Entertainer, Sartre's Huis Clos and the brooding menace of early Pinter, and replete with literary allusions (from Poe to Hamlet), The Double Act is an elegy for a lost England that thoughtfully questions the validity of self-righteous "wokerati" cancel culture. Nigel Betts is exceptional as Billy, "Britain's third most offensive comic", an irascible, bigoted Northerner perhaps modelled on Bernard Manning, who shamelessly panders to his core audience of "antediluvian louts and dirtbags" who revel in "jokes the snowflakes choke on". (Be warned: some of the gags are excruciatingly dark and uncomfortable.) Nigel Cooke is suitably dishevelled and broken as Cliff, his erstwhile sidekick, now fallen on hard times. His ethereal Kate Bush homage – in which he's poignantly dressed as Noddy the clown – is a delight. Edward Hogg is joyously convincing as Gulliver, Cliff's lodger-cum-amanuensis, a "psychotic, Leftie homosexual bent on vengeance" whose prancing, Mephistophelean sneer and maniacal glint all bring to mind a gloriously camp Tom Ripley. Directed with verve and pace by Oscar Pearce, the production never flags, admirably aided by Sarah Beaton's

evocative set design – a grubby, down-at-heel living room, complete with fading poster of the duo in their heyday. Billed as a "tale of guilt, ambition and the ghosts of British show-business", the play deftly captures a bygone zeitgeist, while skilfully articulating the fragility of comedians' egos, and the existential pain and moral ugliness that can lie behind their laughter. Highly recommended.

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

HAMPSTEAD

*****THE INVENTION OF LOVE by TOM STOPPARD director BLANCHE McINTYRE décor MORGAN LARGE lights PETER MUMFORD composer/sound designer MAX PAPPENHEIM movement director POLLY BENNETT with SIMON RUSSEL BEALE a.e.housman, DICKIE BEAU oscar wilde, STEPHEN BOXER jowett/labouchère, JONNIE BROADBENT peter/harris, SEAMUS DILLANE pollard, FLORENCE DOBSON katharine housman, PETER LANDI pattison/postgate, BEN LLOYD-HUGHES jackson, MICHAEL MARCUS chamberlain/ellis, DOMINIC ROWAN ruskin/stead/jerome, MATTHEW TENNYSON housman, ALAN WILLIAMS charon**

Blanche Marvin Critique
Tom Stoppard has decided to explore the whole issue of love as regarding the particular poets AE Housman. One has to sit solemnly and in deep concentration in order to follow all the essences of love that are explored by Housman and follow the exploration by Stoppard. To analyse it fully and much more fruitfully read the attached reviews from Time Out and The Guardian.

Time Out (***) Written by Andrzej Lukowski
Fresh off the back of his peerless Arcadia and pretty much the pre-eminent playwright of his day, in 1997 Tom Stoppard could have scored a hit if he'd released the phone directory as his new play, provided he'd added a few Stoppardian quips. And in some ways that's kind of what he did. There is much to admire about the three-hour The Invention of Love, and I'm glad I got a chance to see it in Blanche McIntrye's sturdy Hampstead Theatre revival. I don't think the word 'boring' is fair. But it's certainly dense. As Stoppard himself says in the programme's accompanying interview: 'you wouldn't write it now, and [if you did] nobody would put it on… how many people now would share a sharp appetite for Latin scholarship..?'. Concerned with the life of Victorian classicist and poet AE Housman, its focus is his Oxford days. Here we see the younger version of the man (Matthew Tennyson) revelling in academia and his own burgeoning brilliance while struggling personally with his feelings for BFF Moses Jackson (Ben Lloyd-Hughes) and the broader paradox that the Victorian society that so revered the Greeks of old was also hostile of the homosexuality – not yet a word – that the Greeks celebrated (though quite how hostile the Victorians really were is an intriguing question that – like many things in this play – Stoppard explores at some length). There is a lot of dizzying cleverness here, but there is also a lot about conjugation (like, a lot), and heaps of digressive scenes about Oxford masters and Victorian MPs, scheming away. Why digressive? Well because we're notionally in the afterlife – or possibly a deathbed hallucination – in which the elder Housman (the redoubtable Simon Russell Beale) trades droll banter with Alan Williams's dour Stygian ferryman Charon. Tossing in scenes of John Ruskin et al gossiping about the students when Housman never witnessed this happening just feels a tad extra when you're pushing the three hour mark. There is the sense that the underworld stuff is just flashy window dressing, although it's certainly not unwelcome. Beale is typically wonderful, not least in his big, rueful setpiece dialogue with the younger version of

himself. But it's a fairly light role for an actor of his stature; his co-star Tennyson is solid as the younger Housman, but he's just not in Beale's league. Meanwhile McIntyre's production is elegant but fairly barebones – beyond the device of Charon it feels starved of a certain amount of razzle dazzle. Housman is a fascinating figure and what Stoppard is trying to say about love, language, queerness and our relationship with our own pasts and the classical past is intriguing. The lingering background presence of Oscar Wilde is smartly done: a sort of uninhibited negative to the buttoned up Housman, he is gossiped about constantly but only appears late on, in a haunting turn from avant-cabaret performer Dickie Beau. It's worth watching, but it's somewhat sloggy, and I wonder if for once a more conventional playwright might have articulated this all in a more gripping, incisive fashion. But then it's unlikely anyone else would have possibly thought of writing this. Ultimately, there is no Tom Stoppard play or Simon Russell Beale performance unworthy of your time.

The Guardian (***) Written by David Jays

A man arrives at the underworld. "I'm dead, then," says AE Housman. "Good." Tom Stoppard's 1997 play conjures the poet and classicist, whose heart and mind were brimming but who never quite lived – decades-long adoration for a man who couldn't love him back, searing poetry which he undervalued, a capacity for love which never sang. Simon Russell Beale's elderly Housman looks back at Matthew Tennyson, wonderfully beady and forlorn as his younger self, in thrall to his oblivious pal Moses Jackson (Ben Lloyd-Hughes). The quicksilver Russell Beale is a vocal glory, leaping in a breath from flute to poignant bassoon, from wit to sorrow. There's a whirlpool floor on Morgan Large's hades-dark set, and Blanche McIntyre's ardent production keeps the action in flux, its undergraduates messing about in boats. But she pins the characters down for key conversations. Old Housman counsels young, grey suits tightly buttoned and wedged into a small wooden bench; later, on a chaise longue, he encounters the exiled Oscar Wilde (a lapidary Dickie Beau). Wilde seems to have lost everything, but refuses pity: "Better a fallen rocket than never a burst of light." s a scholar, Housman resists blundering posterity, restores the purity of Latin texts, conjures poetry lost to oblivion. A beautiful speech describes fragments surviving like poppies spared the reaper, standing alone in a field of cut corn. Stoppard cherishes the work of language – his title suggests the way love poetry gives us a language for emotion. Language also creates sexuality: choruses of Victorian gents chunter about beastliness, platonic enthusiasm or brothers in arms. Dons footle about with croquet mallets and pronounce on the passions (though only in theory), while billiard-playing worthies boast about their campaigns for decency. These scenes don't fly: Stoppard takes our knowledge of and interest in them too much for granted. "My life was marked by long silences," Housman notes, more than once. Finally unpacking his heart, Tennyson's eyes screw tight, his voice heavy as much with grief as devotion. Love, says Russell Beale, is like "a piece of ice held fast in the fist": a tormenting perplexity that burns as it freezes.

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

NATIONAL THEATRE – OLIVIER

******BALLET SHOES by KENDALL FEAVER book NOEL STREATFEILD director KATY RUDD dramaturg NINA STEIGER composer ASAF ZOHAR orchestrations, dance arrangements GAVIN SUTHERLAND décor FRANKIE BRADSHAW costume SAMUEL WYER lights PAUL CONSTABLE sound IAN DICKINSON for AUTOGRAPH video ASH J WOODWARD choreographer ELLEN**

KANE, GAVIN SUTHERLAND fight director HARUKA KURODA with ERYCK BRAHMANIA ensemble, CORDELIA BRAITHWAITE ensemble, COURTNEY GEORGE ensemble/understudy petrova fossil & pauline fossil, GRACE SAIF pauline fossil, HELENA LYMBERY doctor jakes, JENNY GALLOWAY nana (miss guthridge), JUSTIN SALINGER gum/fidolia, KATIE LEE off-stage swing, MICHELLE CORNELIUS ensemble, NADINE HIGGIN theo dane, NUWAN HUGH PERERA pianist/ensemble/understudy jai saran, PEARL MACKIE sylvia (garnie), PHILIP LABEY ensemble/understudy gum & madame fidolia, SHAROL MACKENZIE understudy posy fossil/ensemble, SID SAGAR jai saran, SONYA CULLINGFORD winifred/ensemble, XOLISWEH ANA RICHARDS katerina federovsky/ensemble, YANEXI ENRIQUEZ petrova fossil, LUKE CINQUE-WHITE off-stage swing, STACY ABALOGUN ensemble, GEORGES HANN the prince/ensemble, DAISY SEQUERRA posy fossil, KATIE SINGH ensemble/understudy sylvia (garnie)

Blanche Marvin Critique
Great uncle Matthew (GUM) is a bachelor palaeontologist and an explorer. He has to adopt his great niece Sylvia and she is raised by him and his housekeeper Nana. Three times he returns from expeditions with and abandoned baby and they are named Pauline, Petrov and Posy. GUM goes off on another expedition and doesn't return and he is assumed dead. Sylvia takes in two lodgers to keep the house going. Winifred, an American dancer gets the children enrolled at ballet school. Dr Jakes, a lesbian whose partner has died teaches Pauline how to act. Eventually GUM returns and the girls continue pursuing their ambitious dreams. Posie goes to Paris with Nana to study at a famous ballet school. Pauline goes to America to become a movie star, and Petrov goes to Croydon to learn how to fly a plane. This is a highly complicated storyline with so many characters moving in so many directions but it's full of imaginative staging. Enclosed are other critic's reviews.

Time Out (***) Written by Andrzej Lukowski
The National Theatre's big family Christmas show is a sumptuous adaptation of Noel Streatfeild's classic 1936 children's novel Ballet Shoes. It's slick, classy and meticulously directed by Katy Rudd. But ultimately it lacks dramatic punch.
The story follows the eccentric household initially headed by Justin Salinger's Great Uncle Matthew (aka GUM), a paleontologist in the old-school explorer vein. A confirmed bachelor, he is initially aghast when he is abruptly made legal guardian of his 11-year-old niece Sylvia (Pearl Mackie). But he soon changes his tune when freak circumstances lead to him taking in three baby girls: Petrova (Yanexi Enriquez), Pauline (Grace Self) and Posy (Daisy Sequerra), each of whom he found orphaned while out on an expedition. But then he disappears on one of his trips; the meat of the story is about his three daughters growing up in the unconventional, almost entirely female household headed by Sylvia and their redoubtable housekeeper Miss Guthridge (Jenny Galloway). Each girl's life is defined by seemingly having a calling that they are simply born with: Pauline to be an actor, Petrova to be a mechanic, and Posy to be a dancer, spurred on by the titular ballet shoes left to her by her mother.
To be honest… that's sort of the whole plot. On a beautiful, fossil-filled set from Frankie Bradshaw, Rudd directs gracefully, pepping things up with various plays within the play, most notably an amusingly weird retro sci-fi version of A Midsummer Night's Dream. The three women's journey to self realisation is enjoyable to watch, but sort of in the same way as a good cup of tea is nice to drink - there isn't really a huge amount of drama there. Partially I think this is because the adaptation from rising

star Australian playwright Kendall Feaver is a bit of a missed opportunity. She doesn't interrogate the somewhat dated, British Empire-era original text, but rather blurs it into a soft focus that's more PC, but not in a particularly pointed way. It's littered with minor anachronisms that seem designed to make it less obvious that it's set in the 1930s, but it also ends up saying that's when it's set anyway. If you're going to change stuff, maybe do it with a bit more purpose. It's a classy night at the theatre that purrs smoothly but rarely thrills, hung up on ideas of nurture versus nature that are less interesting to our society than Streatfeild's. You'd have to be a stone not to feel something as each girl receives her final vindication, but while they're memorable characters, their arcs feel pre-programmed and predictable. The story is beloved, but this production never makes the case for it as an all time classic.

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

When I was a boy I thought Ballet Shoes was for girls: a story of poor strivers desperate to don a tutu. This delicious show about three female foundlings forging their own identities, and a makeshift family, in a house full of oddballs in interwar London absolutely bowled me over. Based on Noel Streatfeild's 1936 novel but tweaked and modernised by adapter Kendall Feaver, it's suffused with gung-ho spirit, exuberance and larky wit. Above all, it tells young girls (and by extension, boys) they can be whatever they want to be, and mounts a powerful defence of the arts. One of Streatfeild's young heroines, Petrova (Yanexi Enriquez) is a natural mechanic who wants to be a pilot. But that doesn't mean wannabe ballerina Posy (Daisy Sequerra) or talented actress Pauline (Grace Saif) should look for a job in cyber. Katy Rudd's production may not have the dazzle and snark of last year's NT Christmas hit, The Witches, but in its celebration of plucky women and old-school values – personal and theatrical – it never puts a foot wrong. The acting ensemble is excellent, the choreography (by Ellen Kane) and stagecraft sublime, and Frankie Bradshaw's sets wonderfully simple. There are a plethora of in-jokes and references (to ballet, Bauhaus and Peter Brook, among others) that will delight those in the know yet still amuse those who aren't. Eccentric paleontologist-explorer Matthew Brown (Justin Salinger) is exasperated when his orphaned great-niece Sylvia (Pearl Mackie) is foisted on him aged 11. He in turn lumbers her with three baby girls saved from various perils on his international jaunts while she's still a child. Supported by housekeeper and proxy 'Nana' Miss Guthridge (Jenny Galloway) Syliva learns plumbing, electrics and dressmaking. She keeps the impoverished household at 999 Cromwell Road afloat by letting rooms to boarders including a lesbian doctor of literature and an Indian mechanic who prove useful to her young charges. Here, Feaver and Rudd streamline characters from the book, but also put Streatfeild's coded messages of tolerance and individualism out front. The bratty child-acting of the three leads is by-the-numbers at first, but soon deepens. These girls never knew their parents: all adopted the surname Fossil, in honour or their paleontological surroundings. They don't like each other but learn to rub along and then love each other when their respective callings strike. Their need to work to save the family home feels as relevant today as it did in the 1930s. The three young leads are great together but each gets a moment in the spotlight: Enriquez soaring into the auditorium on a flying harness; Sequerra dancing a solo; Saif showing us how nuance and interpretation matter in acting. Salinger plays all the grown-up, authoritarian roles, including Posy's female mentors and Pauline'simpatient male directors, to hilarious effect. Mackie is heartbreakingly affecting as Sylvia, Sid Sagar irresistible as the Indian lodger who woos her. I feared Ballet Shoes would feel old fashioned. Growing up, my sister and her friends loved it, while boys shunned it. I'm glad to finally make its acquaintance in this superlative staging. No notes. Bravo.

ROYAL COURT

*****MANHUNT writer, director ROBERT ICKE ssistant director ANNA RYDER décor HILDEGARD BECHTLER costume supervisor LUCY WALSHAW lights AZUSA ONO sound TOM GIBBONS video ASH J WOODWARD fight KEV McCURDY with SAMUEL EDWARD-COOK raoul moat, TREVOR FOX paul gascoine, LEO JAMES chris brown, PATRICIA JONES cast, DANNY KIRRANE police negotiator, ANGELA LONSDALE cast, SALLY MESSHAM samantha stobbart, NICOLAS TENNANT david rathband, JATHAN JAGO boy, ODHRAN RIDDELL boy, ZOE BRYAN girl, MADELAINE McKENNA girl**

Blanche Marvin Critique
Manhunt is based on the Britain's biggest real-life manhunt for Raoul Moat after he attacked and wounded his ex-girlfriend, murdered her new boyfriend and blinded a police officer. It is written and directed by Robert Icke, a brilliant director whose new takes on the classics have received much acclaim. This is his first attempt at writing and it shows. The mounting of the production has Icke's usual great direction but the plotting is unwieldy and secondary storylines about other characters are not integrated properly into the play. It could have done with some additional work to make it more cohesive. The other issue is that Icke has chosen to be impartial about presenting the facts as well as some of the imagined scenes that never happened. The result is a lack of point of view which makes the piece seem wishy-washy. What is this play really about? Toxic masculinity? A murderer full of self-pity. I think Icke needs to decide what it's about. Enclosed are other critic's reviews.

Evening Standard (***) Written by Nick Curtis
Can Raoul Moat - who shot and wounded his ex-partner Samantha Stobbart, killed her boyfriend Chris Brown and blinded policeman David Rathband in Northumberland in 2010 days after leaving prison - tell us anything about modern masculinity or the human condition? That's the kernel of writer/director Robert Icke's tricky new play, an original script after a string of stunningly reworked classics. It's a tense and unnerving 100 minutes, driven by a frankly terrifying performance from a pumped-up, bullet-headed Samuel Edward-Cook as Moat. But where Icke brought phenomenal clarity to Aeschylus, Chekhov and Shakespeare, he makes the story here as muddy as possible. Was Moat failed by society, or was he a "callous murderer, full stop, end of story" as then-PM David Cameron put it? Neither? Both? Icke isn't saying. Moat himself narrates, stepping in and out of the action, prowling the forestage and eyeballing us, but his tales of an unhappy childhood, unheard cries for help and a lifetime of police persecution ring hollow, or at least inadequate. There's little tonal let-up from his seething, baleful fury: even the moments when he plays with his young kids seem ominous. At times the show resembles a dark-side version of Jez Butterworth's Jerusalem, another tale of an outlaw pushing a self-serving myth – especially when Moat holes up in the countryside with two dimwit hostages/accomplices. One of them is played by Danny Kirrane, almost riffing on the role he played in Jerusalem on its initial run at this theatre and in the West End revival. The message here is that all narratives are untrustworthy. Northumberland Police's conduct of the manhunt for Moat (the largest ever in the UK), and the authorities' exoneration from all blame, smell fishy. Stobbart lied to Moat that Brown was a copper to scare him away. Female lawyers stroll on to cross-examine Moat but we know he never went back to court or prison. The auditorium, softly lit throughout, is plunged into darkness for a monologue by the blinded Rathband, who killed himself after tabloids labelled him a love cheat. Meanwhile Facebook groups acclaimed Moat a

folk hero. There's even a tragicomic touch: the thing I mostly remember about the case is that confused ex-footballer Paul Gascoigne turned up at the six-hour, open-air standoff between Moat and the police with a fishing rod and a chicken dinner to persuade the fugitive to surrender. Icke gives us a conversation between the two, and one between Moat and his absentee father; then tells us they never happened. The production has a familiar Ickean starkness, with a mesh cage from designer Hildegard Bechtler whose walls double as screens for CCTV footage, social media messages, or sudden, blinding white-outs. A drumbeat and a bassline rumble underneath the action, sometimes out of synch, and songs by The Four Seasons and The Who are tactically deployed. Before the last of many threats to commit suicide, sawn-off shotgun barrel socketed under his jaw, Moat has a speech about the crisis of masculinity. It feels timely, but like everything here it's ambiguous, half-plea and half threat. Icke is one of the most gifted theatre artists working today – his magnificent 2024 Oedipus has just won a string of awards – but for all its intensity, Manhunt feels like it's hedging its bets. Or worse, can't make its mind up.

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

Robert Icke made his name directing boldly reimagined takes on some of the greatest plays ever written: Hamlet, Professor Bernhardi, The Oresteia and last year's Oedipus (which cleared up during this year's theatre award season). Despite the sense that he has genuinely added something to millennia old works, it's still a big deal to make his debut as a 'proper' playwright. Even his most outrageous rewrites have had somebody else's ideas at their core. Manhunt, his play about Raoul Moat, is all him. And to be clear – and I'm going to shock you here – it's not as good as Hamlet. Nonetheless, after a tentative start where it looks like it's going to serve as a sort of well-intended apologia for Moat, Manhunt really settles down into something compellingly weird. It's an examination of toxic masculinity, yes, but in the same kind of way that Moby Dick is an examination of toxic masculinity. The early stages see Samuel Edward-Cook's triple-jacked double-stacked Moat in the dock for a variety of changes. If you have any familiarity with his short, brutal, bitterly absurd rampage across the north east, you'll get that this trial can't possibly have happened – it's a vague existential framing device designed to get Icke's Moat to defend his actions almost from the off. There is undeniably something gauche about his pleading about the state of his mental health and hard childhood. And there's a level of intentional obviousness: Icke wants to get straight to the point that Moat wasn't a cartoon bogeyman, and that the measure of sympathy he found during his brief spell in the national spotlight wasn't totally unwarranted. Edward-Cook's vulnerability and direct pleading to the audience aggressively underscores the point that Moat's traumatic childhood informed his adult actions – a point we would surely have got if it had been made more subtlety. Still, that's Icke's lookout and it's worth saying Manhunt is just 100 minutes long - he has chosen to compress and heighten things. And Edward-Cook is deeply compelling as Moat, a sensitive brute whose unnerving mix of violence, vulnerability and monstrous physicality often seems genuinely unearthly. Flitting between the courtroom and flashbacks to Moat's fateful few days after leaving prison, Edward-Cook's pleading, panic-attack delivery and Tom Gibbon's naggingly loud, organ-based score give a real sense of Moat's fraying grip on reality. Where the play really finds its feet is in an unexpectedly tangential scene that concerns David Rathband, the officer Moat shot and blinded on his rampage. The room is plunged into darkness and for the only time in the play Edward-Cook isn't on stage. Instead we get a haunting, tortured monologue from Rathband (Nicolas Tennant). In it, he describes the devastation that his blinding wrought and his despair at going from 'hero PC'

to tabloid punching bag after cheating on his wife. Icke is clearly drawing parallels with Moat: both were vulnerable men, poorly cared for by society; while one was a hero, one a villain, they both met the same end. The blackout is clearly there to simulate Rathband's blindness, but with pleasing audacity it also covers a major set change, as Hildegarde Bechtler's design moves from hard concrete to grassy bucolic as Moat goes on the run in the Northumbria countryside. It's here that the play clicks, warping from something literal into something borderline metaphysical, a psychographic journey into the hinterlands of toxic masculinity rather than an attempt to literally explain what happened. The true story feels evasive of conventional narrative because its farcical elements are difficult to reconcile with the darker stuff. In particular the profoundly random appearance of Paul Gascoigne during Moat's final standoff with police feels too juicy a detail to ignore but too bizarre to comfortably fit into a serious story. But I was surprised to find Trevor Fox's turn as Gazza to be my favourite bit of the play. A cracked, Ahab-like figure who regales a bewildered Moat with a seething account of his England career, he is deeply odd and compelling – at the climax of his story he simply emits two bloodcurdling screams. This didn't happen: Gazza was turned away and never spoke to Moat. But Icke embraces the incident brilliantly, and the play gains in power as it leaves literalism behind. Icke was born to collaborate with greatness - polishing up ancient tragedies, finding fresh meaning in Shakespeare, unearthing the emotional side to works that have otherwise desiccated with the centuries. Coming up with his own story exposes his limits: not least the limits to his subtlety. But his core strengths remain. Manhunt may spell things out a bit much, but it's also emotionally vivid and compellingly other, blessed with great performances and an unnerving grandeur as Moat's odyssey takes him towards his own heart of darkness.

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

ROYAL COURT

******GIANT by MARK ROSENBLATT director NICHOLAS HYTNER décor BOB CROWLEY lights ANNA WATSON sound ALEXANDRA FAYE BRAITHWAITE with JOHN LITHGOW roald dahl, ELLIOT LEVEY tom maschler, RACHAEL STIRLING felicity 'liccy' crossland, TESSA BONHAM JONES hallie, ROMOLA GARAI jessie stone, RICHARD HOPE wally saunders**

Blanche Marvin Critique
Brilliantly directed by Nicholas Hytner this bombastic play covering the life of Roald Dahl in this particular period when ranting on one his antisemitic tirades about Israel, brilliantly acted, will explode in success despite a weak second act. The fire has struck the veins of audiences and Broadway is its potential. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

The Guardian (****) Written by Arifa Akbar
As debut plays go, Giant has some very experienced hands behind it. Directed by Nicholas Hytner, who runs the Bridge Theatre, and written by Mark Rosenblatt, a director for more than two decades, it sounds like cheating to call it a debut although it is indeed Rosenblatt's first foray into writing for the stage. You would not know it from a slowly brilliant first act, stupendously performed by its cast, which mixes fact with fiction in its dramatisation of a scandalous moment in the life of the children's writer Roald Dahl. It starts off breezily, heading into what seems like drawing room drama, before becoming as dark and sharp-toothed as one of Dahl's fictive monsters.

It is 1983, Dahl (John Lithgow, fabulous, and bearing uncanny resemblance to the writer) is just about to publish The Witches. We find him irascible, in a kingly, upper middle-class way, having just moved into a new home while his publisher, Tom Maschler (Elliot Levey, excellent as ever) and soon-to-be second wife, Felicity (Rachael Stirling) buzz around him in an unfurnished kitchen. The drama revolves around an explosive book review that Dahl has written, railing against Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982. We hear how he has spoken passionately about Palestinian oppression in the past, and now is writing against Israel's wholesale killing in Lebanon – in language that some deem antisemitic. This kitchen gathering is something of an emergency meeting. "We can make it go away," says Maschler, a survivor of the Holocaust who has little allegiance to Israel and great loyalty towards this writer-friend. The central conflict is triggered when an American Jewish sales executive enters the room. Jessie Stone (Romola Garai, restrained but ready to burst) has been sent by Dahl's American publisher as a damage limitation exercise. The plan is to get him to apologise, but everyone creeps around this star author, not wanting to upset him, at first. He delights in his power, referring to Jessie's Jewishness in provoking ways, and we feel the temperature drop when she begins to bite back. She accuses him of conflating Israel with Jewishness, and challenges his comparison of Israel to Nazi Germany. He speaks of apartheid, of the systematic degradation of Palestinian life and the responsibility of Israeli citizens to speak up in protest. It is sophisticated writing, speaking not only of Dahl but also to our own time, although the ground is inherently lopsided: the opposing arguments around Israeli and Palestinian freedom cannot be weighted equally when one – Dahl's – is fuelled not only by a sense of righteous injustice but also bigotry. He is no straightforward monster, though, or at least not in the first act, when he is also rational, tender and playful. Rosenblatt's writing steers delicately away from polemic or crude binaries. Dahl speaks of "your lot" to Maschler and generalises about Jews as a "race of people" bearing certain traits, alongside legitimate criticisms of Israel. By the second act, his antisemitism is glaring, and the drama seems to not know where to go from here, stalled by having to return from the coded conversations of our day back to the fall-out around Dahl's article. Until then, so many debates are embroidered seamlessly into the drama, from the gap between the monstrous genius and his work (Stone admits she still loves Dahl's books), to the exploration of Jewishness. (Maschler, as a Jew, never defines Dahl as an antisemite). Where some theatres have remained at a safe distance from this subject matter – the Royal Exchange theatre in Manchester has recently been accused of censorship on it, for one – Giant shows a necessary bravery in taking it on. This is what theatre is for.

Evening Standard (****) Written by Tim Bano

There can't be many authors whose reputation has been so assiduously protected as Roald Dahl. Beloved, brilliant, endlessly and lucratively adapted, he still sells in the millions. "I'm a direct sort," the big friendly giant says to his Jewish publisher in a play set over the course of two hours on a hot afternoon in 1983. "How do you feel about Israel?" Oof. Mark Rosenblatt's debut play isn't afraid to go there, and way beyond. Head-on, unflinchingly, Giant confronts the vile antisemitism of one of the most beloved children's authors of all time, while sweeping along in its ferocious cross-currents of dialogue all the pitched battles of society today: authors with controversial opinions, art versus artist, complicity and silence, the ways we protect the powerful. It's hard to think when the Royal Court last staged a play that felt so

dangerous, or one so spectacularly good. Yet it's all come from unexpected directions. Director supremo Nicholas Hytner runs his own theatre, the Bridge, and yet chooses to direct this play at the Royal Court. Rosenblatt has a successful career as a director himself, but turns to playwriting with a play that many theatres would cavil at – and the Royal Court itself is still repairing the damage from an antisemitism controversy in 2022. A weird mix of things, and just as in Dahl's books, magic happens. It's shocking, challenging, uncomfortable. Dahl's Buckinghamshire house is being renovated. He's just divorced his wife and is about to marry his long-term lover. He's putting the finishing touches to The Witches. He's also just written a review of a book called God Cried, an account of the 1982 siege of Lebanon by the Israeli Army. His review is thick with antisemitism, and Rosenblatt imagines a scenario in which his British publisher Tom Maschler – real – and his American publisher Jessie Stone – made up – visit Dahl to discuss the fallout. In a casting coup, John Lithgow plays Dahl, brimful of charm (and he looks uncannily similar to the author. There's a bit of Victor Meldrew to him, pained expressions and permanently irritated, but he's also witty and wise. He's always on, always making a joke, talking with the same panache that fills his writing. Though Lithgow gives him a stiffness – he's clearly in physical pain – there's also a sense of restless motion. He never quite sits still or settles. And it's all good fun, seeing this quasi-mythical author come to life in his half-decorated home, being propped up by scaffolds and dustsheets. Until he starts grilling Stone about whether she's Jewish. A sudden streak of awkwardness, a stiffening in the audience, and a stillness too. Dahl remains the charming gent, but as the play goes on and we hear pretty much verbatim the things he wrote and said about Jewish people, the charm isn't quite so charming. Rosenblatt's fearless script is one thing, but it's made extraordinary by the performances. Lithgow dominates, certainly, but it's really an ensemble piece. Romola Garai plays Jessie Stone, and though her character is a fiction, and a useful dramatic foil for Dahl, Garai brings her completely alive. She holds herself tightly, apologetically, like she's on the verge of throwing up at any moment, but there's also a profound dignity to her, especially when in a quavering voice she defends Jewish people against Dahl's outrageous statements. Elliot Levey is the opposite: laidback and apparently "submissive" (one of the words Dahl used to describe Jews), seemingly choosing to swallow his principles in order to appease and protect Dahl. Rachael Stirling plays Dahl's lover Liccy, a desperate peacemaker, whose primary objective is to protect the author. That's the other brilliant strand in Rosenblatt's play: the way the walls go up when someone powerful is under attack. Protect at all costs. The play is kind of old-fashioned, kind of trad, and as un-Dahl like as you can get. For a man whose work was all about the grotesque and the fantastical, this is a staunchly realist piece. It's a dining room drama, a play of chats, of arguments thrashed out in posh English accents. Except, as Dahl doubles down, it becomes clear that there is grotesquery, ugliness, villainy. It's in Dahl's own attitudes and words.

London Theatre (***) Written by Julia Rank

Mark Rosenblatt's debut play Giant takes place during summer of 1983, when the 67-year-old Roald Dahl's divorce from his first wife, the American actress Patricia Neal, was about to finalised. Liccy Crosland, with whom he had been having an affair for over a decade, has moved in and marriage is finally on the cards, and The Witches, perhaps his scariest title of all, is about to be published. Things were pretty rosy,

except for the policeman at the door of his idyllic Great Missenden home. Dahl, who had long been an articulate and dedicated supporter of Palestine, had written a glowing review of a book condemning the siege of West Beirut during the 1982 Israel-Lebanon War. However, some readers interpreted his comments as conflating the actions of the Israel with all Jewish people. It's an unusually starry creative team for a first play (Rosenblatt is an experienced director), being helmed by theatre titan Nicholas Hytner, and performed by a distinguished cast. Dahl was a giant of children's literature who happened to be 6ft 4in as well as the creator of The Big Friendly Giant (The BFG), and, for better or for worse, a real larger-than-life character. It starts as a drawing-room comedy of manners and it never stops feeling uncharacteristically old-fashioned for the Royal Court (which usually doesn't accept submissions of biographical plays). The house is under construction (a bohemian building site designed by Bob Crowley) as Liccy (Rachael Sterling) is an interior designer clearly keen to put her own stamp on the place where Dahl and Neal raised their family. Dahl, who suffered from chronic back pain, is cantankerous, carping about the "Sidcup cherub" Quentin Blake's illustrations upstaging his words, and not being afforded the same respect as grown-up authors like Kingsley Amis – but in an avuncular way. Beloved American actor John Lithgow is terrific in conveying Dahl's charm and cruelty that are essentially two sides of the same coin; he still sees himself as a dashing World War II fighter pilot and needles all his guests in a kind of twisted parlour game. Into the lion's den comes Jessie Stone (Romola Garai), the Jewish-American sales director of Dahl's US publisher, on a damage control mission. Dahl instantly takes against her, yet in the midst of his tirades shows great compassion when he deduces that Jessie's 15-year-old son, to whom she still reads, has developmental difficulties like his own son. Elliot Levey plays Dahl's publisher Tom Maschler, formerly a German Kindertransport refugee who seems to be unique in coming through the Holocaust physically and emotionally unscathed (or so he says – we never hear about what happened to his family). He feels no connection to Israel (why should he?) and, perhaps misguidedly, great loyalty towards Dahl. The weakest elements are the characterisations of the "help" characters. New Zealand temporary housekeeper Hallie (Tessa Bonham Jones) and faithful retainer Wally (Richard Hope) are essentially there so that Dahl has someone wishy-washy and cap-doffing respectively to offload to. It's clear that Dahl had a long history as a bully, and the staggering final telephone call with the New Statesman shows that he felt entitled to express the most abhorrent views, yet he's convinced that it went extremely well and will support his knighthood application (he demonstrates Prince Andrew levels of self-awareness). Jessie will still read his books to her son, separating the art from the artist, but the internet didn't exist then. Dahl's legacy in wider culture may look very different if it had done.

*non-sub*SIDISED

CURRENT - NEW **London Theatreviews**

CORONET THEATRE

******maliphantworks4: IN A LANDSCAPE / AFTER LIGHT composer DANA FOURAS, ERIK SATIE director RUSSELL MALIPHANT choreographer RUSSELL MALIPHANT**

costume STEVIE STEWART lights MICHAEL HULLS, PANAGIOTIS TOMARAS with RUSSELL MALIPHANT, DANIEL PROIETTO

Blanche Marvin Critique
Watching Maliphant *In A Landscape* is like watching a statue that has come to life. The movements are overwhelmingly stunning and the lighting effects create an added sense of shadows as he moves. The result is a marvelous depiction of the human body. *Afterlight* is a tour de force solo performance by Daniel Proietto inspired by the photos and drawings of the great Russian dancer Vaslav Nijinsky. Enclosed are other critics' reviews.

The Stage (***) Written by Donald Hutera
Pair of artful and resonant solos by Russell Maliphant
The work of Russell Maliphant is nothing if not aesthetically refined, and marked by an attention to detail that could easily be considered austere or profound. Maliphant has garnered his fair share of awards and acclaim since founding his eponymous company nearly 30 years ago. Now his 30-minute solo In a Landscape receives its world premiere in tandem with Afterlight, an earlier solo half that length, but still a mini-masterpiece. Maliphant himself dances In a Landscape. At 63, he's in great shape. Accompanied by Dana Fouras' soundtrack of clicks, pulsations, twangs and tones, the piece unfolds as a sober game of 'me and my shadows' movement involving a handful of chiffon curtains. The key component is Maliphant's collaboration with the lighting designer Panagiotis Tomaras. Things commence cunningly with the dancer, in a boiler suit, striking a series of poses behind opaque fabric. After each one, the stage darkens, and he seems to vanish. More curtains come into play, one tied into drapery by Maliphant and others dropping down from above like veils. He plays gently with them via rippling sweeps of hands or elbows. Strong and unexpectedly delicate, his movement throughout is a precise, controlled and confident blend of soft steps, measured but always purposeful: body shifts, lines, curves and spiralling turns, both high and low. In a Landscape could be tighter and trimmer; some of the curtain interactions are overindulged and the piece loses its way. Sight lines can also be problematic – best to watch the piece face on, rather than from the side. But as a journey through Maliphant's physicality and his mysterious shadow selves, it exudes a quiet, sometimes trippy resonance. And those curtains are such a simple, yet ambiguous device. At one point I thought of shrouds, while a friend saw them as a kind of gossamer womb. The piece is followed by Afterlight, a hypnotic solo created in 2009 for the dancer Daniel Proietto. Inspired by photographs and drawings by Russian dance legend Vaslav Nijinsky, and set to Satie's exquisitely spare Gnossiennes Nos 1-4, this small work is a stunner. Casually clad, head covered by a pale stocking cap, Proietto twirls, tilts and twists in a state of poignant rapturebeneath Michael Hulls' morphing, cloud-like light projections. Watching him in such an intimate space feels like a privilege.

British Theatre Guide Written by Vera Liber
I first saw Russell Maliphant's fifteen-minute AfterLight in 2009 as part of The Spirit of Diaghilev programme —what I said then stands now, as Daniel Proietto, looking not a day older, repeats that stunning performance. Intense, concentrated flow under Michael Hulls's imaginative lighting, he is the rose, the faun (as I said in 2009), he is the Nijinsky life force, reproducing his swirling patterns. But to see it three rows away in the small, intimate Coronet Theatre is spellbinding. Spinning clockwise—the lighting shadows turn anticlockwise—he seems to be on a turntable, in a world of his own, aided and abetted by Satie's dreamy Gnossiennes 1–4 (performed by Dustin Gledhill). He takes the breath away, ours and his own. Reaching towards the light, he could be a delicate, burgeoning seedling, on the ground he is the falling sycamore seed, the creatures in the undergrowth. From red to white (Stevie Stewart simple costume design), from rose to young faun, Proietto's own breath is taken away by the standing applause, a terrific ending to a very short evening, an hour in total, but, wow, is it worth it… Maliphant is always worth it. AfterLight won the Critics' Circle 2010 National Dance Award for Best Modern Choreography. The new, twice as long, thirty-minute piece, a world première, In a Landscape, sees Maliphant dance his own composition,

still following his obsession with the sculpture of the body and sculptural light (Panagiotis Tomaras). Grey one-piece, grey gauze panels manipulated to create shadowy depth, stone columns, walls (crinkles in the cloth makes me think of scratched hieroglyphics), ancient classical poses, he takes his time—time immemorial. With simple economical means—to a cinematic electronic soundscape by his life partner Dana Fouras—Maliphant celebrates the body over eons of time. In silhouette, in gentle t'ai chi moves, he flows like silk, yet holds his form like an eternal statue. He evokes classical folk dance moves, chiaroscuro paintings and daguerreotype stills. I think Eadward Muybridge. It is epic and enigmatic. There's an extra treat tonight—two very short films (Film One and Film Two made in collaboration with photographer Julian Broad) on a loop—in the Coronet's studio, where you can stay as long as you like pre-show, during the interval and after the hour-long live show. In Film One, Dana Fouras, in Stevie Stewart's flowing black costume, spins like Loie Fuller and Isadora Duncan in one, painting abstract expressionistic canvases and flower petals, her legs and beautifully pointed feet the stamen. Again lighting plays a big part in the inkblot look. Mesmerising. Film Two is Russell Maliphant's solo turn defying gravity on a red bungee cord. Or maybe exploring gravity and ground work. A human mobile tightly controlled, he keeps it low, nose almost on the ground.

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

CORONET THEATRE

*****STRANGER THAN THE MOON text BERTOLT BRECHT music HANNS EISLER AND OTHERS adaptor ADAM BENZWI, OLIVER REESE, LUCIAN STRAUCH live-music ADAM BENZWI director OLIVER REESE musical director ADAM BENZWI décor HANSJÖRG HARTUNG costume ELINA SCHNIZLER video ANDREAS DEINERT lights STEFFEN HEINKE choreographer LESLIE UNGER dramaturg LUCIEN STRAUCH with PAUL HERWIG, KATHARINE MEHRLING**

Blanche Marvin Critique

It is very difficult to analyse poetry that has been dramatised for a specific occasion. The actual poetry that has been written is the most complex thing to convey. The poems were absolutely beautifully captured in their demonstrations in movement. Analysing each of the poems becomes an impossible task as one captures the mood of each of the works. The poems indicate various aspects of the life of Brecht and enlighten us with different aspects of his character. Enclosed are other critic's reviews.

Broadway World (**) Written by Alexander Cohen

Of all the canonical playwrights Bertolt Brecht seems to be the one whose work is treated with the most dogmatic reverence by theatre folk. Prostrate yourself at the altar and kiss the feet of the oracle of Berlin. No surprise that the Berliner Ensemble are his most loyal disciples, the theatre company was founded and once run by the big dog himself. Watching them perform Stranger Than The Moon, a Frankensteinian amalgamation of Brecht's diaries, poetry, and music is a more quasi-religious ritual than it is theatre. Actors Paul Herwig and Katharine Mehrling sketch an outline of the playwright's life, a happy childhood cushioned in bourgeoise luxury, burgeoning socialist sympathies and the coming of age as a writer. The blank set grants the language permission to take centre stage; silky aphorisms as stark as they are snarky luxuriate, anchored with the weight of Brecht's idiosyncratically cheery nihilism: "When can I be merry?" wonders Herwig, "Soon I hope" retorts Mehrling. A backdrop

screen behind them accompanies the set with montages of 1930s Germany. War is inevitably on the horizon, soon snippets of Nazi book burnings flash across the backdrop accompanied by the eerie smoke-tinged jazz of Hanns Eisler and Kurt Weill. There's a suggestion of a political ghost in the machine waiting to materialise, one perhaps that can potentially speak to our contemporary geopolitics, but it never finds the courage to break beyond hero worship, never fully summoning Brecht from his world into ours. There's a reason why: Brecht eventually returns to post war Berlin flecked with childlike giddiness. The declaration that he will found a theatre company is met by self-congratulatory murmurs of recognition from the audience. There it is. The whole evening feels like an awards ceremony for people who know Brecht, who get the references. Don't know who Helene Wiegel was? On your bike. Someone behind started singing along to one of the songs borrowed from Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder (that's Mother Courage and her Children to you). Top marks for them. There's no doubt that this is one for the Brecht completionists, too esoteric for wide appeal. On paper that isn't a bad thing, nothing wrong with a museum piece of theatre, more interesting than captivating, but I wonder what Brecht himself would have made of it. Given that most of his career was spent tearing down idols, I can't imagine he'd be too happy to see himself become one.

British Theatre Guide - Written by Vera Liber

This may not be for everybody, two solid hours without interval of Brecht's writings delivered in German with English surtitles, but it is for me. Some extracts are in English; I prefer the original. I'm moved almost to tears, which takes me by surprise. Maybe it is its relevance to today's global events that jolt the spirit, dictators on the march again. Or maybe it is muscle memory. A vital collage of his poems, songs, musings political and personal, delivered by Berliner Ensemble's Katharine Mehrling and Paul Herwig with musical director Adam Benzwi pounding on an upright piano. Ballads popular in dissident literature, music highlighting words, making them easier to remember. Homage or a timely recap of a destructive historical period that killed and displaced so many. It's about paying attention to time, memory (has our collective memory been erased?) and the power of words. If only I could get them all down. Whatever your views are of Brecht, there is much to gain from some very wise words: our collective humanity and his personal journey in understanding it. The pleasures and paradoxes of life: to each other we are stranger than the moon (in our digital age, this sounds almost prophetic). Herwig is Brecht as he ages. Mehrling takes many roles: Weimar cabaret singer draped over the piano, in Hitler (though his name is never mentioned, we know full well who the "house painter" is) moustache she channels him and Chaplin, soldier's widow in ballgown singing of what goodies he brought from all the cities Hitler's army conquered, a sad clown and more. She has a terrific voice. All the while, Brecht is typing and revealing himself in his diaries, poems (poetry is "a message in a bottle") and parables (the vixen and the rooster). And photos, some shown to the front row... I, Bertolt could / should be the title of this biographical romp. I wonder what would be his moral dilemmas now, his political allegiances? His bourgeois upbringing in Augsburg, his class consciousness, his solidarity with the workers, his sojourn in airless America, in several European cities, then his return to Berlin after the war and the founding of the Berliner Ensemble in East Berlin. A large screen behind the pair illustrates his mental and physical journey: American skyscrapers, his home and the butchery of the Nazi

regime, abattoir and coalmine workers, skeletal corpses, snow over pine trees, rain on a pane of glass. It is very moving. He talks of escaped starving children desperate to find a way out of a pine forest in 1939, and their dog. Thoughtfully structured, direction and pace by Oliver Reese is unhurried and in effect there are three acts. One in the days of the Weimar Republic, collaborations with Elisabeth Hauptmann, Kurt Weill and Hanns Eisler and his success with The Threepenny Opera. Two follows exile, his writing about politics and war, which included Mother Courage and Her Children, The Resistable Rise of Arturo Ui and The Caucasian Chalk Circle. Three is his return home with his wife, actress Helene Weigel, the rest we know, and his death in 1956. But they all meld into one continuous whole, with shifts of tempo and a variety of numbers to jolt our attention. A wordy concert one could say. Here is his legacy, the Berliner Ensemble. Stage adaptation is by Adam Benzwi, Oliver Reese and Lucien Strauch. It is revelatory. And a cliché (aren't we all walking clichés?): everything passes, life's a journey. The moon rises, or is it the earth? It is cyclical. The company is here for only three days; it is standing room only. It is an event.

*emptyspace*STUDIO

CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

JERMYN STREET THEATRE

****EURYDICE by SARAH RUHL director STELLA POWELL-JONES décor TINA TORBEY costume EMILY STUART lights CHRIS McDONNELL sound CARMEL SMICKERSGILL associate director/movement director ELLIOT PRITCHARD with KATY BRITTAIN stone, KEATON GUIMARÃES-TOLLEY orpheus, TOM MORLEY stone, EVE PONSONBY eurydice, LEYON STOLZ-HUNTER stone, DICKON TYRRELL father, JOE WILTSHIRE SMITH a nasty interesting man/the lord of the underworld**

Blanche Marvin Critique

This poetic drama in which Orpheus, famed for his music, charms Eurydice into love of him and his music which leads to her death when in search of him in the Underworld. She is approached by her father and creatures of the Underworld, but she has died and lives on only as she listens to Orpheus' music. The filling in from a director for such material is inadequate and the search for Orpheus left unclear. Her invention is lacking. The US playwright Sarah Ruhl returns to the tiny Jermyn Street Theatre with her surreal adaptation of the myth of Eurydice, following as the deceased wife or Orpheus on her surreal journey through the underworld. Stella Powell-Jones directs a cast headed by Eve Ponsonby as the eponymous heroine who fought the rocks, the demon death, to find Orpheus. Directed flatly without delving into the falling into the gap of the tale it needed more of a director's insight and not a flat adaptation by the director. Eclosed are other critic's reviews. 3 October – 9 November 2024

British Theatre Guide, Written by Howard Loxton

Stella Powell-Jones, who directed Sarah Ruhl's lively adaptation of Virginia Woolf's Orlando at this theatre a couple of years ago, is paired with her again to present her 2003 take on the Orpheus and Eurydice myth. American poet and playwright Ruhl (who also wrote the book for A Face in the Crowd, currently playing at the Young Vic, and In the Next Room or the vibrator play) has twice been a finalist for the Pulitzer

Prize for Drama and turned this play into the libretto for Matthew Aucoin's opera performed at the Met and Los Angeles Opera. Eurydice had its British première in an ATC / Drum Theatre Plymouth / Young Vic production touring in 2010. This version is Eurydice's story, and Ruhl makes some changes: for instance, it's not snake venom but a fall down stairs that causes her death, a fall it seems manoeuvred by a mysterious man who turns up later as Lord of the Underworld. We first see Eurydice (Eve Ponsonby) on a seashore chatting with Orpheus (Keaton Guimarães-Tolley), a beach towel on Tina Torbey's blue set signalling location. It is an odd pairing for they seem incompatible. She loves books and words, interesting information and argument. He sees no point in them. There is nothing in his head but music, no point in discussion, things are just right or wrong. Maybe theirs is just physical attraction, except that there is no erotic charge between this pair. In no time for even perfunctory courtship, Orpheus is making an instant ring from a piece of string and they are engaged. She expects to get a real ring later. In no time, they are married, and it is when taking a break from the wedding party that Eurydice meets that strange man and has her fatal fall. Meanwhile, Eurydice's dead father (Dickon Tyrrell) has been writing letters to her, worms becoming the postmen to take them to the living. The dead speak a different language, and the river Lethe erases memory of living life, but Eurydice's father has somehow avoided its effects and still knows how to read and write and speak both tongues. When Eurydice arrives in the Underworld, she first thinks her father is a hotel porter, but he makes contact and their relationship is touchingly presented. When Orpheus braves his way there, she has a choice: stay with her father or follow Orpheus back to the living. Though it is always intriguing to see how a writer reinterprets an ancient story, this surreal whimsy doesn't spark contemporary relevance. Copying ancient Greek drama, there is a chorus: three speaking stones are denizens of the Underworld, but what is their purpose? Perhaps they are there for comic relief, but they aren't funny. Joe Wiltshire Smith's Nasty Man and Hades figure switches from business suit to schoolboy cap and short trousers, but is he meant to be malevolent? What does keep you watching for the 90 minutes of this straight-through, single-act play is the playing of Eve Ponsonby and Dickon Tyrrell. They perform with total belief and carry you with them despite the play's inconsistencies.

London Pub Theatres Magazine (***) Written by David Weir

The loss of a loved one – the loved one in this case – isn't an obvious subject for levity. Nor do the nouns Ayckbourn and Alan automatically leap to mind for analysis of one of the world's older classical tragedies. But the old master craftsman's dictum that comedy needs to find 'darkness in its light' and tragedy 'light in its darkness' wouldn't have gone amiss as this new version of Eurydice made its way from page to stage. The tale's oft-told – Eurydice dies, Orpheus heads to the Underworld to bring her back, then loses her at the final step by breaking the instruction not to look back at her until she's in the world of the living once more. And for a couple of millennia, it's been oft-told from the male point of view - Orpheus, the man and musician, with Eurydice generally foregrounded as the prize that was lost rather than focusing much on her own thoughts, dreams and feelings as a person herself. Sarah Ruhl's new version commendably turns that around to focus on Eurydice (a strong and nuanced Eve Ponsonby who carries most of the action). There's much to admire in this re-plotting – her marriage to Orpheus isn't perfect, since he (Keaton Guimarães-Tolley)

is obsessed with his beautiful music more than with the desires and thoughts of his wife, and her temptation to the fall that leads her to the Underworld arises from a desire to read a letter from her late father (Dickson Tyrell, affecting and wistful). If there's a flaw in the story-telling, it's the reverse of the usual barely visible Eurydice, in that Orpheus rather vanishes, a gentle naif concerned only with his music (one whom it's hard to see suddenly deciding to voyage to the Underworld, indeed). Both the literate and varied script and the show (excellent set design and costuming) seem designed to illuminate the darkness with the odd spark of light, but the production rarely lifts from mournful tone and pace across its 90 minutes. It looks like it's meant to raise the odd laugh – a chorus of stones gurn merrily away, and visually more than echo the Knights Who Say Ni. And the Lord of the Underworld (Joe Wiltshire Smith, unsettling rather than sinister) comes on as an overgrown schoolboy who at one point performs a visual gag the Carry On team might have thought a bit singly entendred (he does pull it off with some gusto, but perhaps it could be whipped out). That it doesn't find some more tonal variation is a shame, as the scenes between father and daughter are moving and tender, and the whole looks a treat, using, as often occurs there, the tiny playing area of Jermyn Street to create convincingly separate worlds. But as the Lord of the Underworld himself might say, the show never fails to be interesting, even if a bit more variation in tone and pace would make it more so.