

The Critics: **Theatre**

Revamp of fairytale is chock full of beans



■ Jack and the Beanstalk at the Park. Picture: Ben Broomfield

JACK AND THE BEANSTALK PARK THEATRE

★★★★☆

It's pantomime season and there's more than you might expect in Jez Bond and Mark Cameron's re-imagined Jack and the Beanstalk. This clever take on the traditional story marries slapstick with all manner of meta-theatrical and literary japes. It's cleverly done: a freewheeling confection, overloaded but unfailingly exuberant.

Running with a joke that the Park has simultaneously programmed Hamlet as part of its festive season, the actors start with a scene from the doomed prince only to be interrupted by a disgruntled

'audience member'. The cast re-assesses and then catapults the audience into the land of Gazoob where the evil inventor Ms Grimm wants world domination.

Meanwhile, in the neighbourhood Kingdom of Nowen, Tina [Tupperware consultant to the stars] and her son Jack struggle to pay the rent. Grimm's lovely daughter Grethel and her boyfriend Geoff – the smallest giant in the world – try their best to block Grimm's plans. When Grimm turns Geoff into a bean, only a band of singing mariachi shepherds can help Jack save the day.

As well as Shakespeare, there are far-reaching references: TV soaps, Groucho Marx, classic poet-

ry, to name a few; they come thick and fast. The versatile cast bound between sharp physical comedy routines, do glorious un-PC impersonations of foreigners and belt out the superb numbers.

Michael Cahill is an inspiring Dame, all quivering vulnerability and innuendo in a fruit-presser costume (designed by Josephine Sundt). But the text's excessive knowingness over-complicates the story and the riffs are often too obtuse.

My young companion found it a little confusing. He did want to see it again though – especially for the chance of taking part in Tina's on-stage Tupperware competition.

Caroline David

Dark, resonating epic keeps it in the family

3 WINTERS NATIONAL THEATRE

★★★★☆

London-based Croatian writer Tena Stivicic's National Theatre debut keeps it in the family, with 70 years of history refracted through one Zagreb house and bloodline.

Ambitious and exquisitely constructed, 3 Winters shifts seamlessly between three time periods: 1945, birth of Communist Yugoslavia, when fierce partisan Rose (Jo Herbert) appropriated part of the house where her mother (Josie Walker) was a maid; 1990, as civil war looms and Rose's family mourns her passing; and 2011, when independent Croatia negotiates EU membership, and the clan gathers for Lucia's (Sophie Run-

dle) wedding to a capitalist tycoon who's bought the property and evicted the other tenants.

There are several exposition dumps early on, but Stivicic mostly trusts her audience to keep up – perusing the programme's potted history is a must. Howard Davies' crisp production serves the clarity and economy of her storytelling, with Tim Hatley's ingenious sliding screens easing us between time jumps, accompanied by film projections of harrowing recent events.

Stivicic displays a real gift for balancing personal and political. Although a large cast necessarily means some are confined to snapshots, her characters are richly drawn and her dialogue sharp, funny and true to life. The present-day bickering relations are

most engaging, including Siobhan Finneran's stoical matriarch, Lucy Black's troubled divorcée, Adrian Rawlins' speechifying teacher, and the thematically effective warring sisters: liberal Alisa (Jodie McNeel) and pragmatic Lucia. Adrift aristocrat Karolina (Hermione Gulliford and Susan Engel) provides a wistful note.

Unusually for an epic, female experience dominates. The women negotiate control of their destinies, balance security and principle, examine the legacy of war, and adapt to survive. The climactic twist is predictable, otherwise this is a terrifically impressive tale of family and nation with resonance for our own changing homeland.

Until February 3.

Marianka Swain



■ Billy the Kid at the Rosemary Branch. Picture: Bill Knight

Saddle up for Wild West hit

BILLY THE KID ROSEMARY BRANCH

★★★★★

In their latest boutique Panto at the Rosie, the Charles Court Opera presents a trip to the Wild West with as many references to American Cowboy movies as to English pantomime. It consists of a ludicrous plot to find treasure, thus saving the hero, Buckaroo Dan, from eviction. Dan is played by powerful soprano Joanna Marie Skillett (great to have a principal boy played by a girl) and the principal girl is Pocobeaver, an exquisite Indian Squaw played by Nichola Jolley.

John Savournin, who devises and directs all the shows, is Nellie, the owner of the Saloon – accurately realised by William Fricker's set design, unusually beautiful and enhanced by exciting lighting effects by Nic Holdridge. Savournin is tall and deep voiced with splendid comic timing and irresistibly sexy to Amy J Payne, who plays the Sheriff.

Perhaps the most startling character is the eponymous one. Billy

the Kid is no outlaw, but is actually Dan's friend, a pet goat played by Matthew Kellett.

As in all good Pantos there is a dastardly villain Micky Mumford (travelling artefacts) and as in all good American movies, the villain is an Englishman, who speaks in cockney rhyming slang except when he goes into rhymed couplets expressing his evil plans to slaughter the company, steal the treasure and turn Billy into a fur rug. He is played by the great Bruce Graham and looks exactly like John Bull.

What is so exceptional about these productions is the wonderful singers who effortlessly manage the complicated harmonies by musical director David Eaton, with songs ranging from grand opera to hymns to top of the pops.

There are some great set pieces – watch out for the coyotes! The script is full of terrible puns and innuendos and there is some reasonably painless audience participation. Highly recommended!

Until 10th January 2015.

Aline Waites



■ 3 Winters at the National Theatre. Picture: Ellie Kurtz