

The Critics | Theatre



■ The magical realism of Beckett is evoked in Simon Bejer's piece with Alex Waldmann (Jonah) and Peter Egan (Otto) Picture: Jack Sain

Strange tale of odd couple is ambitious but elusive work

JONAH AND OTTO
Park Theatre, N4
★★★★☆

Robert Holman's influence is evident in the work of a number of today's leading playwrights, and his talent for uncovering the arresting in the ordinary is encapsulated by the memorably strange *Jonah and Otto*, which premiered at Manchester's Royal Exchange in 2008.

This is not a play that provides easy answers, but the questions it raises – and manner in which it raises them – makes it a singular experience.

The chimerical tone is set by Simon Bejer's concrete dreamscape: cement blocks opening out into haunting sea views and loose paving stones lifted to impart treasures. Holman's characters similarly unfurl, with swaggering

hoodie Jonah (Alex Waldmann) gradually revealed as a young father crippled by grief and self-doubt, while Peter Egan's ageing clergyman Otto is literally stripped to the skin as he confesses his crisis of faith and longing for connection.

Holman's play hovers between reality and absurdity, readily evoking Beckett, yet not committing fully to either abstract experimentation or engaging emotional drama. His beautifully crafted writing startles with its offbeat poeticism, but also suffers from repetition; Tim Stark's production can't quite maintain its brooding magical realism, sometimes exchanging hypnotic for soporific.

Egan's sonorous delivery imbues even the weaker lines with gravity, juxtaposed effectively with Wald-

mann's vibrating intensity. Both convey dual natures, delicate in their frailty, piercing in their assaults, always battling for the best version of themselves.

Somehow this exceedingly odd couple find solace as they shift into a wary father/son dynamic, seismic change occurring beneath their echoing exchanges.

Jonah and Otto is a bold piece that tackles existential questions with understated elegance, but its deliberately mysterious lyricism, leaving doubts lingering, frustrates as much as it intrigues.

"Love is paying attention," suggests Otto, and it takes rapt attention to gain a measure of satisfaction from this ambitious but elusive work.

Marianka Swain



■ Jane Horrocks and Sally Bankes Picture: Marc Brenner

Asian comedy no longer cool kid on block two decades on

East Is East
Trafalgar Studios
★★★★☆

In 1999 British Asian comedy was in the ascendance. The movie adaptation of Ayub Khan Din's hit play *East Is East* led the zeitgeist, winning best British film at the BAFTAs.

Almost two decades after Tamasha Theatre's production, director Sam Yates brings it back to the stage, but the drama seems to creak under the weight of its past, no longer the sharp, cool kid of British comedy.

The play follows the turbulent home life of the mixed-race Khan family, who struggle to find where they belong in tough 1970s Salford.

Youngest son Sajit is played with piercing frailty by Michael Karim. The older sons wriggle to escape their father and his attempts to push them into arranged marriages. Their father, Pakistani immigrant George Khan (played by the playwright), is a bully. The portrayal lacks nuance and it's difficult to see past the domestic abuse he doles out. George tries to shield his

children from the British culture that is theirs by birth, and the sad outcome seems to be that the family can only balance the competing identities of east and west at home, a place where violence erupts regularly. It's a bleak portrayal.

George's poor wife Ella is constantly goaded with references to his first wife back in Pakistan. Jane Horrocks softens the stiff northern backbone of this gutsy woman and her scenes with friend and confidante Annie (Sally Bankes) are the calm to the "bleedin' this" and "bleedin' that" storm of family dialogue, which grates like a bleedin' broken record after the first 10 minutes.

I loved *East Is East* when I saw the film in the 1990s and I was expecting to rave about this restaging. But the soap box politicking made me feel I was one of Mr Khan's beleaguered children being pummeled by his world view. It wasn't an entirely pleasant experience, but perhaps that was the point. Until January 3.

Emma Youle

Not at all curious why this charming and significant piece deserves its theatrical crown

THE CURIOUS INCIDENT OF THE DOG IN THE NIGHT-TIME
Gielgud Theatre, Shaftesbury Avenue, W1D
★★★★☆

Its acclaimed West End run ended abruptly last December when the ceiling of the Apollo Theatre collapsed mid-way through a performance.

But after a six month hiatus, Marianne Elliott's production resumed at the Gielgud Theatre just as the show made it to Broadway and the book, on which it is based, achieved national treasure status by becoming a GCSE set text.

With a string of Olivier Awards, I have been desperate to see this play for some time and I wasn't disappointed when I finally did.

Moving and thought-provoking – but interspersed with humour along the way – the play based on Mark Haddon's original novel of the same name tackles the story of a boy with learning difficulties and society's attitude to him with



■ Superb performances by Nicholas Tennant as the father and Graham Butler as the son Picture: Brinkhoff M_genburg

warmth and sensitivity. Haddon says he always regretted the term Asperger's syndrome appearing on the original cover of the book when it was first published, primarily because he asserts that we all have quirks making us different but are not necessarily classed as having a disability. Protagonist Christopher, 15,

played superbly by Graham Butler, has an extraordinary brain, and is exceptional at maths.

He even takes his A-level in the subject three years early – yet doesn't know how to act in social situations, can't bear to be touched and struggles to understand everyday life. His world is thrown into turmoil when he

finds his neighbour's dog Wellington lying dead in the garden, speared with a garden fork – and sets out to solve the mystery.

But his detective work uncovers a disturbing truth and a subsequent quest to track down his absent mother, which takes him from the home he shares with his father in Swindon to the bright

lights and tumult of London, leaves him terrified.

The portrayal of his relationship with both parents and their struggle to understand and do what's best for their son is poignant and touching, with outstanding performances from Sarah Woodward as his teacher Siobhan and Nicolas Tennant as father Ed.

But the outstandingly clever and imaginative set is what makes this so special – an interactive mathematical grid with maps, numbers and drawings depicting the inner workings of Christopher's mind. And the scene where the stage comes alive with a miniature three dimensional replica London with all its twinkling lights and trains is breathtaking. Although a couple of scenes felt slightly longer than they needed to be for no obvious gain, this is overall a charming and hugely significant piece of theatre which deserves its crown.

Aimee Brannen