

The Critics: Theatre

Trilogy shines a light on all women's rights

As the shocking murder of Egyptian protester Shaimaa Sabbagh last month showed, the Arab Spring revolutions which began in 2010 are still as sadly relevant as ever.

In particular, the killing shone a light on the rights of Eastern women – a subject further explored in *The Singing Stones*, a collection of short plays which run at the Arcola until February 28.

The show's writer, Kay Adstead, first became interested in the Arab Spring while researching the London Riots in 2011. She quickly became shocked by the internet reports she was reading.

"The stories that were coming out on the blogs were really quite horrifying," she says. "People didn't really believe that women were being taken and virginity tested; the protesters suffered all kinds of horrors just for protesting."

"Even Amnesty at the time were doubting it, but it was all there on the blogs, which didn't last very long. I was fascinated by it because it seemed as if people were keeping things under wraps and it kick-started my whole interest in what the Arab revolution meant for women everywhere."

The Singing Stones is split into three plays. The first charts the fate of a group of dissident Syrian artists called Masasit Mati, who in 2013 created puppet shows mocking Assad. The second is an epic sketch of women joining in the Arab Spring from Tunisia to Libya and Kurdistan, while the third is a "revolutionary folk tale" based in magical realism.

It's a hefty amount to cover in just a couple of hours, but Adstead – whose theatre company, Mama Quilla, specialises in promoting female actors and women's rights – insists that the show also maintains a light humour and is as relevant to the Western world as it is to the Eastern.

"It's not just about Arab women; it's called women and the Arab revolution. It's about how what has



■ Tina Gray in *The Singing Stones*. Picture: Kim Hardy

happened has affected all women's lives.

"Women were tortured and killed but have been forgotten about. Some of them are still there battling, struggling and fighting to make a difference. People like the female fighting force in Kurdistan are taking a heroic stand against IS in a way that is barely credible, that level of heroism."

The show notably features nine women and just one male actor, from a host of varying ethnic and religious backgrounds. Featuring original films from Masasit Mati as well as musical compositions from Najma Akhtar, it "doesn't provide any answers but asks a lot of questions" that Adstead hopes will keep this important subject alive for debate.

"The problem is that everyone is scared stiff after the Iraq war;

everybody's like a rabbit in the headlights," she adds. "But we've seen what happens if you take that forward – look what's happened in Syria. You create ideological black holes which not very nice people tend to fill unfortunately."

"We have to be active in terms of making sure human rights are respected. We all feel disempowered; I feel like a rabbit in the headlights too and nobody has an answer to it, but we need to keep the debate alive because it's otherwise all too easy with British theatre to shut your eyes and see something which takes you out of yourself, that allows you not to have to think about these things."

Alex Bellotti

■ *The Singing Stones* runs at the Arcola Theatre until February 28. Visit arcolatheatre.com



■ Forbes Masson and James McAvoy

Picture: Johan Persson

Sixties class satire is nasty and dated but McAvoy's a star

THE RULING CLASS TRAFALGAR STUDIOS

★★★★☆

James McAvoy is such a mesmerising actor I could watch him read the phone directory.

After sitting through Jamie Lloyd's ill-advised revival of Peter Barnes' dated black comedy I feel as though I have.

This 1968 establishment-baiter about madness and class experiments with form - combining savage satire with song 'n' dance routines.

Reminiscent of Peter Nichols' *A Day in the Death of Joe Egg* ('72) and Joe Orton's *What the Butler Saw* ('67) while the former has heart, and the latter is funny, Barnes' effort is neither.

What Tucker the (socialist) butler sees is his ballet-tutu-ed master twisting on a rope after auto-erotically asphyxiating himself.

Cue the succession of his schizophrenic son Jack (McAvoy) who believes he's Jesus, and a daft plot to marry him off to a hooker, produce an heir then section him.

The belaboured irony is that in the process of curing him, his shrink Dr Herder becomes mad - while the Earl is preferable as

a love-preaching crazy than the vicious aristocrat who reverts to type.

With Etonians in Downing St and *Downton Abbey* on the box, Lloyd clearly feels a revival is timely. But Barnes' target of England's moribund gentry feels outmoded when Tucker observes that a small percentage own the lion's share of the wealth. You're reminded that 50 years on, it's Russian oligarchs, Microsoft magnates, oil rich Sheiks and the Chinese who own everything.

McAvoy sinks his teeth into a peach of a part, delivering a virtuoso display of physical comedy, hoofing, leg twitching madness and menace.

But even he can't make you care about a play that fails to land its punches and whose supporting characters are alienatingly unpleasant ciphers. There's just no way into this play and a shock Jack the Ripper twist is thoroughly nasty in a dodgy gender politics way.

Lloyd and his fine cast dignify this unworthy material with heroic levels of professionalism, but it leaves you wishing he and McAvoy had chosen something else.

Until April 11

Bridget Galton



■ Miranda Raison and Shaun Evans

Odd-couple love story is soulful and snappy but nothing new

HELLO/GOODBYE HAMPSTEAD THEATRE

★★★★☆

The election may have temporarily turned London's property boom to bust, but the fight for a flat has lost none of its intensity in Peter Souter's 2013 comedy/drama, promoted from the Hampstead downstairs space. Antagonistic City worker Juliet (Miranda Raison) and borderline autistic album-sleeve designer Alex (Shaun Evans) have competing claims on the same rental, but estate agent cock-up leads to love

– are revealed to have deeper significance.

Domestic harmony doesn't last long, as the title suggests, with Souter's deft bookending structure showing the beginning and end of the affair. There's no real Pinteresque chronological wizardry here, more the pilot and final episode of a sitcom, but detailed character work, snappy dialogue and a beautifully melancholic second half elevate a slightly formulaic story. Objects of farce assume poignancy, as shared possessions and Alex's oddball collections – Macdonald's Happy Meal toys, dusty baseball cards, astronaut autographs

– are revealed to have deeper significance.

Souter occasionally spells out such points, mistrusting his symbolism, and there's nothing revolutionary about this Odd Couple pairing: the Sherlockian geek who struggles to express emotion and the needy extrovert who self-destructs when deprived of it. But Evans has a nice take on the dogged geek, revealing a wealth of feeling during an acrimonious encounter, and the pair sells their rich romantic history, whether bickering over the thermostat or addressing more painful subjects. Raison's

delivery borders on shrill, upsetting the screwball rhythm, but she impresses with Juliet's vulnerability.

There's good support from gentle giant Luke Neal and Bathsheba Piepe's awkward mystery woman, though the scene-stealer is still Lucy Osborne's fully functional kitchen. Tamara Harvey's three-sided thrust stage production transfers well, if necessarily losing some of its intimacy, and is just a stone's throw away from a surprisingly soulful denouement. Until February 28.

Marianka Swain