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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that led up to the signing of the Kyoto Treaty in 1997; the first treaty about climate change which was ultimately superseded by the Paris Treaty in 2015.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. Sent 10/02/2025

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

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CURRENT **London Theatreviews**

AMBASSADOR THEATRE

*****THE CURIOUS CASE OF BENJAMIN BUTTON by F SCOTT FIZGERALD book, lyrics, director, stage designer JETHRO COMPTON music, lyrics, co-music supervisor, orchestrator, arranger DARREN CLARK musical director, co-music supervisor, orchestrator, arranger MARK ASPINALL choreographer CHI-SAN HOWARD costume, associate stage designer ANNA KELSEY, lights ZOE SPURR sound LUKE SWAFFIELD with JOHN DAGLEISH bejamin button, CLARE FOSTER elowen keene, JACK QUARTON ensemble, ANN MARCUSON ensemble, ANNA FORDHAM ensemble, BENEDICT SALTER ensemble, ELLIOT MACKENZIE ensemble, JONATHAN CHARLES ensemble, MATTHEW BURNS ensemble, PHILIPPA HOGG ensemble, DAMIEN JAMES ensemble, OONAGH COX ensemble, KATY ELLIS ensemble**

Blanche Marvin Critique

The Curious Case of Benjamin Button is a transfer from Southwark Playhouse to the West End's Ambassadors Theatre. Based on F Scott Fitzgerald's short story about a man aging backwards, Jethro Compton (the co-book & lyrics writer, director and stage designer) has chosen to move the story to Cornwall, giving it a charming West Country flavour. Actors John Dagleish as Benjamin and Clare Foster as Elowen are outstanding in their respective roles and the unfolding of the story works extraordinary well. However the constant telling of dates when any event occurs becomes repetitive and a little tedious. It would have been better to keep it to pertinent information about Benjamin Button rather than adding so much

about peripheral characters. The actors deftly play their instruments but the riff on Celtic music and sea shanties also becomes repetitive and could have had more variety. Overall, it's a lovely take on a familiar theme to live life fully, no matter how long. Enclosed are other critic's reviews. Sent 23/04/2025.

The Observer (****) Written by Susannah Clapp

The Curious Case of Benjamin Button is very curious indeed. It began as a startling short story by F Scott Fitzgerald: a baby is born as an old man who becomes younger the longer he lives; when he is over 70 he seems to be an infant. Director Jethro Compton, whose exhausting list of credits include not only composing the book and lyrics but creating the design, elaborated the plot and transplanted it from antebellum Baltimore to 20th-century Cornwall. Darren Clark added some lyrics and composed music inspired by Bellowhead, Laura Marling, Kate Rusby and sea shanties. This folk musical, brought to swarming life by actor-musicians, opened at the small, enterprising Southwark Playhouse Elephant five years ago; now it has landed in the West End – and taken over the Ambassadors. The theatre bar has become the Pickled Crab, and sells seasalt fudge; the walls outside the auditorium are papered with headlines about the Penlee lifeboat disaster and other old Cornish news. More gumboots than glitz. Plenty of welly. The stage is rarely still or silent. The set, built from salvaged items washed ashore in north Cornwall, is busy with maritime life: wave-worn wood, bright orange buoys, nets slung from on high that catch lights like stars. From time to time in the background there is a tidal roar, the sound of rushing wind. Actor-musicians weave between each other – Chi-San Howard's choreography is dextrous – whisking around cornet, double bass, french horn, fiddle, ukulele, accordion like playthings; even the cello is bowed without touching the floor. The dialogue has vivacious touches, not least in the mouth of a genial fisherman who keeps muddling his wise saws: "I could do it with my mouth open." Still, the story is overcrammed – war, suicide, lost love, the death of a child, rediscovered love, terminal illness – and not always clear. Though John Dagleish is strong and touching in the title role – slowly unbending from his early days as a septuagenarian babe with a walking stick – there is no single knockout song that defines his or others characters. It's a wave-like movement, a constant musical surge – more jig than gig – that sweeps the evening along. Warmly. Curiously.

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

The latest fringe musical to vault nimbly into the West End is this stirring folkie adaptation of F Scott Fitzgerald's short story about a man who lives his life in reverse.

At heart a two-man venture from Jethro Compton (book, lyrics, direction, design) and Darren Clark (music and lyrics, orchestration and arrangement) it relocates the story from Jazz Age Baltimore to 20th century Cornwall but retains the message that every second of life should be lived and savoured. Forget the 2008 Brad Pitt film: this is the version to treasure. The atmosphere is like a ceilidh – or the West Country equivalent – during a pub lock-in. On a set of ropes and timbers, a 13-strong cast of joyfully versatile actor-musicians give vent to moving, witty songs that swell like the ocean. Feet are stamped and tubs are enthusiastically thumped. The script has been tweaked and the production recast since I saw and loved it at Southwark Playhouse last July: the sketched-in supporting characters feel more winsome and cartoonish, and the cast's artfully dishevelled clothes and smeared faces make them look like extras from Oliver! but it remains a sweet love story that carries a powerful, almost mystical musing on the nature of existence. Plus you've got to love a show that rhymes "cup and saucer" with "divorce her". This time round John Dagleish winningly plays Benjamin, whose birth in 1918 as a 70-year-old man complete with three-piece suit, bowler hat, pipe and walking stick prompts his mother to kill herself. His father keeps him sequestered at home, assuming he will wither and die, but Benjamin grows younger and in his 50s ventures out to the local pub, determined to "live a little life" as one rousing number succinctly puts it. Here, he meets barmaid Elowen, "the only woman [he] will ever love". Their romance is thwarted by shyness, family disapproval and happenstance, but the Second World War brings them together, they go through parenting and loss and are finally parted on the night Neil Armstrong walks on the
moon in 1969. Benjamin – spoiler alert – regresses through boyhood and babyhood and winks out of existence in 1988. The book smartly juxtaposes the smallness and localness of the story with epic international (and extra-planetary) events. The love story of Benjamin and Elowen (played with understated conviction by Dagleish and Clare Foster) is couched as a meeting of the moon and the sea, subject to massive fluctuations of time and tide. The gap between events is ticked off in precise units, to illustrate both the enormity of time and how a few seconds can make the difference between life and death. This is no overnight success: Compton and Clark first conceived it in 2019. But the transfer of such an oddball, charming hit 16 months after its success at Southwark does suggest a new nimbleness

and openness in the West End, especially towards new musicals that don't originate from the same old big names.

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CURRENT **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. Sent 21.02.2025.

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. Sent 08.01.2025.

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

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. Sent 09.04.2025.doc.

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 - NEW **London**
Theatreviews

OLD VIC

****THE BRIGHTENING AIR writer/director CONNOR McPHERSON décor/costume RAE SMITH lights MARK HENDERSON sound GREGORY CLARKE movement/intimacy LUCY HIND fight KATE WATERS with BRIAN GLEESON stephen, ROSIE SHEEHY billie, HANNAH MORISH lydia, CHRIS O'DOWD dermot, DERBHLE CROTTY elizabeth, SEÁN MCGINLEY pierre, AISLING KEARNS freya, EIMHIN FITZGERALD DOHERTY brendan, ELLA MARIA CARMEN**

Blanche Marvin Critique
The Brightening Air is about a dysfunctional Irish Family set in the Irish countryside in the 1980s. Conor McPherson's latest play is very much an

homage to Chekhov's Uncle Vanya thematically and in its four act structure. Stephen and his autistic sister, Billie, live in the family's dilapidated farm and are struggling to keep it going. A series of family members arrive, all with their own agendas. Stephen's older brother Dermot turns up with a young mistress, leaving his estranged wife, Lydia, distraught and seeking some magic water to make her husband love her again. Uncle Pierre, a defrocked priest, who may or may not be blind, shows up with his housekeeper Elizabeth with the ulterior motive of not only wanting to live on the farm but take it over. Everyone seems to be yearning for something and there are a few twists to the plot which are never quite resolved or satisfying. The play would have worked better if McPherson had streamlined things a little more. The real strength of the piece lies in the performances which are excellent, especially Chris O'Dowd as Dermot and Rosie Sheehy as the autistic Billie. Enclosed are other critic's reviews. Sent 10.05.2025.

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

Audacious. That's the word for Conor McPherson's new play, a hilarious and achingly moving slice of dysfunctional rural Irish family life in the 1980s with broad seams of mysticism and superstition running through it. McPherson himself skillfully directs a splendid ensemble from which two names have to be singled out. Multi-hyphenate, increasingly transatlantic star Chris O'Dowd returns to the stage for the first time in four years with a heroically detestable performance as the tauntingly feckless, faithless Dermot. And Rosie Sheehy adds to her unbroken run of transfixingly vivid roles as his sister Billie, who clearly has some unnamed and probably undiagnosed form of autism or learning disability. The third sibling is Brian Gleeson's seething, barely contained Stephen, who has been scraping by for years with Billie in the family's decaying farm near Dundalk. He's endured her fixated monologues and sudden rages, fetched her from mysterious trips "to town" where she's been hit three times by lorries. Dermot's martyred wife Lydia (Hannah Morrish) haunts the homestead as if to find some spoor of her errant husband, a "businessman" owner of several cafes and shops. She even asks Stephen to bring her magic water from a local well to bewitch him. Because, you see, Dermot is coming back, along with the siblings' blind uncle Pierre (Seán McGinley), a former priest, and his housekeeper Elizabeth (Derbhle Crotty). There are seismic issues to discuss about the family's inheritance and living arrangements. This doesn't stop Dermot bringing along his witchy new teenage girlfriend Freya (Aisling Kearns). The title comes from a WB Yeats poem and there are (acknowledged) echoes of Chekhov's rural family tragicomedy Uncle Vanya, which McPherson adapted for a 2020 West End production he never got to see due to the Covid

lockdown. HBO's Succession inevitably comes to mind and the offhand cruelty and rural fatalism of the play recalls McPherson's contemporary Martin McDonagh. But McPherson is a truly singular writer, who is always probing the boundaries of mood and genre. The biggest ghost haunting this show is him. There are narrative and folkloric themes that predate his breakthrough The Weir, and resonances with the hardscrabble 2017 musical he created from Bob Dylan's back catalogue, Girl from the North Country. The Brightening Air goes further. No spoilers, but it features a religious revelation, an apparent miracle, and the smiting of the unworthy. There's even a cosmic joke at the end, as well as a throwback to the days when critics claimed McPherson could only write monologues. There's live piano music and bhangra on the soundtrack, and many laugh out loud moments. Rae Smith's set takes inspiration from shadow puppetry. And it *still* works as a family drama. The role of Billie could seem crass but Sheehy gives the character a tight- jawed, twitchily unpredictable conviction. She, O'Dowd and Gleeson convince as siblings, sometimes levelling an antagonistic kick at each other, sometimes looping a brusque arm around a neck. Every character feels fully realised, including diffident farmhand/barman Brendan (newcomer Eimhin Fitzgerald Doherty), who might be Billie's savior but falls prey to a succubus. Even when the focus isn't on them the background cast fully inhabit their roles. McPherson is a phenomenal director of actors. The leaps the takes as a writer into the numinous here won't be to everyone's taste but I bloody loved it.

Financial Times (****) Written by Sarah Hemming

Before lockdown snatched it away in 2020, Conor McPherson's superb version of Uncle Vanya was gathering fistfuls of admiring reviews. Now McPherson returns with his own response to Chekhov's great play: a rich, funny, baggy family saga set in a rundown farmhouse in 1980s Ireland. And, appropriately, one of the prevailing themes of the new piece is unfinished business. Watching it, it's not necessary to know Vanya, but if you do it's a bit like meeting a distant cousin. In twenty-something Billie and her older brother, Stephen, we see echoes of Chekhov's estate manager Vanya and his niece Sonia. But the searing unrequited love story here goes to Lydia, their lovely, downtrodden sister-in-law (played with aching poignancy by Hannah Morrish) who has been supplanted in their brother Dermot's affections by a younger woman. Longing and disillusionment hang heavy on most characters, and, as with Chekhov's drama, the arrival of further family members pulls the others' lives into focus. So in walk Dermot, shaking everyone up with his midlife crisis, and Uncle Pierre (Seán McGinley), a former priest who has his own ramshackle agenda. There are traces of Brian

Friel and other great Irish dramatists here, too, and the play's title comes from a Yeats poem. But the style is very much McPherson's own: earthy realism flecked with folklore and religion. This farmhouse feels like a liminal space — just a few key items of furniture in Rae Smith's design — and many of the characters sense, or reach for, something bigger to explain their unhappy state. As with The Weir, McPherson's early success, a fascination with the mysterious reveals deep psychological wounds. Lydia urges her brother-in-law to fetch her some water from a supposedly magic well, but what we see is the agony of a woman desperate to win back her husband's love. When Pierre, who is blind, declares his intentions for the farm and apparently undergoes a miraculous transformation, it feels like a man spotting an opportunity for a new lease of life. The drama (also directed by McPherson) spends much of the first two acts depicting the dilemmas, only to hit the rapids in act three and move on in act four. It makes for a packed drama and McPherson doesn't quite pull all the threads together. But it's best to roll with the pace, savour the pithy, witty dialogue, and relish the performances, which are excellent. In a beautifully weighted ensemble, Chris O'Dowd is super as the loudly self- pitying Dermot, counterweighted by Brian Gleeson's Stephen, heavy with years of ingrained disappointment. There's a pin-sharp performance from Derbhle Crotty as Pierre's housekeeper, Elizabeth. Best of all is Rosie Sheehy, outstanding as Billie, whose frankness makes her both vulnerable and insightful, and who is, like Chekhov's Sonia, the anchor of the play. It doesn't all gel. But what it catches so well is the difficulty of change, the restlessness of human nature and the deep, nagging desire to find meaning in life.

CURRENT - NEW **London**
Theatreviews

CORONET THEATRE

*****EINKVAN by JON FOSSE composer ERIK HEDIN dramaturg ANNA ALBRIGTSEN director KJERSTI HORN décor/costume SVEN HARALDSSON lights OSCAR UDBYE sound ERIK HEDIN video/projection MADS SJØGÅRD PETTERSEN with VETLE BERGAN, JON BLEIKLIE DEVIK, PREBEN HODNELAND, MARIANNE KROGH, LAILA GOODY, PER SCHAANNING**

Blanche Marvin Critique
Einkvan (Everyman) is a fascinating dynamic written by Norwegian Nobel Prize winning novelist and playwright, Jon Fosse and directed by Kjersti Horn. The play is a series of monologues regarding the relationship of mother to son, who is reluctant to see his mother and father. The faces of

the six-person cast are filmed and projected on screens above the stage telling the story as they physically move bellow in strange shapes. It is the moving story of a family broken apart, of a sense of loss and a fleeting moment in time left to project grief. Enclosed are other critic's reviews. Sent 08.05.2025.

The Stage (**) Written by Tom Wicker

Det Norske Teatret artistic director Kjersti Horn's technically fascinating, theatrically tough-going staging of Nobel Prize-winner Jon Fosse's elliptical play about loneliness and loss arrives in London after debuting in Oslo in early 2024. We're presented with Sven Haraldsson's box-like set design. The top half consists of two video screens. The bottom half is ringed by translucent curtains, through which we occasionally make out the indistinct shapes of people moving about, sometimes pausing to face out at us. The suggestion of fluidity and water is intensified by the close-up projection on a screen of the face of Vetle Bergan's nameless male character, who is lying in a bath. In hushed voiceover, the camera always focused on his eyes, Bergan talks hauntedly about being followed, perhaps by his mother or father. The second screen cycles through mirroring close-ups of two older women (Marianne Krogh and Hilde Olausson), another younger man (Preben Hodneland) and two older men (Jon Bleiklie Devik and Per Schaanning). Their words echo and loop as the characters seem at times to be in conversation with each other, but also to blur together. Fosse's writing has the rhythm of a poem. Cumulatively, it's a mosaic of loss and estrangement, through which we glimpse a family that has broken apart – unable to see each other literally or figuratively, even if the elusive writing crystalises just enough to steer tiresomely into stereotypes about domineering mothers. There's an intriguing sensuality to the way in which the younger men eventually share a screen. Whether they are different people or two facets of the same lonely man, there's an emotive yearning for connection. The cast certainly bring an intensity to their onscreen performances, which are filmed live by camera operators in the bottom of the set. At a conceptual level, Horn's production is gripping, playing with ideas of what we, like the characters, can and can't see via the duality of its staging. There's an in-built voyeurism to our access to these people's lives. The piece has a quasi-hypnotic rhythm – and it's also pretty soporific. Perhaps because of its staging, Horn's production often feels dramatically static – encumbered and weighted down, rather than liberated, by the two screens that dominate our perception of what's happening. As characters make the same ambiguous laments over and over again, it begins to drag. The possible power of this repetition, of lives in a loop, feels bogged down as

yet another face looms into view. It's easy to admire the ambition and vision here, but much harder to engage with it as a theatrical experience.

The Guardian (***) Written by Ryan Gilbey

A sinister, clinical chill permeates this beguiling production of a new work by Norwegian dramatist Jon Fosse, aided by clever lighting and a ghostly piano score. The dynamic between audience and performer is vital to theatre, so what happens when it is imperilled? Einkvan (Everyman), written by the Nobel- winning novelist and playwright Jon Fosse and directed by Kjersti Horn, puts that idea to the test, hiding the entire stage behind fogged plastic curtains suggestive of a sinister clinic. The six-person cast register only as vaguely shifting shapes, though their faces are filmed in tight closeup by two cameras; the images are then relayed to the auditorium on a pair of screens above the stage and accompanied by the cryptic Norwegian dialogue in surtitles. The effect is contradictory. We are so intimate with these actors that we can count every pore on their faces and even see the ring-lights reflected in their eyes, but we are also simultaneously held at arm's length. That discord mirrors the play's themes of estrangement and solitude, the need for human contact locked in a violent struggle with the thirst for autonomy. The opening closeups form a diptych of the same face shot from different angles as a man lies in the bath fretting over the possibility that someone is watching or following him. Someone other than the camera operator, presumably. He doesn't have both screens to himself for long. Soon, a second male face appears on the right. Are they old flames? Siblings? Or, given the Bergmanesque mood, two halves of the same personality? The possibilities shift as readily as the camera angles. Other pairs of doppelgangers take their turn in closeup, each making some parental claim on the younger duo. The bathwater becomes redolent less of a soak in the tub than the suspension of a foetus in amniotic fluid. Never mind cutting the apron strings: the son seems barely to have departed the womb. Among this opaque production's more expressive elements is Oscar Udbye's lighting, which allows the pale antiseptic chill to give way now and then to a warming orange glow that defrosts the stage before the next emotional ice age sets in. In Erik Hedin's score, a piano motif surfaces from the eerie ambient hum before plunging, like the son in his bathtub, back beneath the surface again.

CURRENT – NEW **London**
Theatreviews

*****BLOOD WEDDING by BARNEY NORRIS after LORCA director TRICIA THORNS décor ALEX MARKER costume CARLA JOY EVANS lights NEILL BRINKWORTH sound DOMINIC BILKEY with NELL WILLIAMS georgie, CHRISTOPHER NEENAN rob, ALIX DUNMORE helen, DAVID FIELDER brian, ESME LONSDALE danni, KIEFER MORIARTY lee**

Blanche Marvin Critique, 16th May 2025

Playwright, Barney Norris, has adapted Lorca's tragedy Blood Wedding to the very English setting of Wiltshire and set it in modern day. Instead of rivalling families, there is a love triangle between Georgie and Rob, the man she marries and her old boyfriend, Lee, an Irish traveller whom her parents refused to let her marry. The plot revolves around the wedding at a village hall run by eccentric Brian, a crusty caretaker, who at first glance seems to just be a comedic, working class man but as the play evolves reveals himself to be not only a source of wisdom about the ups and downs of life but the poetic narrator of its tragic ending. Everyone is damaged by the event. Rob's meddling mother and Lee's abandoned wife, Danni, form an unlikely bond while Georgie is left to live with the consequences of her infidelity and the death of two men. The strength of the show revolves around the wonderful performance of David Fielder as Brian who holds the piece together. Enclosed are other critic's reviews. Sent 16.05.2025.

The Stage (****) Written by Holly O'Mahony

Lorca's tragedy becomes a tale of dreams and disenfranchisement in rural Wiltshire

Lorca's tragedy feels right at home in Wiltshire in this version by Barney Norris, directed by Tricia Thorns for Two's Company. As well as lifting the story from its rural Spanish setting and nudging it forward by 100 years, it cuts half the characters (we don't miss them) and laces the tale with an inspired blend of local folklore and current top-of-the-agenda issues, from the cost of living to precarious housing. There's even a small hint of Jez Butterworth's Jerusalem to its complex, disenfranchised characters, larger-than-life yet unheard in this quiet pocket of south-west England. Our young lovers are the big-hearted, secretive Georgie (Nell Williams) and the volatile Rob (Christopher Neenan, in a promising professional debut), still at the mercy of his raging teenage hormones. They're hastily planning a budget wedding at a village hall to formalise their relatively new relationship – perhaps because it's the only marker of adulthood that feels within reach, even though it's Rob's meddling mother Helen (a sensitive Alix Dunmore) who's opening her purse to fund it. There are no feuding families here, but in this small community, it's no surprise that the roofer of the hall is Georgie's

nonchalantly seductive ex-boyfriend Lee (Kiefer Moriarty), an Irish traveller whose presence ruffles feathers. Lee has settled down with Georgie's old school friend Danni (Esme Lonsdale), whose pretence of happy families is threadbare. Lee swaggers on to the stage, beer in hand, muttering the old folk song Raggle Taggle Gypsy, which cannily warns us what's to come. Never far from view is the eccentric Brian (a scene-stealing David Fielder), the hall's crusty caretaker, full of rambling stories about the lost village of Imber. Through some opportune doubling and an unsettling flash of magical realism, he becomes an omnipotent reminder that there's often more to people than meets the eye. The action plays out entirely in front of the hall, which in Alex Marker's design transitions smoothly from appearing desolate and in need of a paint job in the first act to charmingly festive for the wedding – with colourful bunting and a friendly glow radiating from its windows – then back again. Dominic Bilkey's sound design brings lashings of atmosphere, from birdsong grounding the daytime scenes in the countryside to a wedding-scene trick in which snatches of dance-floor fillers blare from inside each time the door opens. Running parallel to the narrative are a number of well-explored themes: shifting attitudes to marriage; the appeal of returning to a past relationship to escape present problems; young men drink-driving on treacherous country roads; and a generation with fewer opportunities than their parents, unsure how to become adults.

Broadway World (****) Written by Gary Naylor

Barney Norris sets his version of the Lorca classic in present day Wiltshire. Is it the West Country accents? Is it the isolation of rural lives - towns, villages, roads entirely unknown to us cosmopolitans? Is it the vague sense that we hover in a liminal space, both more attached to the soil of England, but also offering glimpses of a ghostly world, death's dark vale thinly shrouded by the mists above the ponds. Of course, Federico García Lorca explored this psychological territory long before Jez Butterworth wrote Jerusalem, but Barney Norris's adaptation of one of the 20th century's greatest plays, Blood Wedding, captures an element of the hybridity that exists between the two related works. The otherness of these plays to the eyes, ears and, especially, sensibilities of a townie like me also unites them - I've never met people like this! We tend to think of the USA's sharp divide between liberal urban and conservative rural, but it's present in England too, sharpened by culture war rhetoric and a party in government now less willing to listen to the special pleading of farmers and landowners. Mystical stuff rumbles in the background for much of Tricia Thorns' production, as she continually ratchets up the tension from its mundane start to its epically tragic conclusion. It's harmless enough in the beginning. Rob and Georgie are scouting a wedding

reception venue out in the sticks and their budget stretches only as far as a village hall. Rob's mother, Helen, is with them, embittered about her own failed marriage and, with a barely concealed lower middle class disdain, jabs disapprovingly at her very young son's older bride. Unexpectedly, an old school friend of the bride turns up, Danni, pregnant and pushing a pram. There's plenty passes unsaid between the women and we soon learn that Georgie is the ex of Danni's husband, Lee. Meanwhile the old caretaker is somehow always present, quietly grieving a dead daughter and wife, his own birthplace village requisitioned in wartime and off-limits for all but one day each year, his only chance to honour their graves. Christopher Neenan, in his professional debut, is splendid as Rob, the big dumb lad, all toothy grins and always bringing an unthinking optimistic bonhomie to rival The Inbetweeners' Neil. Alix Dunmore isn't given enough to do with Helen, though she delivers a late, touching reconciliation with Esme Lonsdale's Danni, softening her somewhat one-dimensional uptight harshness in earlier scenes. The weight of the play is borne by Nell Williams as the damaged bride who carries the appalling realisation that she gambled on the wedding erasing her past life and it hasn't. In fact, it resurrected it, with Lee back in her eyeline, the man her family forced her to relinquish. Kiefer Moriarty, perfectly cast and doing wonderful accent work, draws on Marlon Brando levels of bad boy charm as the Traveller lad Georgie just can't quit. Sure he's Bad News, but you can see why he's the eye candy that poisons the well. Even if you don't know the Lorca, your stomach knots with tension as the spiral into disaster tightens and tightens. David Fielder plays the ethereal Brian with no little charm of his own and delivers the father figure they're all missing with a winning light touch. But it's when he has to take on the author's ambition to create 'a new mythology' for Wiltshire that the play stumbles in its conception and execution of its coup de théâtre. I knew immediately why. Lorca's plays are steeped in Catholicism at its most pagan in its rituals, its iconography and its cult of death as salvation. There are references to pagan rites in Norris's re-interpretation, but it cannot carry crashing tides of history that the Roman church can bring to bear on any story. Checking my phone in the interval, the first story concerned black smoke sighted billowing from the Sistine Chapel's chimney - no dramatist can allude to anything as theatrical as that, nor much else that has been sent forth from The Holy See over centuries.