

» **The Critics** | Theatre

Swimming pool tale unafraid to tackle horror in deep end

Is he or isn't he paedophile coach drama needs tightening

ARCHIMEDES PRINCIPLE
Park Theatre

★★★★☆

» A kiss is an innocent thing. So claims Brandon, the swimming coach accused of inappropriate contact, but in Josep Maria Miró i Coromina's unsettling drama, innocence is constantly reframed by context.

Are we more likely to believe Brandon before or after hearing his unsavoury comments, or witnessing a locker search, or learning about the paedophilic incident at a local youth centre?

Narrative

"One issue has nothing to do with the other," protests Brandon – except, of course, that it does.

Coromina's non-linear play, translated by Dustin Langan, spins conflicting narratives as it loops around.

It demonstrates there's no such thing as an unbiased view, and offers timely commentary on privacy rights, institutional loyalty and trial by social media.

However, the cyclical structure and long overlaps robs it of dramatic momentum.

Coromina builds a sense of growing dread, but doesn't resolve it with a pay off.

Crisp

His 80-minute piece could be tightened to a crisp one-act, or developed much further.

Marta Noguera-Cuevas's traverse staging reflects the emotional claustrophobia.

Scenes are punctuated by a blast of children shrieking in the pool – a sound that switches between euphoric and alarming.

Lee Knight's buff, swaggering Brandon, slick as his hair gel, crumbles believably under pressure.

The fractured relationship between him and fellow coach Matt (Matt Bradley-Robinson), whose admiration turns to revulsion, is nicely sketched: criminality is in the eye of the beholder. But between their natural banter and a few evocative monologues is an



■ The admiration of Matt (Matt Bradley-Robinson) turns to revulsion for coach Brandon

odd, stilted style, perhaps too-literal translation, with swerves into melodrama.

Kathryn Worth and Julian Sims, as Brandon's boss and an irate parent respectively, fall victim to it: they're more cyphers than rounded people.

Yet there is inventive exploration of thorny, taboo issues.

Is our society losing its innocence, or are we just becoming aware of the monsters lurking in the depths? Coromina offers no easy answers.

Until May 11.

Marianka Swain



■ Kathryn Worth and Lee Knight as swaggering Brandon and his boss



■ Alice Sykes, Rebecca McKinnis and Matthew Cottle
Picture: Johann Perrson

Ayckbourn revival looking a bit dated despite some fun

A SMALL FAMILY BUSINESS
Oliver Theatre

★★★★☆

Alan Ayckbourn's gift for looking through the net curtains of suburbia and imagining the secrets, lies, and dramas that nestle in a world of soft furnishings and cookery books, gets a robust airing in Adam Penford's revival of *A Small Family Business*.

There is punch in the delivery and pleasing moments of bedroom and kitchen action, but while humour is evident in every line, it is only occasionally converted into laughter.

The story has all the classic markers of a farcical situation. Jack McCracken takes over the family business and learns – from the Private Investigator who has just caught Jack's teenage daughter shoplifting – that someone's cooking the books.

As Jack hatches a deal to get his daughter off the hook, he muses aloud at the shocking lack of morality required to cheat and vows to find the culprit.

You can guess the rest, can't you?

As Jack's own standards slip, enter his doopy brother Cliff, a ringer for Gene Hunt. And then Cliff's sexy wife, Anita, who is coincidentally

entertaining five Mafia brothers in her sex dungeon. And then there's his OCD sister-in-law Harriet, with the balding dog in a basket. And her husband Des, who creates inedible dishes and dreams of being a chef in his own restaurant on the Med. And then, and then, and then...

First aired in 1987, *A Small Family Business* feels so dated, it could be twenty years older, which is odd as the themes of entitlement, honour and morality are high on the public agenda today.

Tim Hatley's fabulous design – a full-sized house in which all the action takes place – looks amazing but is sterile. It does not aid and abet the action, it simply harbours it.

Nigel Lindsay is terrific as Jack, and Matthew Cottle is spittle-flecked and delightful as the sly and creepy PI, Benedict Hough. There are terrific cameos too from Stephen Beckett, Niky Wardley, Debra Gillet and Alice Sykes, but there is little characterisation and it is the plot that drives the story.

There is a National Theatre Live broadcast of the production on June 12, by which time it may have better bedded in.

Shyama Perera

Cruella de Vil baby farm shows how far we have come

WOMEN OF TWILIGHT
Pleasance Theatre, Islington

★★★★☆

Sometimes perseverance in the face of adversity can spark the most fortuitous of outcomes. Originally stemming from an inability to track down a film that had haunted him, theatre director Jonathan Rigby sourced the core material for himself.

Struck by the potency of the script, he brought *Women of Twilight* back to its rightful place; the stage.

Set in a baby farm in the early years of the welfare state, the focus is fixed on the fortunes of 11 women.

These women have either sought shelter or work within the farm's walls. Once there, they are placed within the pressure cooker of a confined space where the dilapidation of

the environment is almost as coarse as the wider social attitude that looks down on them with disdain.

Personalities clash and egos collide. Whilst this is a consistently satisfying piece, that is not to say that there aren't minor missteps. Emma Reade-Davies' Sal is an example. On the one hand, we are told that she is in command of childcare responsibilities; on the other, her physical and mental appearance is too delicate to infer realism in that vocation.

There are a number of inspired brushstrokes too; if Cruella De Vil ran a baby farm she would most likely resemble Sally Mortemore's Helen. She oozes a surreptitious venality.

Special mention must also go to Elizabeth Donnelly (Christine) and Christie Banks (Molly) who shine particularly brightly and deserve broader

acclaim. When it debuted in 1951, *Women of Twilight* was a hit.

Sadly, this budding success gave way to anonymity, as the play slipped from both the collective consciousness and the theatrical repertoire.

Looking back now, it can be seen as a strong marker for how far we've travelled as a society in a relatively short period of time.

Yet the content also throbs with a mournful essence that remains disappointingly familiar.

For at its heart, it speaks of the good, the bad and the ugly of human personality.

And that is something that is eternally relevant.

Until April 27.

Greg Wetherall



■ Sally Mortemore (Helen) and Claire Louise Amias (Vivienne)
Picture: Tristram Kenton