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# Comedy shows a friend in need is a pain indeed...

## Two-hander is delight but just needs more balance

**FRIDA KAHLO OF PENGE WEST**  
Rosemary Branch Theatre

★★★★☆

This delicious double-hander brokers laughs and frustration alike.

A product of writer/director Chris Larner, it's a wry, comedic look at those who wreak immediate havoc upon those around them, testing patience and tolerance to the nth degree, and places the delusional aspirations of the belligerently determined under the microscope.

Laura Kirman is Zoe: a gentle, cheerful, earnest young professional who has fallen for her boss.

In an attempt to act on this desire, she nervously invites him to the theatre. With a positive response in the bag, she makes her way to the ticket office, where she is greeted by an old university acquaintance, Ruth (Cecily Nash).

Not only is Ruth outspoken, ditz and ebulliently dramatic, she is also without the filter of social etiquette and self-awareness. She immediately imposes upon Zoe; demanding a place to crash now that she has broken up with her boyfriend. It quickly becomes apparent that a (university) friend in need is a burden indeed.

Whilst ensconced in Zoe's apartment and licking the wounds of her breakup, Ruth sets about seeking inspiration. She wishes to create a seminal piece of theatrical work. She looks for female icons to provide the source of her triumph. Eventually, through much brainstorming, she settles on Mexican artist Frida Kahlo: an artist she believes to be a kindred spirit. Will the play be a success? Unsurprisingly, things flail and flap with farce and fireworks.

Staged simply, the play's success hinges on the charisma of the two performers. Whilst never shy of commitment, it's a pity to report that this is where matters are unbalanced. The script certainly has verve and vim, but the conveyance is without much nuance. Although her role is the key comedy cipher, so consistently over the top is Ceci-



■ Cecily Nash, left, and Laura Kirman

Picture: Ivan Savage

ly Nash's Ruth that she risks casting Laura Kirman completely into the shade. A little more bal-

ance and this could be a thing of riotous wonder. Until July 13.  
Greg Wetherall



■ Dermot Crowley, Robert Glenister and Billie Piper

Picture: Johan Persson

## Satire written in secret hot off the presses now hacking trial is over

**GREAT BRITAIN**  
National Theatre

★★★★☆

Richard Bean's rollicking swipe at the red tops fizzles with energy and gags both coarse and clever, but takes so many (cheap) shots at its targets it's in danger of not landing its punches.

In satirising the grubby collusion between politicians, police and the papers, Bean stuffs in the gamut of recent scandals from MPs expenses to phone hacking. There are allusions to Milly Dowler, Murdoch's BSkyB takeover, and Met Commander Ali Dizaei, but is Bean telling us anything we didn't already know?

Billie Piper excels as amoral, sexy, hyper-ambitious Paige Britain, news editor of The Free Press, prepared to – literally – get into bed with whoever it takes to get a seat at the top table of power and influence.

In a Coulson-esque twist, her foul-mouthed exuberant editor Wilson Tikkel (Robert Glenister, superb) ends up as Downing Street's press spokesman, leaving Britain free to hack the phones of celebrities, topless models and the father of abducted twins.

On a yacht-based shooting trip,

Dermot Crowley's newspaper magnate Paschal O'Leary wins a concession to scrap the BBC license fee in return for endorsing a conservative election bid – a warning about how far friendly horse rides between David Cameron and Rebekah Brooks might lead.

There are hugely enjoyable running gags, often in headlines flashed up on screens.

The hacking scandal is broken by The Gardener newspaper (tagline "we think so you don't have to") and the gaffe-strewn quotations of incompetent Met Commissioner, Sully Kassam, end up as a Youtube spoof.

The second half turns darker as hacking results in suicide, recriminations, wrongful conviction and death.

Britain's defense implicates us all – we applaud her methods when they expose corruption or celebrity gossip, but castigate her when things go wrong.

Worked on in secret and only staged once the hacking trial was over, Hytner's production is admirably topical and often hilarious, but doesn't suggest how to curb journalistic excess while protecting free speech.

Until further notice.

Bridget Galton

## Playwright fails to hit heights of acting career in this protracted saga

**DAYTONA**  
Theatre Royal, Harkmarket

★★★★☆

Actor-turned-playwright Oliver Cotton's new work poses a problem for reviewers: how much to divulge? It hinges on big revelations, and as much of the meandering two-hour-plus play is interminable preparation for said revelations, it would seem cruel to spoil them, snatching away the ribbon just as you approach the marathon finishing line.

Yet the problem with Cotton's piece is that it takes so long

getting to its twists, there's little time to deal with the fallout, so denying us the meat of the drama. Instead, his set-up has a self-indulgent epic quality that makes Scorsese look positively epigrammatic.

In 1980s New York, an elderly Jewish couple's comfortable life is interrupted by the sudden return of Joe's estranged brother, who disappeared 30 years earlier. Wild-eyed raconteur Billy (Cotton) shares his strange tale: while holidaying in Daytona Beach, Florida, he spotted a key figure from their collective past

and took drastic action. Billy's lengthy yarn would be more engaging if Harry Shearer's bland accountant Joe communicated an interesting response, but he's hamstrung by Cotton and director David Grindley's indecision: is this high drama or black comedy? It falls somewhere in between, neither wholly believable nor particularly affecting.

The second half – a similarly protracted saga – is far more effective due to excellent Maureen Lipman providing the necessary range of emotion, from sardonic passive aggression through to

vehement, naked grief. But she can't escape the fact that the first-half twist is essentially a red herring, with the expected debate concerning trauma, revenge, reinvention and morality mired in predictable melodrama.

The ambitious ideas are never fully developed, and the play's inciting incident is too similar to Dorfman's far superior *Death and the Maiden*. The real revelation here is that Cotton the playwright has yet to match the heights of Cotton the actor.

Until August 23.

Marianka Swain



■ Maureen Lipman and Harry Shearer

Picture: Johan Persson