



# Trapped between two worlds in New Orleans

Voodoo and magic realism lace a struggle for identity and freedom

**L**ike the Lorca play that inspired it, *The House That Will Not Stand* is an intensely lyrical drama about a widow with unwed daughters who pull against her controlling will.

Poet and playwright Marcus Gardley has transplanted themes of female repression in *The House of Bernarda Alba* from rural Spain to 19th Century New Orleans to explore a little-known part of America's racial past.

Set in 1836, it's a time when racial acceptance under French Colonial rule has cultivated a system of placage – where white men lived in open partnerships with free women of colour.

The play's opening, at the death of the head of the household, triggers a vulnerable moment for matriarch Beatrice.

Trinidadian actress Martina Laird who plays the role at The Tricycle Theatre says she's all too aware of her precarious status in face of less permissive racial attitudes.

"Historically there was a thriving class of free coloured people in French-run territories which were sold in 1805 under the Louisiana purchase. It takes a while to feel the effects but free coloured people like Beatrice are aware of the tide turning and the spectre of slavery looming."

Beatrice has fought hard for her family's freedoms and risen to become among the wealthiest women of colour in the city.

"Lighter skinned women were placed in a contract with wealthy white men, not a marriage but a steady relationship that had an official stamp in which she was essentially supported. His death means she has to do what she can to make sure her financial position isn't compromised. She's aware of



■ Martina Laird plays Beatrice  
Picture: Mark Douet

her vulnerability in the world."

Laird, best known as feisty former *Casualty* regular Comfort Jones, says Beatrice's controlling behaviour is "contextualised" by a very real threat to her freedom.

"She's a tough character, ruthless in pursuit of her desires, but her need to control her environment comes from a very dark legacy of slavery. She's free but still has a knowledge of the cruelty that she has come from and wants to make sure her daughters never have to experience being hurt as she was. Her daughters rebel, but different generations have their own context.

"The young are less aware of the struggles that have been fought for the freedoms that they take for granted but in this world it's possible to slip backwards. An older generation would be aware of the dangers of that in a way the younger would not."

Laird praises Gardley's "poetic" script and Tricycle director Indhu Rubasingham's careful direction

in a production that combines elements of magic realism, murder, jealousy, voodoo and a ghost.

She adds: "Unfortunately there is too much that we can look at in this play and understand of our contemporary situation – like the whole idea of shade colourism or pigmentocracy – this looks at its historical context – the light skin is a sign of being much nearer to the colour of the master – and how loathsome it is, then you realise it is still in place.

"Concepts of birth, belonging, entitlement – as much as this is specifically focused on the historical context of New Orleans it's specificity shows us all the things we thought we had moved on from and the ugliness we need to let go of."

## History

Although she recently appeared in the National Theatre's acclaimed production of *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl*, Laird's "heart is fluttering" at thought of another big theatre role.

"The difference between screen and theatre acting is the difference between a marathon and a sprint, each has its challenges, you can be trained for the one but keep wanting to have a go at the other," she says.

But she doesn't regret quitting her long running stint in *Casualty*.

"Being in *Casualty* was a treat. I had wonderful storylines, it was emotionally challenging and I got to jump off buildings and hang out of the back of a moving ambulance, but I am thoroughly enjoying a story like this that speaks to notions of my own cultural history, community and place in the world, that's responsible for who I am today."

■ The House That Will Not Stand runs at The Tricycle Theatre until November 22.



■ Richard Schiff and Lindsay Lohan in *Speed-The-Plow*

## A Lindsay Lohan vehicle that doesn't really get into gear

**SPEED-THE-PLOW**  
Playhouse Theatre  
★★★★☆

**T**he onstage action in Lindsay Posner's much-hyped revival of *Speed-the-Plow* can't begin to compete with its offstage drama.

Ever since tabloid target Lindsay Lohan's casting was announced, people have been taking bets on her actually making it to the theatre, let alone giving a West End-worthy performance.

The bad news for vultures is that she's not a total train wreck, requiring just one audible prompt on press night, but offers an abject lesson in the difference between speaking lines and creating a fully realised character.

In fairness, Mamet poses a challenge with enigmatic Karen, the naive temp secretary who convinces newly appointed Hollywood studio boss Bobby (Richard Schiff) to ditch producer Charlie's (Nigel Lindsay) commercial dead cert in favour of adapting a morally righteous tome.

Yet Lohan, though appealingly childlike, is convincing neither as an impassioned do-gooder nor a cunning manipulator, and her flat intonation grates.

Most egregious, she lets her scene partners down by switching off between lines, as if sensing the camera is no longer on her. It's an unmistakable indication of stage inexperience.

It's not the only miscasting in Posner's lethargic production, with Schiff struggling to convince as a hungrily ambitious shark.

This renders his dramatic 180 – often a tough sell – essentially meaningless, though he's on surer ground with Bobby's crisis of conscience.

## Hustler

The least-talked-about actor is the real star: Brit Lindsay is the sole cast member to nail Mamet's breakneck, machine-gun rhythms. Rather than aping Kevin Spacey's blistering psychotic devil in Matthew Warchus's superior 2008 Old Vic version, he presents Charlie as a sweaty, anxious hustler, aware that this is his last shot at financial security – a resonant reading for our times. Sadly, this *Speed-the-Plow* doesn't deliver satire of an industry sacrificing creative credibility for commercial gain through the play itself, but through the circumstances of its revival.

Until November 29.  
Marianka Swain

## A melodramatic production that needs more bite to really engage

**WARDE STREET**  
Park Theatre  
★★★★☆

**Y**ou would think the 2005 London bombings and their turbulent aftermath offer more than enough drama for an 80-minute play, but actor-turned-writer Damien Tracey adds to the mix political intrigue, romantic scandal, and not one but two ethnically charged revenge killings. Needless to say, most

elements of this sensationalist new work are left fatally underdeveloped.

Warde Street, employing a reverse chronology that serves no purpose other than to flatten the denouement, opens with slippery politician David (Tracey), shackled up with mistress Samiya (Avita Jay), facing further censure when her brother-in-law Ash (Omar Ibrahim) is accused of killing 7/7 widower Eddie (Shane Noone), murderer of Ash's wife Yasmeenah (Maya Saroya).



■ Shane Noone and Omar Ibrahim in *Warde Street*  
Picture: Chris Gardner/Rare Moustache

The second half flashes back to this deadly encounter in Ash's Manchester corner shop, and ups

the thrill level with an armed hostage situation – director Jenny Eastop wrings some tension out of this, even though we know the outcome. She's aided by a riveting performance from Noone as shattered Eddie, desperate to trade helpless grief for active vengeance, and solid support from belligerent Ibrahim and empathetic Saroya.

## Marginalisation

Less effective is the turgid, overlong discussion between Tracey and Jay – who barely convince as people who've met before, let alone star-crossed lovers – and reliance on well-worn conflicts, with Samiya observing (stop press!) that PR rules politics, Eddie making

sweeping generalisations about Muslim faith and hate preachers, and Ash countering that extremism often stems from marginalisation.

One promising thread is the revelation that Ash, once a hard-partying depressive, only found peace and stability after recommitting to Islam – a life change Eddie sees as another cause of bereavement. The inclusion of additional provocative, unpredictable elements would make Warde Street an engaging dramatic response, rather than melodrama benefitting from association with emotive real events.

Until October 26.  
Marianka Swain