

Theatre

Curious sequel
a mixed bag

THE CROCK
Pentameters
★★★★☆

This curious but interesting sequel is based on Rattigan's Browning Version fifteen years on. Crocker Harris is wheelchair bound after a stroke, unable to speak. Unhappy wife Millie finds northern England depressing and misses her lover Frank Hunter. Still a young woman, it's hard luck being married to an infirm man unable to satisfy her needs. Now a young man, Taplow the boy who touched his teacher's heart by giving him a copy of Agamemnon as a leaving present comes to visit.

Taplow now has something else to show his ex schoolmaster and also tells Millie that Hunter is in the neighbourhood. It's only when Crocker and Taplow get together that the play comes to life. Nicolaus Mackie ably conveys the emotions of a disabled man without words or gestures – an outstanding performance. When he does speak he immediately becomes the schoolmaster just as Mark Parsons' Taplow becomes the schoolboy once more. This is an extraordinary feat of imagination and both old man and schoolboy are well played and defined. Steve Gough's 90 minute drama drags somewhat with the less well written or characterised story of Millie and Frank.

Odd couple tale fails to satisfy

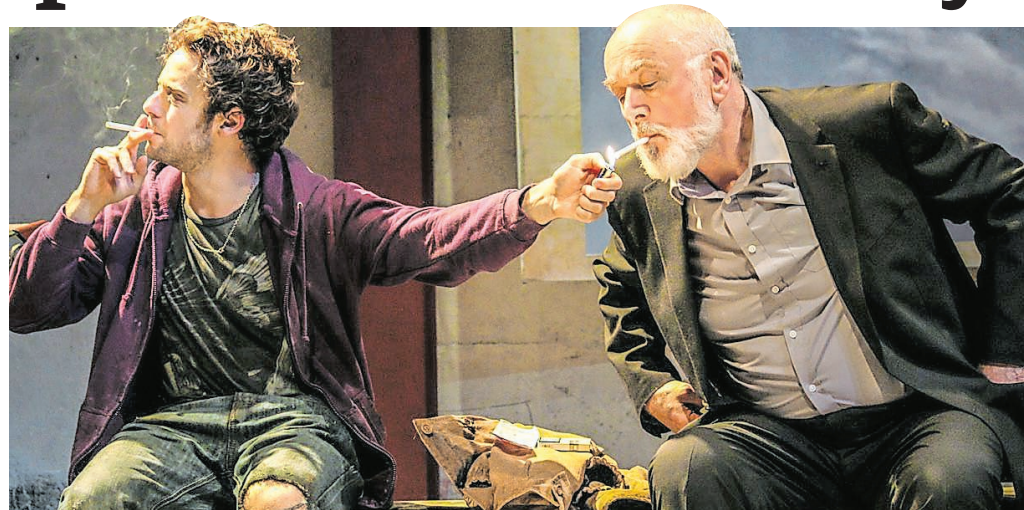
JONAH AND OTTO
Park Theatre
★★★★☆

Robert Holman's influence is evident in the work of several of today's leading playwrights, and his talent for uncovering the arresting in the ordinary is encapsulated by this memorably strange play, 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,



■ Alex Waldmann as Jonah and Peter Egan as Otto

Picture: JACK SAIN

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 weaker lines with

gravity, juxtaposed effectively with Waldmann'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 finds 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. It takes rapt attention to gain a measure of satisfaction from this ambitious but elusive work.

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