

» **The Critics** | Theatre

Like Banksy himself, offering is 'frustratingly out of reach'

Play delves into moral murkiness surrounding art and profit

BANKSY: THE ROOM IN THE ELEPHANT
Arcola Theatre
★★★☆☆

» In 2011, reclusive artist Banksy spotted an old water tank in LA and tagged it "This looks a bit like an elephant".

When news spread, and the tank's value skyrocketed, a consortium of art dealers repossessed it, in the process seizing the home of Tachowa Covington, who'd lived there for seven years.

Tom Wainwright takes this story as the basis for his short play, but deliberately reimagines it. The result is a rich monologue, ably performed by charismatic Gary Beadle, which grapples with social divide, the act of creation and the artist's responsibility to real-life subjects.

The irony of accusing Banksy of exploitation is not lost on Wainwright, whose self-referential script features Covington berating him for using another person to cure his writer's block, and challenging the audience's desire to learn about Banksy, not him. The snake has eaten its own tail and come back for seconds.

Intrusion

It's neat having Covington, up in the LA hills, plot his own Hollywood character arc and attempt to reclaim his story via a YouTube video; it questions our complicity in easy narratives, rather than complex truths.

But Wainwright's on-the-nose pontificating grows tiresome, stopping us from connecting naturally with both themes and emotion. The rough projections and music dominating Emma Callander's production likewise intrude.

Hal Samples' documentary about Covington follows, giving events a different framework and directly addressing the play's moral murkiness. It's thought-provoking and, at times, un-



■ Gary Beadle takes centre stage at The Arcola

Picture: Richard Davenport

comfortable viewing. The man himself, however, is lost.

Wainwright's Covington wears the mask of flawless victim in a generic, urban sob story, complete with Disney animal sidekick; Samples' more tangible version is fascinatingly eccentric

and resourceful, yet still a tool for social commentary.

A stirring evening, but, like Banksy himself, real engagement remains frustratingly out of reach.

Until April 26.

Marianka Swain



■ Dress rehearsal for El Dorado

Picture: Zute Lightfoot

Witty tale of infidelity, greed and deception in a war zone

ELDORADO
Arcola 2 Hackney
★★★★☆

El Dorado is known as the mythical lost South American city where it was rumoured the streets were paved with gold.

Marius von Mayenburg's El Dorado is a city torn apart by bombs and ready to be pillaged. An investor's dream, this city of greed offers unique historic prospects to those brave enough to take the risks. As the smoke rises from another city saved by coalition bombs, there's a fortune to be made rebuilding the wreckage.

The new inhabitants of the city are aspirational by nature and aiming for success. On the face of it Anton has got it made, with a dream house, beautiful musician wife and a baby on the way. But all is not what it seems – we see Anton forging his boss's signature and keeping secrets from his family with ever more deception. And his wife, desperate to escape her pianist career, tries to crush her hands under the piano lid.

Meanwhile, a wealthy wid-

ow with her toyboy partner are equally unfulfilled by this strange and amoral environment. Each and every one of the characters we meet is deeply, deeply unstable.

With painfully funny scenes of married bliss in meltdown and the insistent presence, on their screens and in their dreams, of the West's far-flung and half-forgotten wars – *Eldorado* asks what happens when the drive for success carries us past our coping point. In this indictment of modern bourgeois society, Von Mayenburg shows us that we're unlikely to get our bond back when our lease on the planet expires.

Sian Thomas offers the laughs as the wittily inappropriate, drunken, rich widow. And Mark Tandy is a delight as Anton's sadistic Satan-like boss.

It's a fast paced play that held the attention of this buzzing audience throughout. Confusing at times, but always enthralling, this is an impressive production with high-level performances.

Emily Govan

Farming tale's a little on the dry side

ONCE WE LIVED HERE
King's Head Theatre
★★★☆☆

Jaunty songs armed with droll wit and pith might sound like a recipe for success for this award-winning new Australian musical but, if anything, the residual heavy lesson of *Once We Lived Here* is the vital importance of that notion known as "story".

This bountiful play at the King's Head is burdened by a confused narrative. On the one hand, it is about the demise of family-run farms. It tells the tale of a small family who are pushed to consider abandoning their home, their business and source of livelihood because of a prolonged drought that has beset them. It is a topical issue of noble value.

On the other hand, it deviates with worrying frequency into sitcom drama, wallowing in love affairs and the travails of a dysfunctional family. It dips into farce and sincerity. It drops in and out of thematic intention with the commitment of a serial philanderer.

It is dizzyingly disorientating and frustratingly hard to pin down.

No dramatic impulse is satisfyingly explored. For example, the crushing commercial reality for the majority of family run farms is not referenced with any level of detail. There is also never enough invested in the characters to truly empathise with their personal woes. Consequently, their tribulations wash over the audience without any real impact.

In the attempt to tick off each box in the theatrical checklist, this promising musical becomes far less than the sum of its parts.

On a positive note, the performances are committed, spirited and, despite a few wonky harmonies early on, commendably effective. This ensemble does their level best to hold things together.

It is just a pity that the blue sky responsible for the drought didn't appear metaphorically for the writing. *Once We Lived Here* is a disappointment that isn't without occasional charm and momentary flashes of success. In the main, however, it is served up as an arid emotional experience.

Until April 26.

Greg Wetherall



■ Belinda Wollaston, Iestyn Arwel and Melle Stewart

Picture: Andreas Grieger