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Stripped back piece makes us focus on human condition

Revival is startlingly profound in its seeming simplicity

OUR TOWN
Almeida Theatre, N1
★★★★☆

The heartfelt message of Thornton Wilder's iconic 1938 play is delivered with stunning directness in David Cromer's unaffected revival.

Wilder's fourth-wall-busting piece endeavours to communicate the truth of what it means to be human by limiting theatrical artifice, an aim honoured by Cromer's intimate, immersive staging, in which house lights stay up and actors wander freely through the audience.

Often played as a mistily nostalgic paean to small-town America, Cromer's *Our Town* instead strips away period dressing that might act as a barrier: Alison Siple's costumes are neutral contemporary and performers use their natural accents.

New Hampshire settlement Grover's Corners may be evoked with dogged deliberateness, but this production balances specificity with resonant universality.

Cromer himself plays the metatheatrical Stage Manager, narrating and directing the action with dry matter-of-factness, like a jaded flight attendant pointing out fire exits.

The effect of this artlessness – Wilder's preferred "understatement of sentiment" – and Stephen Dobay's minimalist set is to stimulate our imagination and demand a rewarding level of engagement.

Similarly unshowy performances communicate emotional undercurrents with admirable restraint. Laura Elsworth's Emily is refreshingly spiky, while David Walmsley is fearlessly unfiltered as her puppyish suitor. Anna Francolini and Kate Dickie evoke the weary domestic grind, Richard Lumsden displays deft timing, Annette McLaughlin lands an hysterical cameo, and Christopher



■ Laura Elsworth, David Cromer and David Walmsley *Picture: Marc Brenner*

Staines' depressive choirmaster delivers both Jonathan Mastro's expressive music and a genuinely disquieting beat.

The absence of props results in some dubious mime, and allowing the story to drift into a more contemporary realm makes the gender politics problematic.

Yet this quietly sincere piece is a

striking microcosm, homespun philosophy masking deeper wisdom. Wilder argues for the preciousness of inconsequential moments, and in asking what makes a life and how we might be remembered, *Our Town* is startlingly profound in its seeming simplicity.

Until November 29.

Marianka Swain



■ Jenny Ogilvie and Edward Wolstenholme *Picture: Matt Howey*

Lots of laughter in this satire on life, love and sex hotlines

UNIDENTIFIED ITEM IN THE BAGGING AREA
Old Red Lion Theatre,
St. John Street, EC1
★★★★☆

The opening moments of this play grab the attention by boldly staging what would normally be a very private occasion and then making a joke of it.

Taken by surprise, the audience is soon rocking with laughter. The writer, Sarah Simmonds, ridicules the painful situations, the ridiculous antics, of human beings while never once losing sight of how difficult, how very deep, these dilemmas are, and how unhappy people are made by them.

Post-menopausal Victoria is played with sensitivity and perfect timing by Jenny Ogilvie. Over the years, she and her husband have ceased to have meaningful communication. She feels redundant and unloved. This is, of course, a contemporary problem: in the past, many women died in childbirth or soon after

and men would re-marry someone younger and sexier.

Victoria – who, irritatingly, often seems more like a 1950s housewife than a post-women's lib. female – seeks help from a support group, run by Anita, hilariously caricatured by Kate Russell Smith. There she meets the ebullient Meg, an independent woman who earns her living by running a sex hotline. Meg (exuberantly performed by Paddy Navin) proves to be a supportive friend.

Modern life, too, is ruthlessly satirised: the scene in the supermarket automatic checkout is unforgettable. Inevitably, the ending is somewhat contrived – real life does not provide satisfactory endings and this play is grounded in real life. Overall, this play provides an evening of hilarious entertainment, plus plenty of food for thought!

Box office: 0844 412 4307
Until 8th November.

Jill Truman

Imelda is great on dance floor but musical says little about dictatorships or even shoes

HERE LIES LOVE
National Theatre – Dorfman
★★★★☆

With an *Evita* revival running in the West End, there seems a trend for musicals about despotic, spendthrift self-styled women-of-the-people who married international leaders.

Like the Rice/Lloyd Webber offering, this boogie through the life of Imelda Marcos by musician/composer David Byrne and DJ Fatboy Slim offers fabulous costume changes, a sung-through score of uplifting melodies and an anti-heroine with a cold, ambitious heart.

Taking inspiration from Imelda's love of disco dancing, the newly refurbished Dorfman Theatre – formerly the Cottesloe, now with better toilets and bigger bar – has been converted into a nightclub. Audience members can sit in the gallery or throw shapes on the dancefloor, shepherded by pink-jumpsuited bouncers as shifting catwalks and rostra are



■ Natalie Mendoza as Imelda Marcos with a cast including Dean John-Wilson as Aquino *Picture: Tristram Kenton*

used to perform upon. At one point we're even taught to line-dance.

In a tightly-choreographed enjoyable camp fest that borders on the glib, Alex Timbers' slick direction fast-tracks us from Imelda's modest origins in the

1940s via beauty pageant success to first dating senator Ninoy Aquino, then future pres Ferdinand Marcos. As the story turns darker – Imelda pops pills to deal with the public attention and marital infidelities – the couple's popular presidency turns to dictatorship

with extravagant spending, the declaration of martial law, and imprisonment and assassination of opposition leader Aquino.

Natalie Mendoza is seductively dazzling as Imelda, ably supported by a slick-haired Mark Bautista as Ferdinand Marcos and Dean

John-Wilson as a poignant Aquino who bravely returns from exile to his death.

And Peter Nigrini's evocative projections on multiple screens offer images of real life figures.

From the programme notes Byrne means to criticise America's complicity in the saga and pay tribute to the bravery of the Filipino people for staging a peaceful coup against the Marcos in 1986. But the lack of dialogue, coupled with the relentlessly throbbing disco beat deny quieter moments to explore political or emotional complexities.

We hear almost nothing from ordinary folk about what it's to live in a dictatorship, nor do we get a window on the inner life of the increasingly delusional Imelda. Oddly there's barely a mention of shoes.

For all its dazzle and energy, *Here Lies Love* leaves you as empty as its heroine's heart.

Until January 8.
Bridget Galton