

## ***subSIDISED***

**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 Licky, 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 be finalised. Licky 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 Licky (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.

## **westEND**

**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 cliché 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 - NEW**

**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 glamorous 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

**\*\*\*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, NAKO 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. Nassim 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.

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**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 be finalised. Licky 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 Licky (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.

## ***emptyspace*STUDIO**

**CURRENT - NEW**

**London Theatreviews**

### **ROYAL COURT**

**\*\*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 of 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 replotting – 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.